

LAURO PALOMBA

## Allergic Reactions

**D**AWN PENETRATED THE curtainless, unguarded window and found Martin burrowed under the covers, the blankets hilled-up by some seismic frenzy. The air hung stiff, inelastic as washing on a winter clothesline. Within the hill, in God-starved darkness, Martin's nostrils and sinuses were flooding with the night's accumulations. Histamine on the march. He cursed the ragweed and hay fever that thrived in the cement of city life. They lay dormant while he slept and then ambushed him at the first conscious moment. These sensitivities—he hadn't suffered from them as a youngster and couldn't say when they'd developed—depressed him.

His spectral hand wound out to grope for the outsize kleenex by the pillow and dragged it inside. The vicious snorting from beneath the covers startled and puzzled the pigeon pacing on the window sill.

The kleenex, folded, drenched and refolded, was unfit company in Martin's foxhole and his limbs and bleary head eventually emerged. It had been a wet, thundering night—the sky leaking into his dreams—and the cleansed air closed in on his musty flesh. The muddle in his head broke apart and vanished when he yawned and sucked human odour up his nose.

Other smells battled for attention: stale whiskey, orange rinds, a discarded tuna tin; and other sights: a rain-stained floor, socks snarled under one shoe, a dishtowel solidified around the refrigerator handle, a dazzling windowpane. Martin turned away in revulsion.

His legs, saddlebagged with sixty-two years of grudging movement, scraped into the bathroom. His bones were ready for retirement; they creaked like an old ship's spars. Where to store them when he retired? He'd leave them where they ran dry but what if the world played one of its many unfunny tricks and shredded his job beforehand? That concern smarted him like his lower back muscles when not lubricated into place.

Then, all at once, the jarring, unstoppable sneezes wracked him, blast upon blast, until he slumped, splattered and sweating. He plunged for cover, dove his head under the faucet and let the icy stream flow soothingly around his neck, a buffer against his tormentors. When the hazard had passed, he straightened up and washed his face, ears, the inside of his nostrils and armpits.

The mirror above the chipped basin handed back his dull face. His features had soaked up the ravages of war, women and booze and he saw no point in examining them. The remnants of white hair were short and isolated in clumps. Two pats of a palm served as a combing. He easily tracked down the pants and shirt, the missing shoe was a pain to locate, and he grunted as he shoved in his feet, grunted to tie the shoelaces.

From the refrigerator—it shut improperly with a muffled pop and he had to bang it again—he took an egg, pierced the ends and swallowed the contents with jigsaws of rye bread. From under the rusty bedsprings he pulled out a whiskey bottle and applied two snorts, one to rinse his mouth, the second to carry the antihistamine pill to its duty. Pills disagreed with him but they were fair trade for a dry nose. Dipping his fingers into a jar of maraschino cherries, he chewed a half-dozen. The awakening exercise concluded, he treaded down the squeaky stairs into Friday.

The day was luminous. A cluster of bodies had already formed at the bus stop but Martin stood apart. Several commuters were wearing headsets and dancing slyly to private urges. Martin gazed at the summer knees, the gauzy dresses and tanned shoulders, the lie and slope of breasts. He squinted at the house he had just left.

Gertie had stood her ground when the developers blitzed her block and now the dwelling remained, dilapidated but defiant, dwarfed by the apartment towers on either side. He visualized Gertie waddling on her swollen, arthritic legs, trying to frighten the pigeons from her home. She had sent them winging with stones until the day her aim failed and shattered a window. Seeing her beaten, the pigeons had counterattacked with vengeance and

bombed the porch into submission. Gertie had called the Health Department and it sent out an inspector but the pigeons, suspecting treachery, had flown to safer sanctuaries.

"I don't see any pigeons," said the unsympathetic inspector with a coffee and a raisin bun balanced on his clipboard.

Gertie, puffing out thicker than her legs, burst back, "Well, you can sure as hell see the sons of bitches weren't constipated!"

