

A VERY LATE PILGRIM

ROBITSCHKEK pulled his '37 Chevy into a pine clearing, from which a narrow footpath ran across the dune down to the beach. As he braked to a stop, pine branches gently brushed the top of his car and the fine Cape Cod sand was thrown against the inside of the fenders. Seven or eight other cars were parked, higgledy-piggledy, in the clearing, as though the vacationers here were trying to compensate for months of lawful and restrictive parking in town.

Robitschkek left his car between a slick convertible with New York license plates and a jeep equipped with fog lights, two rear mirrors, and bright-red leather cushions. It was painted a brilliant van Gogh yellow and belonged to a painter in nearby Provincetown who this season was going through his Post-Impressionist period. Robitschkek had never set foot on the Cape until two weeks before, but his friends Fred and Helen Murphy had told him about the jeep. Last season, they said, it had been painted an academic Van Dyck brown. For a moment, Robitschkek wondered whether the painter had ever been hurled in an olive-drab, mud-stained jeep over the shot-up dirt roads of northern France, past crude signs saying, "ROAD CLEARED OF MINES TO THIS POINT." Probably not, he decided.

Robitschkek took off his shoes and got out of the car. He was wearing trunks and had draped a towel around his shoulders. Everybody came to the beach here in bathing suit or trunks. You couldn't have done that in Europe, he reflected, but then over there not everybody had a car—not even a battered Chevy—to drive to the beach in.

He walked mincingly through the hot sand of the beach path. He'd never been good at walking barefooted. After he had gone a short distance, he met a group of people who were coming from the beach. He had never seen them before, but the men said "Hello," and the women smiled. Most of the people here were cheerful, he'd noticed, hailing and smiling in true vacation spirit, comfortable in the knowledge that after four weeks they would never see you again.

It had been a long time since Robitschkek's last vacation, so long that he'd almost forgotten what a real vacation was like. Ten years, perhaps. No, twelve—1936, Meran and the Dolomites and Lake Como. If anybody had told him then that only four years

later he would go to America to live!

He crossed the top of the dune and saw that it was high tide. Not far away was Helen Murphy's light-blue beach umbrella. Four women and two men were clustered around it in various poses of recumbency, trying hard to relax. Robitschkek had always been impressed with how dead serious people here were about this business of relaxing and getting a tan. Only when he got close to the group did he see that Helen wasn't there. He didn't seem to know any of the people. They gave him a short, uninterested glance, as if the middle-aged, dark-haired, intense-looking man with the narrow shoulders weren't worth a second look. The men nodded casually, and then they all went back to their sunbathing. Robitschkek nodded and sat down a little aside. He wished Helen would show up. He was having the dreadful sinking sensation—as he had so often since arriving in America—of being terribly alone in the middle of a crowd. Sometimes people would say "Hello," and sometimes they would ignore him, but always he felt alone just the same—here on the beach, or at a party, or in Ann Hopkins' general store, the little town's principal shopping place. Robitschkek was a quiet, soft-spoken, sensitive man. "Much too oversensitive," Helen Murphy used to say. "But I don't blame you, Jan," she would add. He wished he were able to say "Hello" to strangers and slap the shoulders of people he'd never seen before.

Helen Murphy came out of the water, taking off her rubber cap as she walked up to the umbrella. "It's cold today," she said. "But wonderful. Hi, Jan. You meet everybody?" When Robitschkek shook his head, she introduced him to the others in a perfunctory way, as if she weren't too sure of their names. Robitschkek got up, nodded to the women, and shook hands with the men, trying desperately to look casual and not to make a motion that might suggest a bow from the waist.

Helen spread her towel next to him on the sand and sat down on it. "You're late," she said.

"I had to wait in Ann Hopkins' store," Robitschkek said. "I went for the paper but it hadn't come in yet. And I tried to get some cranberry jelly."

"Did you get it?"

"No."

Helen smiled indulgently. "Ann's tough. She likes to make a distinction between her customers, who can buy anything that's displayed in the front room, and her friends, who are admitted to the back room, where she keeps her homemade jellies and special stuff." She laughed. "You'll make the back room someday, Jan. Don't worry."

"Yes," he said, "but how long will it take me?"

Helen couldn't miss the slight undertone of bitterness in his voice. "Don't be silly, Jan," she said, shrugging, as though the subject could be shrugged off lightly.

