

An Atlantic "First"

A STORY



A veteran, now in his twenty-fifth year, who is thinking and writing in terms of peace, JOSEPH HELLER *is a junior at New York University, where he is majoring in English and producing short stories which in our judgment give very real promise. During the war he flew sixty missions as a bombardier with the 12th Air Force in Italy and France, but the urge to write was then in his mind, and now he is doing it.*

CASTLE OF SNOW

by JOSEPH HELLER

My Uncle David was a sober man, and my Aunt Sarah, an earthy, practical woman, lived uncomplainingly with him in what seemed to be a perfect and harmonious relationship. When he was reading or occupied with his thoughts, she was always busy with the housework. Occasionally he would find himself tedious, and she seemed able to anticipate these infrequent excursions. When he would look up from his book and remove his glasses, she was always at liberty from her chores and ready to provide the relief he desired.

"Reading," she would complain. "Always reading. How can you waste so much time with your books?"

"I'm not wasting time," my Uncle David would reply defensively. "There is knowledge here in these books, and knowledge is a very great thing."

"What's so great about it?" my Aunt would demand. "You can't leave it to the children. It's something you have to take with you when you go."

"It's the same with all great things," my Uncle would answer. "You must take them to the grave with you. You cannot leave great things behind."

"If you take all the books in your trunk," my Aunt would scoff, "there won't be room for you."

"It's not the books," my Uncle would try to explain. "The great things are what they create. Great things are here," he would say, tapping his forehead slowly. "And here," he would add, a little more loudly, and tap his finger over his heart.

The great tragedy in my Uncle's life was the failure of the revolution in Russia. He was born in a small village not far from what is today Leningrad. He was an active socialist in his youth — so active that he had been forced to flee the authorities. He was good at figures, and when he came to this country he found employment as a bookkeeper with a manufacturing firm, working there until the great depression threw it into bankruptcy.

He watched the revolution from this country, and he rejoiced when the Czarist government was overthrown. He had faith then that in Russia would soon be found the culmination of all that is beautiful in mankind. When the original aims of the revolution failed to materialize and were abandoned for ends that were more prosaic and more easily achieved, my Uncle's faith was questioned. He watched the betrayal of his hopes in the following years, and when the reality could no longer be ignored, he turned silent and went to his books for solace.

The first effects of the depression struck close, throwing many of our friends and neighbors into unemployment immediately. I was attending elementary school then, and I was just barely able to understand the implacable laws of economics and the harsh punishments of poverty.

One morning my Uncle David took me to the city for a winter coat. Autumn was turning bitter, and the coat I had worn in previous seasons had been diverted to the use of my younger cousin. It was a cold, gray afternoon when we returned, and as we walked up the street to the house, we came upon a pile of furniture stacked desolately in the street near the curb. We stopped to look and my Uncle answered my questions, explaining the trag-

edy to me in a low, unhappy voice. It was my first experience with eviction and I was horrified by such a drastic circumstance.

"But that's terrible!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," my Uncle agreed. "It is terrible." He placed his hand on my shoulder and we resumed walking. "It's terrible for someone to be put out on the street. And it's terrible and frightening to be unable to help."

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THE next week my Uncle lost his job. When I came home for lunch one day, he was sitting by the window reading. He glanced up briefly at me when I entered, and returned to his book without a word. My Aunt put a finger to her lips, motioning for silence, and when I sat down to eat, she told me that the firm had closed and he was without work.

There must have been some money saved, for he was unemployed for almost three months and we continued to live on the same standard. My Aunt Sarah was a thrifty manager and an excellent cook, and if she economized on the food, it passed without notice.

My Uncle went looking for work every day. He would be gone when I awoke in the morning and he would return late in the afternoon or sometimes in the evening long after we had eaten. He would enter wearily, seat himself at the table with a dejected sigh, and announce his failure. My Aunt would set some food before him, and he would eat in silence, staring despondently at some point on the kitchen wall. After eating, he would sit awhile. Then he would rise, go to the trunk for a book, settle in the living room, and read late into the night.

My Aunt showed great concern for him and she would sometimes entreat him to leave his book and come to bed. He always refused, and if she persisted, he would grow annoyed and move into the kitchen, where she would have to raise her voice to be heard and risk awakening the children. After a while she allowed him to stay up without protest, but she suffered terrible anxiety over his health.

Finally, after three months, he found work. It was a temporary job on a construction project that fortunately lasted for seven months. Several weeks after it ended, we were forced to sell some furniture. My cousin was moved into my room, and his bed was sold along with several chairs and lamps and a miscellaneous assortment of other household articles. My Uncle made arrangements for the sale, and everything that was to go was moved into the foyer.

The man came in the afternoon. He entered respectfully, and throughout the entire transaction regarded us with practiced solicitude. He examined each article thoroughly, making whispered calculations to himself, and then retired to a corner of the kitchen with my Aunt to haggle over the price. They were there a long time, arguing stubbornly in low, muttering voices. When my Aunt returned, she wore a petulant expression. She announced obstinately that she was not going to sell.

