

THE ELECTRIC MAN

For Rebecca

THE FIRST TIME I saw him he was sitting out on the deck of the Auberge DesJardins, drinking something out of a tall glass. He had a broad-brimmed straw hat on, the kind that women wear, and he was reading *The Herald Tribune*. I was always looking out for *The Herald Tribune* that summer, because it indicated to me the English-speaking visitors when they came. I could no longer excuse the great loneliness of that summer by the dearth of English newspapers in the place, but still—I was always happy to see *The Herald Tribune*.

The Auberge was a spot more popular among the Continentals. The Americans and the Brits and most of the Australians stayed at the bigger resorts, closer to town. We kept Swiss and Belgian visitors, many of whom returned season after season, and so were not—as the Americans always seemed to be doing—simply passing through.

By that point in the summer, my French was good enough for just about every purpose except being able to actually *say* anything. My accent was all right, the guests all said so: I could carry it off. It wasn't marvellous, they didn't say that, but they did say, to my credit, that I didn't sound

like an American, pretending, or—and this was worse—a Canadian, being sincere.

When I saw him the first time I was doing the afternoon rounds on the deck—sweeping through, as I did every four o'clock—collecting empty glasses and trays and asking if the guests were quite as comfortable as could be expected. Everyone mostly said that they were. The Auberge—especially out on the deck, in the pre-dinner hours—was a comfortable place, and very few people thought to complain. Except, of course, on the occasion that they should need a drink, or the bill, or else another drink, and then they did ask, but so politely—in so light and detached a way—that it was as if they wished to indicate that the lack, indicated by the request, was in fact just another element from which was composed an all-around satisfactory whole. One or two guests, however, over the course of the weeks that I stayed on at the Auberge, could be counted on to be more exacting than most. The man with the hat was, it turned out, one of those.

THE FIRST TIME I saw him was not the first time he saw me, and when I made my way over to his table and said, "Tout va bien, Monsieur?" because he looked like a man who didn't need a thing in the world, he said, "Non." He said: "I saw you pass this way fifteen minutes ago, and I tried to get your attention. There's not enough ice in my drink." He rattled his tall glass so that I could see that it was true.

From his accent I guessed he was from somewhere in the Northeast. Connecticut, New Hampshire, maybe, and I thought it was too bad that he could tell right away that I wasn't French. Usually it was just the people who really *were* French who could tell. But maybe, I thought, he was one of those guests whose French was so bad they didn't even try. Who just spoke English as though they expected everyone to understand, or else learn in a hurry.

"I'm sorry, sir," I said, in my friendliest voice. "We'll get that fixed up for you right away," and he said, "I didn't expect you to be from the South. I would have pegged you as being from Minnesota or something. St. Paul. Aren't you a little serious," he said, "for the South?"

I didn't know what he meant, but I knew he didn't mean to be nice. He had a teasing, half-mean look in his eye and held his glass away from me when I leaned over to take it away. I could tell he was going to be a most scrupulous guest, and any hope that I'd had for striking up more than the usual conversation with him was gone. I just wanted to get back to the kitchen, to get him more ice for his drink like he'd asked.

The glass itself, however, the man with the hat had by then retracted—just enough that I would have had to really reach for it in order to take it away. He watched me carefully as he held it there, at that particular distance, looking interested in what I might do. I didn't do anything. I just stood there with my hand—not extended, but just

open and waiting between us—until he got bored with the game and simply handed me the glass.

That's the way things went for some time. He didn't like me very much, and I didn't like him. Or else he liked me too much, and I didn't like him. I couldn't decide, and neither one pleased me.

I could never please him, either. I wasn't, perhaps, quite *authentic* enough for him. Whenever I answered his questions—about where I had come from and why—he always gave me a suspicious sideways look, as if he supposed I was lying and he and I both knew it but we weren't going to say anything about it—at least for a while.

He was the one who asked questions—I never volunteered information on my own. And he never believed what I told him. It gave me an uncomfortable feeling, because his questions were never particularly complicated, and I had never before had anyone doubt the answers I gave to questions as simple as those.

