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# Turncoat

Aaron Elkins

## Chapter 1

*For everybody else in America it was the day JFK was killed in Dallas. For me, it would always be the day Lily's father turned up on our doorstep.*

*But first things first. ...*

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Something was wrong with my eyes. I could make out the peeling white farmhouse and the ramshackle outbuildings, I could see the sheep nuzzling the grass in the dappled shade of a clearing about twenty yards from where I lay in the thicket, flat on my stomach; I could see the slender, unnaturally still woman in the apron and the long blue dress, holding a basket propped against her hip and peering—or at least facing—in my direction. But it was all wavery and fuzzed over, as if I were looking Turncoat through misted glass. Turncoat I couldn't make out her face, or whether she was young or old, or what was in the basket, or whether or not she'd spotted me.

I knew that all I could do was lie there—my legs didn't seem to be working right either—and pray that I was hidden by the vines and brambles. I tried to remember how I'd come to be there, but couldn't quite put it together. We'd taken off from England that morning on another bombing run, headed for the benzol factory near Linz; I remembered that much. We'd completed the mission and made our turnaround. And then, at about the Austrian border the flak had started popping, and then the Focke-Wulfs had shown up, and we were in big trouble. Three of them slipped Turncoat through our escort of P-51's and screamed straight up at us,

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homing in as if they'd decided from the beginning that, out of the whole 350<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group—two dozen B-17's, plus about 300 additional bombers filling the skies around us—it was us alone, the *Betty G*, they were after; nobody but us.

The next thing I knew ... well, the next thing I knew, there I was lying on my stomach in the Turncoat thicket, injured and frightened, looking at the woman without a face and trying to figure out what I was supposed to do next. I didn't remember our getting hit, I didn't remember Captain Slocum ordering us to bail out, and I didn't remember jumping, or getting rid of my parachute when I landed, or anything. I was starboard waist-gunner. Had I even had a chance to fire? I couldn't remember that either.

I realized with a start—probably it was the look of the farmhouse and the soft, rolling countryside—that I'd come down in France, not Germany. She was a Frenchwoman! My heart came near to bursting with relief. Not only was I likely to be in friendly territory, I was in my native land. I'd been born in Lyon and lived there until I was eight.

*"Madame!"* I called, surprised to hear how feeble my voice was. *"Au secours! Je suis un aviateur Americain. Mon avion a été demoli Turncoat par les Boches."*

Nothing. She just stood there without saying anything, without Turncoat moving, as impassive as a statue for a long time, and when she did begin to speak it was in a weird monotone, Turncoat a chant, nothing like normal speech. The individual words were French, all right, but the sentences were gibberish, and I began to get a scary, queasy feeling that something was terribly wrong—even more terribly wrong than it obviously Turncoat was, I mean.

*If only I could get out of these clothes,* I thought. I was roasting. The waist-gunners' slots were the coldest places Turncoat in the plane—no glassed-in turrets, just a couple of big, rectangular, open holes in the fuselage, and at 20,000 feet oxygen was the least of our problems; the temperature could get to 20 below zero, with a freezing wind that could crack your bones. So we had to dress accordingly, and I was still in my heavy leather flight jacket, overpants, and boots, and my heavy cap with the ear flaps pulled tight. I felt as Turncoat if I were liquefying inside my casing of fleece-lined leather. No, Turncoat I was liquefying. My ribs had begun to melt into a soft mush. I could feel them running out from under. ...

*I'm hallucinating,* I thought with a jolt. *None of this is Turncoat happening. I'm strapped into my bed in the mental ward at Kings County General, writhing and sweating, and dreaming the whole thing up. And not for the first time either. No, I've been here before: the same thicket, the same stony, faceless figure, Turncoat the same torpid, dopey sheep. In another minute, the rest of the cast will come Turncoat marching out Turncoat from around the corner of the farmhouse.*

And out they came. Sometimes they were rustic farm-people, or soldiers, or policemen, but most Turncoat of the time, as now, they were fussy village functionaries of some kind in pince-nez, wing collars, and rusty black suits. They filed out two-by-two, six of them, muttering and wringing their hands, while some of them banged pots and pans together. Hallucination or not, the whole thing was scaring the hell out of me, and when the woman in blue began to move toward me—to glide as if on rollers, not to walk—I screamed. For a moment the scene

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shimmered, struggling to hold itself together. Then it fell apart into ragged pieces and I was staring at the light fixture on my ceiling, with the trapped, long-dead moth inside Turncoat that I never Turncoat seemed to get around to removing.