Robitschkek had known Helen and Fred Murphy ever since he arrived in



this country. Fred was a successful illustrator and the Murphys had a home in New York and a house on the Cape. They had tried hard to persuade Robitschek to spend his four weeks' vacation with them and, in the face of his persistent refusal to impose on them to that extent, had had to be content with getting him accommodation in a good rooming house nearby. It had taken Robitschek a long time to understand Helen's abruptness, her matter-of-fact approach to problems when a little emotion seemed in order. But by now he'd learned that her calmness by no means signified a lack of inner warmth. Though she had never told him anything—Helen Murphy wasn't the kind of person to tell you many things—he felt instinctively that she had taken a beating from life and had managed to get up just before the final count. Maybe that was why he understood her so well. He, too, had staggered up just before he was about to be counted out.

"That woman next to you," Helen was saying in a low voice, "is Mary Hamilton, who writes art criticism under the name of Maryse Houseman."

Robitschek nodded. He had never heard of Mary Hamilton—or Maryse Houseman, for that matter. He'd had no time for art criticism since he came to this country. Too much time had had to be spent with such inartistic problems as getting back on his feet, making a living, and helping to bring over a few people

from Europe. In moments like this, Robitschek felt that he was still a long way from the center of things, still on the outside, in spite of such superficialities as being able to read the funnies and enjoy a baseball game.

"I understand you're pursuing Dorothy Henderson," Helen said. When she saw Robitschek's bewildered face, she broke into laughter.

"I—what?" he said.

"She's telling everybody that you're giving her that Continental wolf's look and that you kissed her hand two nights ago, after her party."

Robitschek shrugged helplessly. "It's so hard to get rid of that habit," he said. "At home, you kissed your hostess's hand when you said goodbye. It meant—nothing!"

"Poor Dorothy," said Helen. "It must be hell to be the third wife of Dr. Henderson. It must be hell to be anybody's third wife. She's so much afraid of a possible fourth one that she has to keep her mind spinning in high gear by inventing things like that. Did you know that Dorothy makes up lists of people who haven't shown up at the beach in the afternoon? Like a lot of people who come here year after year and own a house, Dorothy considers absenteeism an unfriendly act toward the Cape. Those people are prouder of their beaches than of their kids." She looked beyond Robitschek, waved, and said, "Hello, Peggy."

A slim girl with a little nose and high cheekbones strode up, greeted Helen, and got down on her knees next to them. Helen introduced Robitschek, and the girl said, "I've seen you around. You're staying at the Brewster place, aren't you? Are you a writer or an artist or something?"

"No," he said. "I work for an export firm."

Helen said, "Excuse me." She moved over to talk to one of the other women.

THE slim girl lay down on her stomach. She reminded Robitschek vaguely of a pretty Wave with whom he had spent two wide-open weeks in 1943, before he'd been drafted and sent overseas.

"You like the Cape?" the girl asked. It was Standard Conversational Opening No. 1, and Robitschek nodded and said, "Yes, very much." That was Standard Answer No. 1. A few times in the past two weeks, he'd told people *why* he liked it here—the shifting winds, the sudden changes of weather and sky, the air that made you feel as if you were aboard a ship, always drenched with the smell of water and seaweed—but then the people had stared at him as if they hadn't expected to hear all that, and he had shut up in embarrassment. But it was confusing. The week before, he'd encountered Dorothy Henderson's wrath when, after a short visit to the Berkshire Festival, in Tanglewood, he told her how nice it had been in the Berkshires. "I wouldn't want to be buried there," she'd said sharply. "All those long-haired phonies and women wearing high heels." Dorothy was able to forget completely during the summer that nine months out of the year she herself was running around on very high heels, on Park and Fifth.

The girl who looked like the Wave of '43 said, "How do you spell your name? I didn't quite catch it."

No one ever did. "Robitschek," he said. "R-o-b-i-t-s-c-e-k"

"Oh dear," she interrupted with a nervous laugh. Robitschek didn't like her clarinet voice. Then he saw the question in her eyes, even before she spoke. The Wave had



looked exactly like that the first evening, shortly before their relationship had taken a gratifying, if somewhat hectic, turn toward intimacy. "You from Austria?"

"In a way," he said. "Until 1918. Then I became Czech. In '39, I was a Portuguese citizen for several months, but, of course, I've never been in Portugal. Now I'm American, and I hope to remain it."