I SAW A LOT of the man with the hat after that. He stayed on at the Auberge for the final part of July and most of August. Unlike the other guests, he didn't go into town, or take weekend excursions to Provence or down along the Côte d'Azur. Like me, he stayed at the Auberge pretty much all of the time.

I would see him in the mornings in the dining room when I delivered curled-up butter to the tables, and then

later I would see him down at the beach, sitting in one of the Auberge's folding chairs, his woman's hat on, when I went down to the shore to collect the beach furniture that had been abandoned by the other guests. In the late afternoons, I would always see him on the deck, before the dining room reopened—he was always very prompt at mealtimes—and I would laboriously refill his tall glass with ice that, it seemed, melted unnaturally fast in his hands.

One afternoon, I said to Marie-Thérèse, who was a niece of Madame and Monsieur Rondelle, the owners of the Auberge, and had worked in the dining room three summers in a row, “Il n'est jamais contente!” As I spoke, I tossed my hands in the air in order to emphasize my disdain for a man who could never be *contente* with a thing. I was always talking with my hands in those days—to make up, I suppose, for how I always suspected my words to fall so short of whatever it was I was trying to say. Marie-Thérèse just shrugged. She was a very easygoing girl, quite *contente* herself, almost all of the time. “Quelque personnes,” she told me, “sont comme ça.” She shrugged again, and went out onto the deck to check on a guest, who was just then at the very beginning stages of needing something.

The way she said it, “sont comme ça,” as if it were the most inevitable and insignificant thing that it should be so, made me feel a little foolish for having allowed myself to be so bothered by the hatted man, who was—as Marie-Thérèse

said a little later—obviously “un peu cuckoo.” As she said it, she wound her finger as if around an invisible spool beside her ear, rolling her eyes up into her head so just the bottom bits of her irises showed.

IN THE EARLY AFTERNOONS, before I had to go up to the deck to refill the guests’ drink with ice, and take away and refill the trays with little things to eat, I would always go down to the beach myself, and lie out on one of the long fold-out chairs, in the shade. I always covered myself up completely, even in the shade, on account of my fair skin, which was so easily burned. I wasn’t like the French girls who just got browner and browner as the summer wore on and could lie out from ten to two o’clock and not get burned, even on their most sensitive spots, which were also bare.

Because everyone else preferred the sun, I had my shady spots all to myself, and the beach felt secluded and private in the places that I chose. I liked it that way. It was a change from the constant hum of the Auberge, which was busy in the high season. Also, it made me feel as though, at least in those moments, I had control over my solitude. That it was a thing I had chosen.

Sometimes I would try to read, but I was allowing myself to read only French books during the day, and that was difficult. I could never get into the plot of anything. I understood the words, that wasn’t the problem—it was just that that was all they seemed to be to me on the page. Just little, individual words—each one isolate, and independent

of any of the other little words, which I also understood, and therefore not seeming to be continuous, in any broader sense, beyond their exact and independent meaning.

So after a little reading I would give up, and put the book down on the sand, and stare around at the beach and out to the water, which always looked very blue and warm, even though if I ever went down to it, it turned out to be cold. Also, it was green and brown up close, and not brilliant and blue as it had looked from afar.

For some time I was always re-convinced from a distance that the next time I went down to the water it would really be how it appeared. But after a while I stopped going down at all. I didn't like to keep finding that I'd—again—been wrong.

So I stayed up in the shady spot that I had all to myself instead, not reading, and just looking around. I had rediscovered an old habit of mine, which was to look at things through a narrowed field of vision by cupping my hand around my eye. In this way I would reduce the world to such a small point—my palm curled like a telescope, and one eye closed—that all I could see was one particular thing. For example, I would look out at the ocean and narrow my palm in that way so that all I could see, beyond my own hand, was a completely uniform shade of blue, uninterrupted by any other shade, or by any of the noise and commotion of the bathers, who stayed in the shallow parts, near shore. Or else I would turn my head and with my telescope eye see just the top bit of a sail. Or

a radar reflector—glinting in the sun. Seeing neither, that is, the radar or the sun, but instead just—that *glinting*; just the reflection of metal and light.

