

SIAM: A VOYAGE

wasted opportunity, wasted hope drew his mind around toward Marcus' point of view. A long suppressed impulse to see Jim House break and fall found permission to appear at the center of Leon's awareness. The unchallenged spin in the *Herald*, the rubber-stamp commissioners, the secretive planning and the jovial slander behind people's backs needed to come to an end. More than that, House had to leave. He was in Elder's way, and he had to admit it. He had to apologize and run. *Wait*, Leon thought, *breathe*, think it through objectively. Similarities to the destructive feelings he'd experienced in the hollow on Banner Street were present. Don't risk everything, he told himself, when you don't know where this comes from.

Leon pressed on his tightened stomach and walked to the end of the wholesale section. He sat on one of Pedro's sun-bleached deck chairs in the shelter of an empty concrete bay, out of the breeze, which was now turning brisk. Alone in the bay, remembering Marcus' red-faced petition, the band of abdominal tension became a tumbling fountain of ideas for removing House, from his office and from Elder, though Leon was sitting still with his eyes closed, outwardly calm. As he let the options turn inside him, Leon felt his teeth clenching, then a moment's mental warning that these ideas had a surprisingly savage edge. The warning also seemed to hint that to accommodate the unknown source that gave these emotions their power, was to accept a ticket on a journey toward that source. Accepting the ticket by impulse, his mild dislike for House became moral enmity, with a force his rational mind seemed unable to counter. Reasonable questions were squelched by animosity, before they gained form.

The distant pounding rhythm of the high school marching band at daily practice carried on the breeze from the football field, over on the north side of Elder. The thumping sounds, amplified by the empty grandstand, echoed throughout the forested basin. Leon could hear the brass and sidedrums clearly, braying and rattling every time the wind shifted. Bass drums thundered in unison, an authoritative, militant vibration in his belly, exhortation to go, to run to the drums, and leave human questioning behind.

Fierce and suffocating, the impulse gripped his solar plexus. Even behind the thickness of a window he could feel the punching pressure in his gut, quelling the fear, pulling him back into line. Outside the window, in bright sunlight across the road, clusters of wounded in convalescent blues stood,

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apparently dazed, near a Guards' band arrayed on the lawn around St. Mary's Hospital. Others stared down from open windows toward Paddington Station, or shared cigarettes behind shaded walls out of the heat of the sun. From his vantage, a short distance away, observing them through the windows of the station, they appeared to be unaware of the band, or that they were heroes to the public. They had stopped the Germans at Ypres, in November. The Huns' great sweep through Belgium and Picardy to Paris had been blocked by these men. Why didn't they look up? Did the band have no effect on them? He turned away from the soot-hazed glass, uneasily remembering descriptions in the papers of shell-shock. It's best not to question returned veterans, one paper had said.

Around him, along the platform on the line to Exeter, dozens of cadet officers and men were noisily milling with relatives, waiting for the train that would take them back to barracks on Salisbury Plain. On the adjacent platform, middle-aged civilian men dressed in dark suits read newspapers and kept their hats on and straightened their ties in denial of the heat. Down the line, a large, soot-black locomotive huffed and wafted a veil of smoke ahead of it, squealing brakes echoing off the high iron and glass roof of the station. Several women on the platform called out farewells to men ordered to form up. Fathers standing at the back of the platform waved top hats and bowlers in wide arcs at relatives already in queues. One man he overheard, in spite of the noise, spoke about his pride in sending two sons back from leave, back to Salisbury Plain for one of the new Kitchener divisions.

"Now *everyone* in the country's sharing the obligation," the cherry-cheeked man said.

The stranger close to him concurred. "Right you are. Not just families of the Regulars, it's everyone now. Nothing like it in history, really."