"Oh," said the girl.

It's no use, Robitschek thought. I might as well have stayed in New York and saved my little money. There, at least, they had stopped asking questions. In New York, no one cared, since there were so many of your kind. Helen had meant well when she urged him to come to the Cape, where he "could be anonymous and just relax," but Helen had been wrong. Sooner or later, they would catch up with you. Take the office, for instance. For quite a while he'd felt safe there; everybody working at the office had known him for several years. Then, a few weeks earlier, a new receptionist had appeared behind the switchboard, a metallic blonde with sparks in her knees, who could rotate her jaws for hours. She was a recent arrival from a place called Seligman, Arizona. "Funny kinda accent you got," she'd said between her bubble-gum contortions. "You should have heard him three years ago," another girl had said. "Boy, you could have cut it with a knife. But he's doing swell. Another three years and he'll be talking just like one of us."

Three years here and three years there, Robitschek thought. How many times three years have you got? You talked to the children of your American friends and suddenly the children gave you that blank stare, as if you were talking Swahili, and you realized with a sickening sensation that they simply didn't understand you. Drunks were like that, too, but with drunks you could always comfort yourself with the thought that they wouldn't understand anybody.

Only once had he succeeded in submerging, and becoming one of those who'd *always* been here. That had been during his basic Army training. The other fellows—most of them from the East and Middle West—had been too tired or too disgusted to give a damn. After a few weeks of drill, K.P., and crap games, Robitschek had been taken for granted, one of the boys. Just that. His friends in New York wrote that it must be tough for him, at his age, but, actually, it had been the happiest time



"If we were on our toes, we'd figure out some way to get a decent cut of what these babies claim as church donations in their income-tax returns."

he'd had since he came to America. It came to an abrupt end when he was transferred to a fancy outfit where everybody spoke half a dozen languages and had a "background." The hell with background.

"How you been getting along with Ann Hopkins?" said the girl who looked like the Wave. "Took *me* two summers to get admitted to her inner sanctum. She doesn't like"—the girl made a hardly perceptible pause—"summer people."

Robitschek nodded. She was a good-mannered girl, so she said "summer people." In Europe, people had been less subtle. The difference here between the summer people who rent a place for the season and me, he thought, is that they cease to be summer people the day after Labor Day. Even that phony painter with the van Gogh-yellow jeep will cease to be part of the "summer people" when he gets back to Greenwich Village. He belongs there. Only I will always be one of the summer people, even on a

cold winter night in Columbus Circle.

"I've seen Ann Hopkins turn people out of her store who came in big Cadillacs," the girl was saying, drawing figures in the sand with her finger. "She's been refusing to sell her back-room stuff to old Miss Farrington for years, on the theory that Miss Farrington is overbearing and, besides, spends only part of the summer here. Imagine—Eleanor Farrington, from Beacon Street, whose grandfather was a Supreme Court Justice under John Quincy Adams or somebody!"

Robitschek shrugged. "I guess Ann Hopkins has the right to choose her back-room protégés," he said. "At least, she's frank about it. Saves you time. Three years here and three years there go fast, you know."

The girl looked puzzled. "Ann is a character," she said. "Some of her forefathers came over on *that* ship, you know." Her glance went toward the west, where Provincetown's Pilgrim Memorial Monument stood out like an

exclamation point against the dim haze.

Robitschek wished the Wave were next to him, instead of this girl. The Wave hadn't talked so much. She'd been fun.

The girl turned over and brushed the sand off her stomach. "I know the bed you sleep in, up in the Brewster house," she said. "It must be two hundred years old. That inlay work is terrific. They could get five hundred bucks for it."

"Maybe it's good for an antique shop but not to sleep in," Robitschek said. "It's built like a hammock. The first morning, I woke up counting my bones."

The girl laughed. "Gosh, I wish Dorothy Henderson could hear you. She'd kill you. Dorothy says she hates modern beds with inner-spring mattresses."

Helen Murphy drifted back, picking up her towel and things. "I've got to go," she said. "You going to stay, Jan? I don't have the car. Fred went to Provincetown."

"I'll get into the water for a minute and then take you home," Robitschek said, and got up. "Excuse me," he said to the girl.

When he came back from the ocean, dripping and cold, everybody was standing up, staring out to sea. Three little boys were shouting, "A whale! A whale!" Robitschek turned around and saw a big grayish mass that was awash on the surface of the sea.