It was, indeed, an old habit—back from when I was a kid, and would go out into the small front yard of my mother’s house in Jacksonville and look at things like that, just a little at a time. After a while I knew the whole front yard that way—in small sections, each the size of a dime. What I liked best was to look at the natural things: the grass and the little scrubby flowering bushes in my mother’s garden by the porch—and the sky. I could pretend that the rest of everything didn’t exist. That I was a different sort of girl, who lived in the country instead of in town, and was surrounded by wilderness on all sides.

When I had chosen one unblemished spot, one particular, dime-sized part of the yard, I would concentrate on it very hard. I would try to press myself, every bit of myself, into that small space left between my palm and the curled-up pinky finger of my right hand. To rush right out of myself, just as—I imagined—that other girl, who was not me, and yet was ever so much more me than I myself could ever have been—might do.

It was a tingling, rushing, electric sensation that I felt coursing through my body then, when I tried so hard to push myself into the fragments of the lawn, and experience the world in the whole and real way that another (I imagined) might. Like maybe the little bits of me were on

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fire and if I didn't get pressed into the spot that I wanted to press myself into, I might burn up and be gone.

It seemed important. To be able to get into blades of grass the way that I wanted to. Or into the two or three spots in the sky that weren't marked up by tall houses, or telephone poles.

ONE AFTERNOON, down by the shore in front of the Auberge, just as I had set down my book that I wasn't really reading, the man with the hat came over and set up his chair next to mine. I saw him from a distance before he came. Before, that is, it was clear to me that it was in my direction, specifically, that he would come.

He was carrying his chair, and walked slowly, the chair banging on his leg with every second step. I made a tunnel of my right hand and held it up to my right eye, squinting the left so that it was entirely closed. Then I followed his hat, just the broad brim of his hat, until, when I took my hand away from my eye, I realized that he was almost upon me, and he could see very well what I was doing. I wiped my eyes, surprised, and then continued to do so as he approached, as if I hoped us both to believe that it was what I'd been doing all along. He put up his hand in greeting but didn't say anything until he had settled—quite near me—into his chair.

"Hello," he said, naturally. As if, outside of my working hours, he respected that I was in no way responsible for any discomfort of his.

“Hello,” I said. But I was wary. I wondered what he would ask me, because he didn’t have a drink, and I didn’t have any ice.

“You probably don’t know this about me,” he said. “I’m a painter.”

“Oh?” I asked, but he didn’t say anything more. “That’s interesting,” I said. “What sort of painting do you do?”

“Landscapes mostly,” he told me. Then paused again. “But I’ve been meaning”—he kept his eye on me as he spoke—“to try a portrait someday.” Again he paused. “I was wondering,” he said finally, “if you would be willing to sit for me someday soon.”

Because I didn’t have a proper reason to refuse, I said that I would, and the next evening, as we’d arranged, I knocked on the door of his third floor room. I could hear him shout from the inside that I should come in, so I did, and there he was, sitting in one of the straight-backed chairs that were provided in the more modest rooms. Next to him was a dish of watercolours and a small stretched canvas. He had been waiting for me. He didn’t have an easel or anything, and his watercolours appeared unused. There was another straight-backed chair opposite him with an uneven table behind it. On the table was a small lamp that cast a limited light around the otherwise dim room. I had made—I thought suddenly—a rather large mistake. He wasn’t a real painter, that was obvious now—and was perhaps even more *cuckoo*, as Marie-Thérèse had said, than we had originally supposed.

I thought it best if I left immediately. Quickly and discreetly. And in the future—I thought—be even more certain not to disturb, or trouble, the man with the hat. But instead of leaving, and for somewhat of the same reason that I agreed in the first place—because I could not think how to refuse—I sat down in the chair he had arranged for me, opposite his own.