Martin had watched the scene from his broken window, annoyed by the disturbance interrupting his sleep. With his landlady nine weeks mute in her grave, he worried over the future of the house.

The bus was late. He knew how to summon it. Light a cigarette and it was bound to appear. He did and was not disappointed. Three drags and he flipped it onto the sewer grate.

He nestled into the corner of the long seat at the rear, leaning his temple against the window, inhaling the diesel perfume piggybacking on the breeze. The draft also toned down the driver's preachiness: "Come on, folks, a little more, keep moving, the back's going to the same place as the front."

The overloaded motor groaned to life and Martin could have heard his own strangled gasp for breath as the bomb explosions gobbled up the oxygen. The ink on the 1945 armistice was forty-two years dry but whenever the bus lurched, he might still recall—today he declined—a mind shrapnelled with fear.

The comfort of payday put sprightliness in his step as he threaded through the narrow aisles of assembly line workers to reach the Receiving Department. Inside the sliding metal door, he didn't greet Russell, who was making copies of the previous day's log and addressing them to the purchasing agents and expeditors in other departments. The logs were slimmer nowadays; business was slowing for the electronics firm and the American defence contractor it supplied.

Martin sat at his desk and went through the documents in his wallet. It had been a while since the nightmare visited him. He sensed a connection between his allergies, his scary nights and his abhorrence upon waking. They'd become rare but when the memories materialized before he lost consciousness, his distaste kept him from sleeping. If he finally nodded off, he awoke wild-eyed and aching and left for work hungry and ragged. When abandon-

ing his bed proved too severe, he called in sick and then fondled the whiskey and cherries, listening to the radio, swiping at distractions. The nightmare had been on holiday—the small mercies—but this was the season.

The bell rang at eight. Cornflakes, Harvey and Jorge trooped in from the cafeteria bandying pleasantries that didn't alight at his desk.

Martin selected a stapled bag from the shelf and brought it to his desk. He emptied it, counted the items, wrote up what he'd received, made six copies and deposited each in the appropriate tray. Glancing at Russell, he supposed computerization would put them out to pasture long before retirement.

Martin had learned to sleepwalk through his job. He assumed it was a universal habit among workers. His second bag, his third, his fourth, his umpteenth was conveyor belted by him. He totalled up the rotary canopy switches, the reducing couplings and the spigots. A coupling had been short-shipped and he asterisked the information. Maintenance would be happy with these knick-knacks.

“What're you gonna have?” Russell asked.

“The special,” Martin said. “I'll get us some seats.”

He chose their usual table at the far end of the cafeteria and sat facing away from the entrance.

Having preceded the noon-hour rush, Russell would quickly pay the cashier and Martin had time only to scan the newspaper headlines for August 21. He spotted an article on Rudolph Hess who'd died Monday in Spandau Prison in West Berlin and a sidebar on ex-Nazi Klaus Barbie who'd been sentenced to life imprisonment in July. A humorous piece resurrected Matthias Rust, the West German nineteen-year-old who'd landed his Cessna in Moscow's Red Square in June and gotten the Soviet defence minister fired. In the editorial section, more commentary about Oliver North's congressional testimony and President Reagan's role in the Iran-Contra scandal. You picked up a copy of the latest news, Martin thought, and everything dealt with the past, not much of it happening in your own country.

“Turkey?” he said, setting aside the paper as Russell slid the tray across to him.

“Don't you want it? You can have my halibut.”

"I ordered the special and that's that. Wouldn't you know it'd be turkey."

"What's wrong with turkey on Friday? You become Catholic?"

"You got hopes. There ain't nothing wrong. Turkeys and me are buddies. I was a big brother to them during the war."

"Weren't you overseas?"

"I was. This was after."

"After what?"

Martin paused for the words to line up properly. "After being a hero didn't pan out."

"Holding a rifle on turkeys? Did you pot any? What kinda medal you get for that?"