"That's the first whale this year," Helen said. "Now we'll have something to talk about for the next four or five days."

The grayish mass began to beat the water, and went under.

"Gosh, it really is a whale," said the girl who looked like the Wave. Several people began to talk excitedly about a whale that had appeared there two years before. Robitschek realized that Helen hadn't been joking when she said they would be talking about the whale for days. He wished he, too, could be enveloped by the pleasant vacuum of this place and get all excited about whales instead of the latest headlines. He said goodbye to the girl, but she was staring out to sea and paid hardly any attention to him. He walked back to his car with Helen, took her home, and let her out in front of her place.

"Don't forget to come back for dinner," she said. "Around eight."

"I'll be there, Helen," he said. It was ten minutes to seven. His New York paper might be in now.

IN front of Ann Hopkins' store stood an old-fashioned black Packard limousine, with a uniformed chauffeur behind the wheel. Robitschek, still barefooted and in swimming trunks, walked around the car and up the two steps into the store. A tall, forbidding elderly woman, wearing hat and gloves with her black dress, was saying, "I suppose you still don't have a decent brand of anchovies, Ann?"

"Nope," said Ann Hopkins. "Sorry, Miss Farrington."

Ann Hopkins was a small, resolute woman with an opera singer's bosom and a baritone's voice. She put down the newspaper she'd been reading and crossed her strong arms defiantly over her chest. Miss Farrington said good night and went out, and the Packard drove off. Ann Hopkins looked out. "Always pestering me, that woman," she said, to no one in particular. "Who the heck does she think she is?"

Robitschek stepped to the pile of papers on the floor and picked up the top one, which had his name pencilled on the upper right-hand corner. It was spelled "Robitsek." It was the same paper that Ann Hopkins had been holding in her hands. Robitschek glanced over the front page, as was his custom. A big headline said, "SENATE VOTES TO ADMIT 205,000 DPS FROM EUROPE."

Ann Hopkins pointed at the front page. "You been in one of those camps?" she asked, looking up directly at him.

He shook his head. She didn't know about those things, but how could she? "I've been lucky," he said. "I came here eight years ago."

"And I thought all the time you were just another one of those fancy summer people—until this afternoon, when Fred Murphy told me about you." She added, "It must be terrible in those camps."

"Yes," he said. "I guess so."
"I'm glad they're letting them in," said Ann Hopkins. "I've never been in Europe. Boston and New York are as far as I've gone. They can have both of them, as far as I'm concerned." She shrugged again. "But the people in

Europe . . . Sometimes I'm sorry, and sometimes I'm mad at them. You know what I mean?"

"Yes," said Robitschek. "I think I know."

"What are they like—those people over there?" She looked at him.

"There are all kinds of them," he said. "Good ones and bad ones. Like everywhere. Like here."

"Yeah," she said, nodding thoughtfully. "Guess that's right."

Robitschek turned toward the door and said, "Good night, Mrs. Hopkins."

"Wait!" she shouted, starting, as if she'd just remembered something. She went into the back room and returned with two glass jars of cranberry jelly. "Just finished making it," she said. "I'll put it on the bill. And if there's anything in the back room you want, just tell me, Mr. Robisek."

Robitschek took the jars and said "Thanks," but Ann Hopkins had already disappeared into the back room. He took one jump down the two steps in his bare feet, sat down in the car, and carefully laid the jars on the front seat, under the towel. A fresh wind was swishing through the car. He started the engine and drove off with a sudden spurt. He drove down the road so fast that the tires were screaming when he turned the first curve. He looked down at the speedometer and checked himself. He'd been going sixty-five miles an hour, much too fast for the little car. In his room, he stood the two jars up on the mantel, next to the few books he'd brought along. When he sat down on his two-hundred-year-old bed and looked at his bare feet, he saw that the sole of the left one was bleeding. He'd been all right when he'd come out of the ocean. He must have cut himself as he left Ann Hopkins' store. Funny, he hadn't even noticed it then.

—JOSEPH WECHSBERG

CAREER

Ambition grows on her like stairs around a tower; she is never alone again. The stairs ascend her. The foreman smokes in the garden.

Insidious, gradual, the deadly scaffold grows beside the windows, and she never remembers, later, what was the blight that killed each rose.

—GERTA KENNEDY