“Let me guess,” he said, after a while—he was sketching away at the canvas, with an ordinary pencil, his paints laid aside. Every now and then he would look up at me, but more often he looked down at the pencil. “Let me guess,” he said. “You wanted to be an—actress when you were a girl.”

It was not what I expected to hear. “No,” I said. I never had wanted to be an actress. I supposed he’d said it imagining that all girls who agreed to sit for portraits imagined themselves that way, then or at some other, earlier time of their lives. That they were all aware, and wanted to be made more so, of their own particularness, their singularity.

I liked the movies, but the theatre seemed exaggerated to me. It always rang a little false. One time I’d gone up north to a festival in Savannah with my friend Ariane. We sat right up front for a production of *A Single Afternoon*, which was put on by a British company that Ariane had told me I’d enjoy. They were “naturalists”—like in the movies. “They even have the backstage set up to look like another room of the set,” she explained. “So the actors don’t get out of character between scenes.”

I had never been more bored in my life. Even Ariane was bored. You could feel it—boredom everywhere. Soon even the actors started to feel it. They sped up their lines, and started to look angry, when it didn't seem “right” or “real” that they should.

Not even midway through, Ariane leaned over and said, “I'm depressed.”

We were sitting so close to the stage that at a certain point—surely things were now drawing to a close—one of the actors came forward, so close that I could have reached up and touched him—and I did. Without really thinking—I did. I reached out and touched his foot, which was clothed in a very ordinary sock—the thick, pilly wool kind that lots of men wear, and that on occasion I had even worn myself.

Ariane, even with how into “making a scene” she was in those days, was horrified, and leaned away from me, as if in reflex. She looked at me from that new distance as though she had never seen me before in her life. It was no ordinary boundary, the look suggested, that I had crossed. The actor himself gave a kind of a jump when I touched him, and then shot me a startled and irritated glare. We were so close that I could see every line, and every slight change in the expression, on his face. He was older than he was pretending to be.

It was just: there was something ridiculous and sad about those socks. I wanted to touch them. All of a sudden, seeing them so close, all the little pilly hairs shooting off

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from them in all directions, I'd thought, isn't it the saddest thing in the world that there was this sock—what seemed to me the single realest sock I'd ever seen—up there, in front of me on the stage, and it was pretending *not* to be a sock, or at least to be a sock in *another* afternoon, a sock that it, so evidently, was not.

A sock that would be realer than the sock that it *actually was*, was a thing that I could not imagine.

I TOLD THE MAN with the hat that I hadn't ever wanted to be an actor. The closest I had come, I said, when he seemed surprised, was in a fourth-grade play when I was supposed to play a crow. "I didn't have any lines," I told the man. "I was just supposed to fly around in the background, but that was fine by me."

"I imagine you were a very good crow," the man said with a little smile. He had picked up his tray of paints and was beginning to dab at the canvas.

"I wasn't," I said. "I called in sick. My mother dressed me in the costume and painted my face, but then I looked in the mirror and started to cry. Nothing my mother could do could get me to leave the house looking like that."

"I guess I was wrong," the man said.

"I just kept saying," I told him, "'I don't want to be a crow! You can't make me!'" I laughed, but the man—who was not wearing his hat on this occasion—did not.

"That's sad," he said. His old sideways look was back. It seemed his remark may have even been a sort of reproach.

For laughing at something that he saw—and that I should see too—wasn't very funny at all.

Well, it was *my* story. And I didn't think it was sad.

"Oh, it's okay," I said. Then: "I thought I was supposed to be too *serious* anyway."

I WENT BACK TWO OR three more times to sit for the guest. In the daytime, we resumed our old routines, and he never mentioned anything about the painting when he saw me. Strangely, he didn't try to talk to me, either, as he had done before when I refilled his drink with ice in the late afternoons. He seemed more distant, and formal, as if we had never met at all, and that made me feel a little strange about the whole thing—as though I'd had a love affair with the old man, instead of simply sitting in a chair.