The pipes, clipped drumming and pounding of the Guards' band across the road in St Mary's seemed louder as the train slowed, halted and reduced steam. Cheering and hooting erupted from another entrance to the station as army lorries arriving from Euston Station unloaded outside, returning recruits from leave in the north. Military police pushed them to the western end as they taunted the London recruits waiting on the platform. Competitive spirit rippled through the noise in the station, there being no end to cocky evidence of

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a willingness to fight. And the papers had said the Huns were already reeling.

Feelings of pride, in being part of the greatest stand in history should have burst his heart, but the hand he held pulled back. He knew she hated the sounds in the station by the way she put her head down. To see her beautiful face pale and her eyes so obviously full of dread weighed on him. These were moments he had hoped would bring admiration and an awe that might melt her other-worldly opinions. Something monstrous and dark had to dissipate from her thinking, and she ought to finally accept the responsibility to country that both he and her father took for granted.

For the last four years, while he'd been at Cambridge, she'd tried to convince him by letter and in person, to abandon an appreciation of what most saw as the height of civilization. Where appropriate, he'd humored her with patience, devotion and an easy tolerance. Throughout that time he'd seen her and her right to dissent as the proof of the zenith of civilization, as well as the reward for all he had achieved. The nation might recoil from social innovators and critics now, but before the war dissenters of many kinds had been accepted as part of the experience at Cambridge, and therefore he listened with goodwill to her. In the larger picture of the present though, duty was the thing that mattered in protecting all that was good. Recently however, tolerance had seemed a little one-sided between them, in that she was unwilling to accept that duty did require something from each of them.

There was little time left for conversation now, and months might go by until the next leave. Jenny held her gaze low as if she were depressed again, while he tried to find a less trafficked area away from the crowd on the platform. She seemed unaware that every man who saw her followed her with his eyes. Her height and smooth complexion, her posture and wide-set eyes, held onlookers' attention in a swath on either side, as he drew her toward the barricades blocking off the neighboring platform. With her eyes averted, she seemed to see no one, and yet he could feel her warm hand in his, not limp, but vital, contesting silently with him.

A sergeant major directing leave-returnees to a nearby queue barked at dozens of civilians impeding their progress, telling them there was a war on and they would be arrested if they interfered. Percussion and brass from St. Mary's across the road could be heard more clearly as the engine's release of

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steam slowed to a hiss. Carriage numbers were shouted out and men chastised for tardiness. Minutes remained. Officer cadets would be called to first-class carriages as soon as the other ranks had boarded. To avoid the pushing he guided her around the barricades across Platform 10 and behind a short wall, determined that she should hear him out.

Jenny had begged to come alone to see him off, which he had interpreted as a sign that she may have been ready to listen. The sooty brick wall next to a custodian's locked door would probably mark her summer dress, but it hardly mattered now. Holding her gaze, he kissed her, softly at first, then pressed harder against her body, crushing her hat against the grimy bricks. Her long, straight brown hair fell out of a white ribbon onto her shoulders, and a hot glow around her made him draw in his breath. She too took a breath, her hazel eyes concentrating on him, as if she were speaking through them.

"Walk away with me," she said, still breathing hard. He drew back in disappointment, knowing what she meant, and that she had no intention of saying *yes*, on terms that fit the times. What she was proposing had the siren-lure of far-off Utopia, a Faustian bargain in effect, to pay the price of desertion for hiding together in the furthest corner of the Earth, away from the war. Where was her grasp of the mettle that had sustained all lasting civilizations? When existence itself was being weighed, this was the moment to move forward, not to run. And yet her eyes were of the fiery kind that wouldn't tolerate cowardice. How could she think in such contradictions? It confused him that her beauty was charged with riddles and unwarranted indignation, rather than a sensuality he could answer. She overwhelmed him with demands, when what mattered was so easily accepted by the rest of the country. Holding her tightly, he tried to think of the right words to fan the spark of patriotism her father had goaded her to respect, at least for the navy.

"You don't need to get on that train, any more than I do," she said, before he could speak.

Impatience stifled him. That she would thumb her nose at military law, wasting seconds, while the moment to address marriage was passing, seemed irresponsible and unfeeling. Amazed at her audacity, he held her hands. "You're being short-sighted."