"No medal. You get a white feather."

"A white what?"

"Feather. Like what's on birds."

"I thought you said fatter."

"Doesn't matter. I'm mixing up the wars. You wouldn't know. You're a baby of fifty-nine." He picked up his knife and fork and eyed the gravy camouflaging the meat. "I couldn't even do that right."

"The turkeys?"

"Yeah. The turkeys. They made me guard the officers' turkeys after I was shipped home. The day before Thanksgiving somebody stole two of them and they gave me latrine duty. Nobody was going to steal those."

Russell hooted at Martin's confession, anticipated more. Martin clammed up. They ate to the noise of nearby voices. Finally, to revive the conversation, Russell said, "I owe you ten bucks from last week."

"Remind me tonight."

"You think I could talk to you about something?"

"Tonight," Martin repeated, pushing away his unfinished plate.

While the supervisor attended a meeting, Cornflakes sneaked out to the bank by the shipping doors and cashed all their cheques. With the bills folded in his breast pocket, Martin became livelier, voluble. The money was his drinking permit, his passport to oblivion. Under the right circumstances, the beer could smuggle him into sleep before the nightmare bushwhacked him. Now, he began

to shower tame insults on the discussions. Making his rounds, he slapped his colleagues on the back and offered compliments: "You're doing a beautiful job, Harv, but it's all wrong."

"What now, Georgie?" Cornflakes asked cheerily. "Back to Portugal?"

"I will stay," said the slight man. "There is possibility here."

"That's what you said your first day. Damn if it ain't. The very same."

"I am not discouraged. My wife expects a child and I will stay."

"Too bad you can't keep that hotblooded tool under wraps. You gotta quit wavin' it around. You coulda put her to work."

"She has the children, I work. I find more."

"You're a good little worker, Georgie, I'll say that for you. But them's the breaks; last come, first go."

"I work many years in Oporto. I am not surprised."

"Sure, Georgie, but a kick in the teeth is a kick in the teeth. You need a recommendation, a good word, you come to me."

"I thank you. Then maybe you write my name correct. Jorge."

"Hey, Georgie, you think I can't spell?"

"Goodbye, Martin," Jorge said wistfully. "I enjoy it. Maybe they call me back."

Martin shook the hand, feeling defeat in the fingers, tenacity in the grip. A fat lot courage had done for this immigrant. The foreign culture, the foreign food, living compactly within his severed family clan, for what? To hunker in the promised land. One of those nasty tricks that lop off your balls. Martin wished him luck, resumed his work, geared down for the weekend.

Cornflakes waited for the frail Portuguese to leave. "He was almost cryin' there, wasn't he? I can tell. Ain't ever seen a guy cry off the track. Christ, the pony don't come in, they bawl. Lay me off and they'd be doin' me a favour. Laugh and wet myself all the way to the unemployment line. A good little worker he was but it's gotta be pretty tough. It's good we passed the hat, eh?, and squeezed him a coupla bucks. Him sayin' no, I guess he don't go for charity. Bein' Portuguese and all that. You know how proud these guys are. But you get your notice, you gotta be ready, right? You think he could be holdin' back? Maybe he's got a nest egg stashed ...."

“Hey!” Martin jolted him. “Why don’t you drop anchor someplace else?”

On the large television screen the news was inaudible, a pantomime. Obscenities flew in the air, bunched together and in tight formation, cruising through the smoke like bombers. None of the gossip from the adjoining tables held much interest.

Martin liked these bars with their artificial environments, the air conditioning that purified the air. The nature lovers could keep the pollen and the sneezing.

“Nine,” Martin shouted, adding to the din. The waiter collected the drained glasses crowding the table. “Five minutes I’ve been trying to get you. You got something against the regulars?”

“Take it easy, Marty,” the waiter yelled back, perspiring, wiping the table with a cloth and his beaded forehead with his sleeve. “Whadya want, it’s Friday night.” He deposited the slim, hour-glass draft beers. Martin tipped him and he weaved among the circular tables to refill his tray.