We acted like that with each other, for some reason. Overly polite and conventional like that. We didn't, either of us—as is often the case with the more humid matters of the heart—know quite how to understand the breach (though it had been, in our case, only the smallest, almost undetectable, tear) of our independence from one another, which we otherwise would have maintained.

ONE DAY, WHILE HE WAS working away without even looking up at my face, which often for long stretches he was able to do, I said, "Why did you think that? Why did you ask me that before—if I'd wanted to be an actress?"

He said only, as I had suspected: “Doesn’t every young girl?” And shrugged. He did not seem in the mood to discuss anything.

But instead of letting the subject drop, as I might have, I said I didn’t think all young girls *did* want to be actresses. I said it was an unfair thing to assume. I guess that I was feeling a little hurt, because I’d thought, if nothing else, that he was a man who paid attention to things. Who was perceptive, and had perhaps seen something in me, something particular, that had made him ask that question, instead of its springing from either mere supposition or form.

So maybe I liked, after all, the way that he looked at me sideways when I answered his questions, as if I thought for a moment, too, with that look, that I had made it all up—that the details of my life weren’t really my own. That I was perhaps someone altogether different—whose particulars I didn’t, or was just about to, know.

But later he said, “I myself was an actor, you know,” and I said, “I thought you were a painter,” and he said, “A person can be more than one thing.”

“Okay,” I said. “So what kind of actor were you?” He could be amusing after all.

“You just struck me,” he said, in answer to my previous question, and ignoring the last, “like me in a way. Like someone”—he looked up for the first time in a while—“who wishes they were more than they are in real life, or at least something—somebody—else sometimes. That’s

an acting technique," he told me. "I suppose you wouldn't know that. Starting from zero so that then you can become something, or someone, entirely new." He was working away diligently with the paints, the small canvas tilted—always—up and away from me so that I couldn't see the progress that he made. "That's what you should have done when you were a crow," he told me. "Your problem was seeing yourself as a little girl who *looked* like a crow, and not being the crow yourself." I nodded, and made a small sound like I was interested, and understood. He didn't seem embarrassed at all to say what he had, and I did think *that* was interesting. What he said really did strike me as an essentially embarrassing thing to say. *To admit*, that is, that you were not, in and of yourself, *enough*. And would remain that way. To my American sense of things, which I—and I assumed that he, too—had retained (he had the accent, after all, stronger than my own), well, wasn't that the very worst thing that a person could admit?

"I don't think that's me," I told him quickly. "I think I'm all set to be just me. Just as I am."

"So I was wrong again," the man said, shrugging his shoulders again, like it was no big deal. "Just with me, it's different," he said after a while, "because I really was an actor."

"Right," I said. "What kind of actor did you say that you were?"

"A circus performer," the man said. "I was the Electric Man in the Bulgarian Circus."

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I laughed even though he didn't. "The electric man?" I said. I tried to become serious again, as if I had been all along. "What's that?"

"Oh," he said, putting his paints aside. "Oh, you don't know about that, either." And then he told me about how it was to be an Electric Man in the Bulgarian Circus. How every night he would go out into the ring, and put his hands on a shiny metal ball, and be pumped through with electricity that the silver ball shot out so that his hair stood up on his head and his clothes got singed and sometimes at the end of the night he would have small wounds on the tips of his fingers where the electricity had had nowhere else to go in his body and so burned its way out. "The crowd loved me the best," the man said. He never wore his hat in the room, and he was bald as an apple. "I never saw it myself, from my position, but they said that from the stands I *glowed*."

"That's just crazy," I said, but I was impressed. I didn't know, of course, if I should believe him or not, but then I didn't see why not, or what purpose it would serve either of us if I didn't. "Did it hurt?" I asked. I remembered sticking my fingers into the electrical outlets at home sometimes, when I was a little kid. How much *that* had hurt. I did it more than once, but maybe no more than three times. You'd think it wouldn't have taken more than the once, but I just always wondered at what point the electricity would arrive out of those tiny little slots where it looked like nothing could be.