Jenny had made similar comments about Utopian freedoms during his last

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leave, so he matched her zeal, deciding to dispense now with her disregard for duty.

“We’ve talked about this before, remember? That would be desertion. It would affect our life during the war and after it. How would we live, now and in the future? I’d quite rightly be shot, which is no solution.” He moved closer for emphasis, as the penetrating noise of the Guards’ band opposed him, and the shouting on the platform grew louder. “We have no real money of our own, we know nothing of any Eastern language, or the customs. We’d be beggars there. We’d be seen as deserters and we’d be treated that way, there and here, if we had the gall to return.”

“Curtis, their obligation is to the current order,” she said, concentrating on him as her other hand bent outward to encompass officers, other ranks and civilians on the other side of the wall.

“And mine? What is mine?” he said, incredulous. “When could the need be greater? I will not be a coward. That’s what you’re asking me to become, simply because you’re afraid. Everyone’s afraid, but we go on. What would your father think if he heard this?”

“You misunderstand,” she said softly. “*You* may choose, they don’t know to. You remember the poem, about the waterfall in Siam? Our obligation is to God, not Gog or Magog. I’ve saved the money we would need for passage. We would not be beggars.”

The money she referred to had been growing in small increments in a savings account, for about a year. However large or small the account was now, it wouldn’t amount to more than an attempt to fund desertion. There was no other name for it, when God’s purpose for them, and the whole country, couldn’t be more straightforward.

“Your mind is in an imaginary world,” he said, bewildered at her insistence. “You pay no attention to the world God placed us in, as stewards. It’s more than money for passage. It’s about honor and service in saving this world. *This* one.”

“It *is*,” she agreed, her eyes on fire. “The war must be *won*, not merely fought. But won with what, and for whom? Who are these kings, this family of kings? They are spineless weaklings, the staff of Gog and Magog! Do you remember what Nana said about principalities of darkness? We are here for

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their judgment! We are more than we seem! You...Don't look so surprised. Remember what you saw in St. Magnus!"

No one else could have heard her over the noise in the station so he kept his peace. She kept a firm grip as she straightened his lapels, continuing to challenge his discernment of right and wrong, as if nothing would ever matter more to her. Once again, it was the wrong time and place to press the question that burned in him, concerning this world. When alone with her on previous occasions he'd hinted, to test her readiness to accept him as he was. Without hesitation she'd steered the conversation to a place in Siam, where she said they were needed. They were the body of God. Involuntarily it made him smile. Her care for him was evident, even as she fought him, misguided by her inexplicable creed, simply too far and too wide of the need of the hour.

He lifted her chin tenderly, and her eyes gradually took on more of the thoughtful, loving light that normally shone there. Two important principles would prevail: first, that he could not, and would not abandon his country. Second, it was just as clear that she would in time agree to marry him, though perhaps it would be in the East, and not in England, if that's what she preferred.

For the moment they held each other, saying nothing, only a sooty wall of red bricks between them and other ranks, whose cigarette smoke and laughter drifted overhead. Even so, the creaking leather of a newly-issued belt and his shining officer's boots, still reeking of the tannery, made her turn her face away.

A gruff, middle-aged Cockney sergeant pushed between two men at the end of the wall, who hurriedly stubbed out cigarettes. The sergeant peered around in the dim light, touched the rim of his cap then stood at attention. The puffy-faced man's sweaty odor surrounded them like a cloud. "Sir? Time to board, sir."

Out of sight, an engine whistled several times, NCO's voices were raised and hundreds of men returning to Salisbury Plain began to move their packs toward the older carriages assigned to elements of the partially-formed 56th Division. He dismissed the sergeant and picked up his heavy suitcase.

On their way to the first-class carriages near the end of the train he felt stung, unable to persuade her, and again taking the weight of her unacceptable ultimatum back to barracks. The impasse had deepened. Frustration locked his chest and his jaw, and so he looked straight ahead.