They had exhausted sports, unions and sex. Cornflakes boasted he’d copped a feel from one of the assembly women—the busty divorcee in the red pantsuit—in the stationery room. Martin and Russell slapped aside the likelihood.

Out of the blue, Cornflakes objected to his nickname. They regarded him stupidly—the misaligned nose, the reddish rabble of beard, the mouth forever chomping words and peanuts—confused by the digression.

“Drop it, Cornflakes,” Martin said irritably. Everyone knew he’d earned the moniker from finagling second bowls of cereal from the cashier at the cafeteria. As if the first bowl had gone stale. “Talk about something else. You’re always hogging ....”

“You’re always puttin’ me down.”

“Don’t give us that. Jesus, it’s for your own good. If it’s not you, it’s your wife. You getting it steady?”

“Who cares?” Russell said, suddenly frisky. “He don’t know what to do with it anyway.”

“All right!” Cornflakes exulted. “I got it!”

“Yeah? Ever had it before?” Russell chirped.

“How about Russell’s woman?”

“I don’t wanna talk about her,” Russell said soberly.

“Why not? She more special than my wife?”

"Somebody told me she knew you," Martin interjected. "Said you were the slackest thing she's ever seen in the sack."

"That's a lie! Who said it?"

"Your wife, come to think of it."

"You leave my wife outta this."

Martin smiled inwardly. Something clever had just occurred to him. "If you're Cornflakes, that makes her Rice Krispies."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning she doesn't snap, crackle or pop. She just lies there and bangs."

"Yeah? It's more than you had for breakfast, all alone, you son of a bitch!"

"You're hot, Cornflakes. Cool off with a brew."

Cornflakes swallowed a cheekful and digressed again. "You know, this company's gettin' tight."

"So are you."

"Poor Georgie there. My wife says ...."

"What the hell does she know?"

"Look, she's my wife."

Martin guffawed and a thin derision sprayed from his lips. He'd had a wife too and what did she understand of his distress, his harsh tongue, his drinking? "She's some guy's daughter you've been feeding for thirty years."

"The company's gettin' cheap," Russell cut in.

"Profits are down," Cornflakes said. "It has ...."

"You sound like the president," Martin sneered. "Don't make me puke this cold beer. Profits are down. Who fed you that crap?"

"Business operates on profits."

"The Pope's Catholic and you can have him; so?"

"You just don't wanna listen."

"You got that right."

"You think you know it all."

"People like you and me don't wear fancy suits. They're not hurting. I wouldn't know a loophole if I fell in it. There's no dirt on the officers; they got others to blame."

"What officers you talkin' about?"

Martin hesitated but recovered. "Officers of the company."

"You're only lookin' at one side."

"How many sides can you look at? Ask Jorge what side he sees. I don't get why an ass-kisser like you isn't in the executive suite."



Cornflakes slammed his hand on the table. The blow slopped ounces off the tops of the glasses.

"Those are yours," Martin said.

"I can't talk to you! You're like ... like a dial tone!"

Martin appreciated the comparison even if it probably originated with Cornflakes' wife. "I'm going to the can," Cornflakes announced. He staggered in the wrong direction.

"You haven't had much to say."

"I don't feel like it," Russell muttered.

"You worried about lay-offs?"

"No. We got seniority."

"To hell with you then. You don't want to talk, don't talk." He motioned the waiter over and had him set down three more. He was going to give the nightmare a run for its money. "You can drink at least."

Russell put the glass to his lips but only sniffed it. He crossed his arms on the table and rested his chin. His droopy cheeks draped on his wrists. He had the face of a tired bloodhound on tranquilizers.

"You sick?"

Russell didn't hear him. Martin drank two drafts in succession and searched for Cornflakes. The wall clock was threatening seven.

"I had to throw her out."

"Who?"

