

The Whole Family Was Afraid

I hadn't seen Jack, Nicholas, or their family
since they left the emergency housing camp in Noisy-le-Grand
five years ago.
Even though I pounded on the wooden panel,
rattled the doorknob, called out my name,
no one answered.
Still, the woman next door confirmed,
"Yes, they're home. Knock louder; they're inside."
Even the dog did not bark.

When I finally risked pushing the door open,
there stood young Jack at the back of the kitchen, near the stairs,
looking ready to keep the toughest intruders out of the upstairs rooms.
I didn't dare approach him,
but stayed rooted to the spot with surprise.
In vain, I repeated my name.
He echoed it back to his mother,
hidden in the bedroom, unwilling to move.
Then finally she recognized my voice,
and dared to come downstairs toward us.

As we met and talked,
she didn't tell me why she was so afraid,
but it was easy enough to guess.
Creditors,
continually pursuing the family,
demanding unpaid back rent
from a housing project they'd lived in three years earlier,
and for the last apartment they'd had
before dropping out of sight here.
There was the grocer, about to cut off their credit,
and the utilities company that wouldn't accept late payments
even if the electricity had been cut off for a long time.
Her fear also came
from the big fourteen-year-old son and his father.
There was no knowing what they might do!
Sooner or later, bad luck was bound to strike.
Finding her like this
reminded me of the times in Noisy-le-Grand
when I saw her dart into her shack
the moment anyone turned the corner,
splashing toward her in the mud.
Fear! The whole family was afraid--
Father, mother, and children lived in fear.

Ever since I've known the Jamisons,
they've always been afraid. It came from far back.

The mother had grown up in foster-care institutions
She knew just what to do and say,
as well as what you don't say and do
to keep out of harm's way.
The father too had learned as soon as he could reason,
as soon as he was born,
that other people were always right
and he was always wrong.
Sometimes he told stories about his youth,
living with his mother in a tiny basement room,
about the money you had to scrape together
by begging, stealing, or earning it, whatever did the trick.
Later, he left his hometown,
walking through towns and villages,
finding food through chance encounters.
Then he met Simone, a terrified young girl,
with a baby in her arms,
thrown out of the house where she had worked as a maid.
They lived in slum shacks,
sometimes here, sometimes there, finally in Noisy-le-Grand.
He used to tell me about the children
who had been taken away from them.

Do either of them know how to read or write?
I never knew about him.
She would scribble a few lines now and then
when the darkest crises engulfed them.
She'd jumble together her worries, her prayers to the Virgin,
her plea for help,
as well as that trust she had in us.
For her and her family, we were the only helpful haven
from which she would not be turned away.

Now, five years later, that same fear
has numbed her heart and kept her from answering,
when I knocked at their door,
that same fear that had the boy
braced by the stairs, ready to take on
anyone who threatened him,
his brother, or his mother,
or this defenceless, constantly frightened man--his father.
The father confided in me, "My oldest one
is learning bad habits with the neighbor's kid.
How's he going to wind up?
What will I do if a mean streak gets under his skin?
Everyone will say it's my fault.
They'll take him away from me like the others."
"The others" are the seven children never returned to him.
He cannot even imagine what they look like now,
deep down in his soul's memory,
it's been so long since he lost them.

“And my wife, she can’t see the danger;
she just doesn’t get it! She’s always sticking up for her son.”

This fourteen-year-old son
is also a kid who can hardly read or write.

“He tries as hard as he can! But he just doesn’t catch on...,
and he’s ashamed because they make fun of him.”

He has already stolen things. Nothing really big--an old bike.
But if you swipe a penny, you’ll rob a bank.

The police is already keeping an eye on him.

“Just wait and see; they’ll kick us out because of this.”

That’s how I’ve always known them,
kicked around from pillar to post...
at times without a home,
at times without work,
sometimes without children--but always afraid.