“Oh yes,” the Electric Man told me, busying himself again with the task of my portrait. “Oh yes, it hurt very much,” he said. He picked up his tray of paints again and gazed down at the small canvas. It appeared that he did not want to talk after that, and after a quarter of an hour went by in which we didn’t speak at all, I asked him if he thought one day soon I could see the portrait. He said, “I leave tomorrow, you can see it then.” And then a little while later, he got up and said: “That will do.”

IN THE MORNING HE WAS not downstairs when I did the rounds with the butter, and when I went about by the shore collecting chairs and parasols from the beach I did not see him there either—shielded, as usual, by the broad rim of his woman’s straw hat.

He must have slipped out while I was down by the shore, because when I returned to the Auberge there was no one whose ice melted so fast and I spent the lazy pre-dinner hours casually refilling trays for the few guests who ate their little things very slowly and never seemed to need anything.

As usual, just before dinner, I checked my mail slot in the lobby of the Auberge, though there was rarely anything to find, and there it was: the small canvas, all wrapped up inside a rather tattered paper bag. I felt relieved—and not a little flattered. All that time, it would seem now, the painting had been just for me. But when I tore away the wrapping I saw that what he had left me was not a portrait at all, but the most banal seascape, not unlike the one outside

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the window of the Auberge, which the man with the hat would have seen quite clearly over my shoulder as I sat for all those hours opposite him in a straight-backed chair.

For a moment, I still hoped that he had kept the real portrait of me for himself and had given me this canvas only as a sort of substitute. But then I thought that it wasn't very likely: I had only ever seen one canvas in the little room. It seemed the man was, after all, perhaps quite literally, insane. I felt disappointed, and was about to make my way back to my room, when I noticed there was something else in the bag. It was the broad-brimmed hat, all rolled up—I hadn't imagined it could be made so small. It had a note attached to it, too, which said, in childish scrawl, *Because you're fair, like me, and must burn easily in too much sun.*

WHEN, A DAY OR TWO after that, I returned a stack of French novels to the little library that the owners kept in the Auberge's lounge, I slipped the canvas in with the books because I didn't want to look at it anymore. There was something very sad to me about the uniform blue of the ocean and the perfect little *m*'s for birds that had been drawn onto the sky. I wanted to get rid of it, but I didn't want to just throw it away.

My routine continued, unchanged by the Electric Man's absence. I made my rounds with the butter in the morning, and then went down to the beach, where I collected abandoned chairs and parasols, and then stretched out in the shade—covered head to toe so I wouldn't burn, and

wearing the Electric Man's broad-brimmed hat. I still did that—still stretched out on the beach in the shade—even after I'd stopped going down to the water anymore because it was actually cold and green, or pretending to read French novels because none of the words ever seemed to hang together in a consecutive way.

I would just stare around, my hand curled to my eye sometimes, like a telescope. A strange sort—most basic sort—of telescope, of course; it never made anything appear any closer, or farther away. I never tried to summon myself, as I had done as a child. Never tried to press myself—myself as I *felt myself to be*, most truly—through the small space that was left between my farthest-away finger and the curve of my thumb. I think I didn't want to risk finding that, were I to try, I wouldn't feel that tingling, rushing electric sensation that I had when I was a child.

Someday, I thought, while I lay stretched out on an Auberge chair in the shady spot of the beach—before returning to refill the trays and pass out drinks and bills, and then drinks again, to the late-afternoon guests—I would try it again. I would try to feel myself *alive* again in the way that I had when I was very young. Perhaps the Electric Man had inspired me. To find that “blank space” of myself—or whatever it was he had said. There was no real *reason*, after all, I thought to myself, that I could not feel that way again—it was, in fact, quite possible, and someday, I thought, when I was feeling particularly well, I would try.