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When they reached the second-to-last carriage he could see Jenny's eyes were wet and reddened where she'd wiped them. He could feel her fingers trembling as he held her hands. Her grip was firm and he thought for a moment she wouldn't let go. Other cadet officers were waiting to board and so he squeezed her fingers, pulled his hands away and stepped up into the doorway, before he too was tempted to lose his composure. Two steps up he looked around, into her eyes, and for a moment there was no distance or impasse between them. The train lurched.

Groping, he reached out awkwardly for balance, as his mind failed to recognize what he saw around him. The gusting wind brought waves of urgent rapping and strong brass cadences from the band across town. Disoriented, unsure of where he was, Leon thought of calling out, but couldn't see anyone, or recall any other names or faces. Before he could walk two steps from the chair, he collapsed on his knees in the empty concrete bay, closed his eyes and could see only her, still contesting an imaginary freedom with him. Intoxicated with the contest, he was unable to stand, remembering her lips and the way his breath hungrily took in the heat that seemed to glow around her. On his knees, he rested his forehead in his hands. Who was she? Was she from a movie he'd forgotten till now, or an archetypal dream, or the most penetrating and disabling hallucination? Being so close to her made him ache, not physically, but with an eerily familiar dread. How could someone so beautiful bring with her a feeling similar to the helplessness of the pit under Banner Street? In that hell, no matter how much effort and will were applied, a fall from a great height felt imminent. Worse, her memory brought with it the sensation of falling into a bottomless dark void. Yet nothing could explain how strongly he felt pulled toward her, regardless of time or place, as if her feminine presence possessed a magnetism unlike any ordinarily lovely woman. This was the one, this Jenny, so completely and intimately familiar it seemed he'd never really known or fought with anyone but her. The exhilaration he felt from the fire still around her head made him giddy, a vitality in her eyes that began to ease the dread. I'm here, her eyes seemed to say. *Still here.*

Pain made Leon aware of the gravel under his knees. Marcus' tense invitation intruded for a moment. What was he thinking, letting Marcus leave without clearly telling him, no? Marcus wanted division, which would be expensive and

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bad for business. It meant encouraging a savage side of himself that stirred when House was mentioned. It was easy to prefer Jenny's illusory company, and the reassuring pressure of contesting the past and future with her. He combed his memory for her words, which had been spoken in a refined English accent. So, she was English. Everything in the dream was English, even his own choice of words. And there, as he got up, he stumbled at a mental wall, at the impossibility of the experience.

On his feet, walking alone in the wholesale area, Leon began to reorient to the sounds of Elder, and the presence of customers around his nursery. Amanda and Angela were busy with customers in the cashiers' section when Leon walked by, head down, not wanting to talk to anyone. He could see Pedro, Jose and Ramon far off in the back field, loading potted saplings onto a trailer. Fletch was helping a customer on the west side in retail. None of it seemed to matter as much as what had just happened. How long ago had it been that Marcus asked him to contact Cohen at the county offices? It felt like years, and in confusion he sat at the rocky edge of one of the waterfalls, on a bend in the bark-chip path in retail. He bent sideways and scooped out several handfuls of water to splash his face, letting the droplets fall off his chin. The waterfall running between the rocks made soft, confident sounds, reminding him of the way she spoke, and he remembered something she'd mentioned about a waterfall in Siam. How long ago had that name been in use? It mattered, he decided. If Marcus had been edgy over GemMart's future in Elder, or insisted on contacting Cohen—fine, they could talk. For now, there was the lure of a more important impossibility. *How do I find her?*

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For two days, Leon went through the motions at work, leaving on three occasions without notice to explore the history shelves in the city library, allowing his staff and the nursery's advertising momentum to take care of business. The staff saw him in the office, but phone messages accumulated unheard in the answering machine.

Leon's attention span for business matters remained short, and concerning Marcus' petition, non-existent. An impelling curiosity drove him to discern