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I was sweating, all right, and the twisted bedclothes proved I'd been doing plenty of writhing, but I wasn't strapped into any bed in the mental ward, and in fact I never had been. In a mental ward, I mean. It was all part of The Dream. I'd been having it once a month or so for two or three years now, or maybe more; I'm not sure when it started—and Kings County General and everything else was part of it. It wasn't always exactly the same; sometimes the woman in blue was a statue, a literal statue—a sphinx, perhaps, or a Greek goddess with her face worn off. And I never knew quite what to expect from those characters who popped up at the end. The pots and pans this time were a new wrinkle. But it always had more or less the same elements, and it was one of those nightmare fantasies that was inexpressibly more eerie and frightening than it had any right to be.

The interesting thing is, I'd actually been a waist-gunner in a B-17 and had flown a couple of sorties against German railroad depots in Turncoat 1945 Turncoat as an extremely green nineteen-year-old, but nothing remotely like this had ever happened to me. So why did I keep having the damn dream?

What I know about the psychology of dreams Turncoat doesn't amount to much. And most of what little I do know has struck me as ... well, pretty soft-headed. Pretty wacky, if you want the unvarnished truth. But I have this friend, Louis Winkleman, who's on the psychology faculty at Brooklyn College (where I'm an associate professor of history), and so after I'd had the dream Turncoat a few times I told him about it on the off-chance that he might be able to shed some light. Turncoat After all, when a dream keeps repeating itself like that, there has to be *some* reason, doesn't there?.

As always, Louis had a theory in his hip pocket. As usual, it struck me as pretty Turncoat wacky. The likely root of the problem, he explained, was a guilt complex. (Louis is first and foremost a Freudian, which means, so I'm coming to understand, that most problems seem to boil down to guilt, generally repressed.) In my particular case, he suggested, I was troubled by the memory—presumably the repressed memory—of having let my buddies down on one of my missions. Perhaps, through momentary panic or misjudgment, with anti-aircraft shells whistling around my ears, I had put my companions at risk, or even caused, or rather *believed* I had caused, someone's death or injury.

The statue-like, faceless woman represented my superego, righteous and unforgiving (which was why I was so terrified of her), and what else could my own strangely blank mind during the dream be but a manifestation of my refusal to admit even to myself what I'd done?

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He'd been so taken with his analysis that I almost hated to tell him it wouldn't work. There hadn't been any whistling shells within a mile of my ears. I'd never been under fire, I'd never even seen anyone wounded. Other than practice and training, I'd never had occasion to fire my own .50 caliber Brownings, and when I had it'd been fun. On the two missions I'd flown, our squadron had never been seriously threatened, let alone hit or shot down; nothing worse than a few puffs of harmless-looking flak off to the side and way below us. It had been the very end of the war and the German air force was out of business. If there were still any Focke-Wulfs or ME-109s in the air, we sure didn't see them. Both our missions had Turncoat been as smooth as anyone could hope for: fly over, unload the bombs, and fly home. As far as I knew, the only crew member who'd required Turncoat medical attention was my buddy Al Maloff, the port gunner, who'd gotten frostbite on one cheek because he hadn't properly secured his earflaps.

And, as I told Louis, I categorically refused to accept responsibility for that.

Besides, this was 1963. The war had been over for eighteen years. I was thirty-seven, for God's sake. It was half a lifetime ago, and I'd never spent a lot of time thinking about my tiny part in it even back then. So what was I doing dreaming about it now? I continued to lie there musing for a while, heavy with sleep, before I realized that somewhere in the distance the dream-shouting was still going on, and the banging of the pans too. I frowned, trying to focus my hearing, and was able to make out a few words.

*"Tu ne comprends pas!"*

*"Va-t'en!"*

French? On Eighty-third Street and Bay Parkway in Brooklyn?