"How much will he give you?" my Uncle asked. She told him and he smiled sadly. "Give them to him," he said. "These are bad times, Sarah. You will not get more any place else."

"I won't do it," my Aunt argued resolutely. "I'll get a job first. I'll go out tomorrow and get a job."

"Where?" my Uncle David asked. He smiled at her with sorrow and spoke in a soft, pitying voice. "Where can you find work?"

"I'll do what I used to do. It isn't so long ago that I used to work and I am still in good health. I'll work as a waitress or I'll serve drinks in a cabaret. I can still do it."

"No, Sarah," my Uncle said, shaking his head slowly.

"Why?" my Aunt insisted. "Why not?"

"You're not a young girl any more."

"But I can do it. I'm strong for a woman."

"They don't want you. When they hire girls they want a young girl with fire in her eyes and firm hips that will roll when she walks. That isn't you any more."

My Aunt was a pathetic figure as she groped for a reply. She was near tears and her naïve sorrow saddened us all. My Uncle put his hands on her shoulders and smiled into her eyes.

"But when you were younger!" he exclaimed. "Then it was a different story. You could walk into any place then and they would be glad to have you."

My Aunt was not mollified, but the furniture was sold, and in the weeks following, other articles moved from the house in small, stealthy groups. Clothing was mended and remended until wear was no longer possible, and all the schoolwork was completed in the afternoon so that a minimum of electricity would be used after darkness.

One day my Aunt Sarah went out and visited the neighborhood laundries, and she secured work mending shirts, turning frayed collars and cuffs and sewing rents in the fabrics. She would bring the work home with her, and when she was not busy with the housework, she would sit in the kitchen sewing. My Uncle would chide her with a broken, self-pitying humor, and she would respond to his teasing with indignant perseverance, but in all his heavy raillery, he never once attempted to dissuade her.

Our misfortunes prolonged themselves in a way that was unintelligible to my young mind. It was like a string of rubber being stretched beyond its limits, growing thinner as the tension increases with no promise of respite, and I was aware that a point was being approached at which everything must

suddenly and disastrously snap. Relief must come or else a rupture occur that would hurl us all into a maelstrom of confusion, chaos, and tragedy. Then one day, without a word beforehand, my Uncle returned with a stranger, a man who had come to buy his books.

I remember the figure of my Uncle kneeling by the closet before the open trunk. He removed the books singly, each one with both hands, glanced at the title soberly, and passed it to the strange man, who appraised it in a moment and added it to the mounting pile behind him. My Aunt was stunned by this latest development, and she stood motionless, watching the proceeding with profound regret.

From my Uncle's actions it seemed that he had been determined to sell them all and had then wavered. Midway through the pile, he hesitated over one book and placed it on the floor behind him. Near the end he withheld another. When all the others had been sacrificed, he picked up the two books and considered each thoughtfully. Then, with reluctance, he handed one to the man and rose. It is interesting to note that in this, possibly the moment of his greatest tragedy, he chose the humor of Chaucer in preference to the comforting promise of the Bible.

He received a pitiful sum for them, four or six dollars, accepting it without complaint, and then gratuitously offered the trunk with the books. When the man had departed, my Uncle faced my Aunt and handed her the money. The poor woman was too confused to speak. She wanted to upbraid him, and yet she seemed to know that his sacrifice could not be avoided.

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The next week he found a job. He came rushing into the house with wild exuberance, too excited to remain still or speak coherently, and we were transformed to a gleeful mob by the good news. When we were calm, we learned the details. He had been hired by a large bakery as loading supervisor and traffic manager. The pay was good, only ten dollars less than what he had been paid by the manufacturing firm, and, as he was quick to inform us, since prices had dropped, it was really much more. He was to begin work the next day, and we took the snow that had begun falling that afternoon as a good omen.

We left together the next morning and he walked with me as far as the subway. The snow was still falling and it was deep and dry on the ground. He kicked it up with his feet as he walked jauntily with the unleashed energy of a young boy, talking giddily and happily, unwilling and unable to suppress his enthusiasm. He inquired into my schoolwork and my ambitions for the future, and he prophesied a lawyer's or a doctor's office for me and talked about putting money away for a small home. We parted by the station and I walked on to school, feeling at peace for the first time in almost a year.

The snow stopped falling sometime during my morning classes. At three o'clock we were dismissed. I walked home alone, because for some reason I wanted to hurry.

When I turned the corner, I noticed some people in front of the cigar store staring up the street with amusement. As I continued, I saw that all along the street people had stopped and were looking toward a group of young boys playing around a large pile of snow. I peered ahead, but I could discern nothing from the distance. Then, when I approached the snow pile, I stopped with astonishment, for seated in the snow among the boys, and completely at ease with them, was my Uncle David.

They were erecting a fort, packing the snow into blocks and passing them to another group who set them into a wall that was appearing around the pile. One of the larger boys there had assumed command and was directing activities with loud, belligerent orders, and my Uncle David was complying with cheerful abandon. He was laughing as he worked with the other boys, and his dark face seemed younger and more content than I could ever recall. He was wearing his suit, and I noticed his overcoat folded up on the sidewalk. He looked up suddenly and saw me.