THEN, AT THE VERY END of August, perhaps a week or two after I had last seen the Electric Man, Madame Rondelle, the owner of the Auberge, stopped me on the stair. "I had a note from Monsieur Wyatt," she said. She always spoke to me in English, because she was no more French than me, though she spoke the language more perfectly. She was a Swede, but of course her English, as well as her French, was impeccable. I rarely saw her long enough to speak with her, though, and, in addition, she always made me nervous. She seemed so sure of herself all the time, and because I was never sure of anything, especially that summer, I always suspected that I was misunderstanding things—even in my own language. I had got that used to second-guessing.

I didn't even know who Monsieur Wyatt was, for example.

"Who?" I asked.

Madame Rondelle looked up at me, sharply. "The man with the hat," she told me. "He knows *you*," she said. "He said to give you a kind hello." She hesitated then, before stepping away—evidently wanting to say something more, but for some reason uncertain. "A very *dear* man," she told me, as if that were an explanation of something. "I'm a friend of his sister. He's been coming here for years." Then she hesitated again. "A little strange," she said, and her hand left the railing where she had placed it and fluttered up to her chest, as if it hoped to retain something there. "But a very *dear* dear man," she insisted, as if that settled it. But still she did not immediately move to go, and in the

space of time in which we both lingered—she on the stair, about to decide whether to finally complete her ascent, and I at the bottom, equally unsure of whether I should relieve her of the conversation, make some excuse to go—I tried to think of some perfect thing to say to her of him. But I couldn't think of anything. I didn't want to tell her about the painting, that was certain. Someday she would find it, in going through the library, and throw it out; I didn't think she should know anything of its history if that were to be the case.

“What does he do now?” I asked, for want of anything else. “I mean,” I said, “how is it he has the time, and the—” I paused, “the resources, I mean, to stay?” Then I realized I'd been rude. But I wanted to know. I didn't imagine that a former member of the Bulgarian Circus would have a very large pension. I presumed, in that moment, because I had never thought of it before, that he must have been from one of those large and wealthy New England families who could afford to finance, and be responsible for, the whims—however fleeting—of their members. It was because that suddenly seemed clear to me that I thought with some shame that it would have been better for me not to have mentioned the money at all. Money was embarrassing when there was either too much or too little of it, and the means to the Electric Man's situation—which was evidently comfortable—would have been better left unspoken.

But Madame did not seem perturbed by the question. If anything she adopted a more conciliatory tone. “From

what I gather," she said—she began her ascent once more as she spoke, but slowly—"he gets a fairly sizeable cheque from Veterans of Foreign Wars." It would have been difficult to say whether she had whispered or shouted the words. There seemed, anyway, to be equal attention paid to both emphasizing and concealing the information that the sentence contained. Then she shrugged. "That's what gets forwarded here," she said.

I must have looked surprised, or like I was about to say something, and I don't think that she wanted to be detained much longer. "He got wounded badly in one of the wars," she explained—as if she wished now that she hadn't brought it up at all. "I'm not sure which one, he was in so many. Sam—that's his sister, my friend—she believes"—she had almost reached the top of the stair; pretty soon she would disappear—"they pay him to keep quiet about certain things, you know, that are too—" she paused again, just slightly, just before she was lost to the upstairs of the Auberge and said, "too awful to talk about." She had another tone in her voice now, a very sad faraway note had crept in, and her hand had remained at her throat as she mounted the stair. "He used to bathe down at the shore when he first came with Sam," she said. "But for some reason, he's stopped bathing now." She looked down to where I stood—it seemed a great distance. "It used to give me quite a fright to see him," she continued. Then she made a face, and tossed her hand that had been held at her throat in the air as if whatever she'd wished to hold as she'd

ascended was useless to her now. "Just—awful," she said, "his whole body all scarred over the way it was. Whatever it was that happened to him, I don't know. But I should *hope*," she said, "that he's getting, for it, a pretty compensation." With a slight nod then, which served to mark her final departure, she turned, and continued up the stairs.