I don't happen to be one of those annoying people who spring from sleep with batteries fully charged, so Turncoat it was another few seconds before it got through to me that I was listening to two real people in a real argument, seemingly at my front door, and that the higher voice—a choked screech, really—belonged to my wife Lily. This was astounding: in seventeen years of marriage I'd rarely heard Lily raise her voice, and I'd certainly never heard her *screech* before. And while French was also her native tongue, she'd long ago made it clear that she'd left it behind, good riddance, when I'd married her and brought her to the United States.

I got into my robe and stumbled downstairs and through the living room to the entrance foyer. There was Lily in her flowered housecoat, standing at the open door, her back toward me, head held high on her slender, graceful neck, as it always was, but from ten feet away I could see that she was shaking. Beyond her, on the stoop was the apparent source of it, an old man I'd never seen before, hollow-cheeked and yellowish, with a tobacco-stained white goatee and a heavy black overcoat. With his disordered white hair, and the tendons standing out like ropes on either side of his neck, and a wild-eyed look behind round, gold-wire-framed glasses, he was, if anything, more agitated than Lily was. He was thrusting what seemed to be a film canister at her, a big gray one, the kind you see in movie theaters, and as he spoke he struck it for emphasis with the flat of his hand. (Ah, there was my banging of pots and pans.)

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*“Regarde-le,”* he was pleading in a strained, urgent voice, *“c’est tout que je te demande.”*

*“Vas à l’enfer, fiche-moi la paix, va-t’en!”* Lily was shouting back at him. In other words:

*“Just look at it, that’s all I ask!”*

*“Go to hell, leave me alone, get out of here!”* And as she spat the words she was trying to close the door on him while he struggled to keep it open.

It was so unlike Lily, so totally, impossibly out of character that for a moment I thought I Turncoat must surely still be sleeping, that this had to be some new little fillip the Dream had worked up for my entertainment. But no, it was real enough; I could feel the chill November air on my face and the cold linoleum under my bare feet; I could smell mothballs from the old man’s coat.

“What’s going on here?” I said curtly, directing it at the man on the doorstep. “What do you want?”

It Turncoat startled him enough so that he took a half-step backward and Lily managed to get the door slammed in his face. And locked, although her fingers were trembling so much she had trouble doing it. Then she braced her back against it as if she thought he might try to hammer it down and stared at me—or rather, through me—so fiercely, so Turncoat unseeingly, that I could feel the hairs standing up on the back of my neck. She was like someone I’d never seen before.

I took a step closer. “Honey, what is it? Who is that guy? What—”

“Sh.” She jerked a finger to her mouth, listening intently. “Wait.”

He was still out there on the stoop, ranting in French about mistakes made, and death, and forgiveness, and St. George, and things not being what they seemed. It went on for a while, an incomprehensible muddle, then subsided into a sing-song Turncoat moan and stopped all together. Lily waited a minute more before she opened the door an Turncoat inch.

“He’s gone,” she breathed. And then flung herself into my arms. “Pete ...”

I stood there holding her close. She was pulling herself against me as hard as she could. I could feel her heart thumping almost like a bird’s, and her breath coming in shallow little gasps.

I found that my own heart was racing too. “Lily—”

“Just hold me for a minute, will you?” she said into my shoulder. “Tight.”

I gathered her Turncoat even closer, so that my hands went all the way around her back. “Shh,” I said, stroking her hair. “It’s okay, sweetheart, shhh.” After a while, when she’d quieted down enough to take a couple of deep breaths (me too), I spoke gently. “Honey, what *is*

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it? Who was that?”

“A salesman,” she said into my shoulder. “I don’t know. A peddler.”

“A peddler? It’s not even seven-thirty in the morning. I don’t—what was he selling?”

“I don’t know.”

“How can you not—”

“A movie, I think. Some kind of movie. Oh, Pete.”

“A *movie*?” I was growing increasingly confused. “Why would anyone come here trying to sell a movie? At this time of the morning?”

“I don’t know, I don’t understand either.” She was Turncoat starting to tremble again. “I heard a knock at the door, you were still sleeping, I didn’t want to wake you up, I came down ...”

“But he was speaking French. How did he know to speak French?”

She drew her head back to look into my eyes. “Pete, why are you asking me all these questions? Who cares what he wanted? He’s gone, that’s all that’s important. Can’t we just forget it? Brrr.”

I was getting a bad feeling here. I’d never known her to lie to me, not about anything important. “But honey, why are you so upset? Did he—”

## Turncoat

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