"Bobby!" he greeted loudly, raising his arm to wave. "You are just in time. Put your books down and come play. The snow is good and clean."

I flushed with shame and a dreadful fear seized me. I stammered something unintelligible and ran to the house and up the steps. I tore into the house with a cry, startling my Aunt Sarah.

"Uncle David!" I cried. "Something's the matter with Uncle David!"

Her hand leaped to her face with alarm. "What? Where is he? Where is he?"

It was too much for me to explain, and I pointed frantically to the living-room window. She rushed across to it and threw it open. I followed her slowly, catching my breath, and waited behind her. When she turned, the fear had gone, and her face was set in a tight, angry expression. She went to a closet, put a coat on over her apron, and walked out, motioning me to follow. We walked downstairs and down the street to where they were playing in the snow. Some more spectators had gathered immediately about them, and my Aunt Sarah pushed through until we were standing right above my Uncle. He was busy with the snow and he did not see us.

"David," my Aunt said. "Come upstairs."

He saw us and his face broke into a welcoming smile. "Sarah!" he exclaimed with delight. "I was just thinking that maybe I should go upstairs and call you. Come, Sarah, come play in the snow."

"Come upstairs," my Aunt said firmly.

He looked at her with surprise. The boys, sensing

a conflict, had stopped playing and were drawing slowly away. All the noises in the world ceased suddenly as the whole universe focused eyes upon us.

My Uncle's hands played unconsciously with a snowball as he looked up at her. "Forget your housework for a while, Sarah, and come play. It will be like old times again. Do you remember when we used to play in the snow years ago?"

"David." Her voice was low and determined. "Come upstairs."

"Do you remember the time when we went into the country and found the old farmhouse? It was snowing then, and there were you and I and a girl named Sonya, and Peter Grusov. I built a castle for you from the snow. You were fifteen years old then. I built this fine castle for you and you helped me. Then we all went into the woods to look for rabbits, and when we came back it was late and the castle had frozen solid, and we all said it would last forever. It was too late to go back that night and we stayed in the old farmhouse, and when we went out the next morning, the sun was shining and it was warm, and the castle I built for you from the snow had melted and couldn't be recognized. Do you remember, Sarah? Try to remember."

"Come upstairs."

"And when we got back that day and you told your father, he chased me with a stick, and I hid in my cellar and he wanted to fight with my father. Try to remember, Sarah. Please try to remember."

"David. Come upstairs."

The calm on my Uncle's face disappeared, and he looked strained and anxious. "All right," he said. "I'll come upstairs. But first tell me if you remember. Think back and try. Do you remember?" He watched her with desperate hope. When she spoke, his face fell.

"Come upstairs," she said.

A great shadow came over him and his body went limp with disappointment. He rose listlessly, retrieved his coat, and walked after her to the house. She walked ahead. He did not try to catch up, but followed meekly behind, and I, puzzled and frightened, kept several yards in the rear.

When we were upstairs in the apartment, my Uncle dropped in a chair by the kitchen table. My Aunt hung her coat in the closet and returned to the kitchen. She stood across the table from him, her expression sternly demanding an explanation. My Uncle sheepishly avoided looking at her.

"What happened to the job?" she asked at last.

"They were striking. That's why I was hired. They wanted me to scab."

"You didn't take it?"

"They were picketing when I got there. They were walking in the cold with large signs in their hands and picketing."

My Aunt didn't speak. Her lips began to twitch with despair.

"I couldn't go in, Sarah. They were men like myself. I couldn't go in and take their jobs."

"I don't care about the job," my Aunt said, speaking rapidly, as though she feared her voice would choke at any moment.

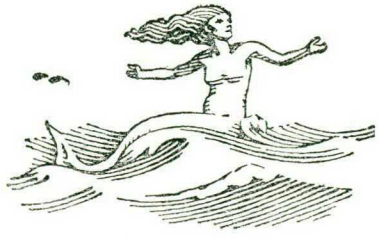
"Then what is it?"

"In the street," she blurted out. "Like an idiot. With the children in the snow like an idiot."

My Uncle shook his head as though he were in a stupor and ground his knuckles into his eyes. "I was coming home," he said, softly and sadly, "and I had only bad news for you. I passed the children playing in the snow and I remembered how I used to enjoy it when I was a boy. I wanted to play with them, so — I took off my coat and played with them."

My Aunt turned to the stove and peered into a simmering pot. Then she began to knead some dough that was laid out on a wooden chopping board, her unforgiving face disclosing her anger. My Uncle rose and moved into the living room, abject and silent.

He remained in the house the rest of the day, keeping carefully out of her way and glancing at her meekly from time to time. My Aunt Sarah worked ploddingly in the kitchen, never once meeting my Uncle's gaze. She was angry and hurt, and most certainly baffled, for she was unable to understand why a grown man should want to act like a child.



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