Russell lifted his gaze. "She was drinking all my money. I'd go home and find her drunk and my money all gone."

"Don't crab. You never had it so good."

"Sometimes it was worth it and ...."

"You want another beer?"

"Not now." Tears were breaking loose and seeding themselves in Russell's folds. He wasn't hiding them. "I waited so long for her." Martin didn't know where to turn. "It was nice to pass the bottle and get it back."

"Where the hell is Cornflakes?"

"I waited so long for her," Russell whispered, his spirit mingling with his breath and continuing onward to the vacant spot hypnotizing him.

Martin abruptly stood. "I have to go."

Russell restrained him. "I lied," he said, seeking absolution. "I didn't kick her out. She left me."

"There are more."

"I won't find them."

"She was a boozer. A boozy tramp." He disengaged his arm.

"Don't say that. Are you goin'?"

"Yeah. Tonight's my night. You want to come along?"

"No ... I ...."

"See you Monday."

"Your ten bucks," Russell said, holding it out to Martin who crushed it in his hand and made for the exit.

In August, the light loitered and revealed Martin far too visibly. He preferred January when at this hour the night was blacker than grief and he looked at it from the bunker of his parka. Now it was balmy. He watched the white smoke rising lazily from a smokestack borne off and dissipated. His nose itched. The pill would soon be wearing off and so might the beer. He didn't trust two pills in a row or the twenty-four-hour variety. They'd create a false sense of victory, masking the ongoing battle. He checked his pockets for tissues in reserve.

At the intersection he hailed a taxi and ducked into the back. The driver remarked on the waning evening but the conversation didn't kindle. In the rearview mirror, he saw his passenger leaning against the door, shoulders hunched in wintry imitation.

Martin was meditating on Russell and the summer student. Working together for three months, they'd made each other happy without effort and on the final day the boy had shaken Russell's hand and Russell had palmed him a twenty. The boy had left with the old man sadly staring at the empty parking slot. Later, when Martin had gone to confirm an entry in the log, he'd noticed Russell, head bent over his fine print, whimpering to himself.

Would Russell not grow up before dying and stop this battering he was giving his heart? Making friends with a summer student. Where were these temporary bonds getting him? Hadn't he learned they lacked staying power?

The memory crept up on him—dimmer and less intense than in its nightmare form—sliding on its stomach.

Martin had come earnestly to France, skin taut, brain keen, bravery slung on his back and loaded for action, fuming at having been bypassed for the D-Day landings. But now he was there to square accounts and there'd be no holding him back. The moment

had been safekept for him to inlay with tributes and commendations.

The history books called the fighting south of Caen "Operation Totalize." The weather in that early August of 1944 was hot and clear and the lieutenant worried that so much dust was being raised by the vehicles that it would give away their intentions. The same lieutenant who briefed them by flashlight before the night attack and wasn't seen again. Orchards, open fields, walled villages. Martin remembered names such as Rocquencourt and, later, Proussy and St. Denis de Méré. Also, the bombers droning towards the German lines and a Scotsman pointing skyward and saying, "That is what we like to see. We don't give twopence when they are around."

Twopence. The price of the Sunday papers in England. In the issue of *The Star* he'd been given after being sent home, the front page declared "every inch of ground there is being fiercely contested." They'd gotten that right. Another large headline shouted ESCAPE GAP IS CLOSING. Too bad not all the German Seventh Army chose to escape.

How quickly things went awry on the road to Falaise. Route Nationale 158. Bombers blowing apart his unit and he couldn't even get off a shot. Leaping from the trucks. Concussions on the ground yet through the deafening terror the hundreds of crying wounds. Their own bombers. British or American, at any rate. That started it.

And then the subsequent events. Fourteenth, fifteenth, sometime mid-August. Spreading out when they encountered the enemy. The empty feeling of the battlefield. The confusion of who was where. In one of those small woods ideal for concealment and no different from another hours before, the soldier raked by the machine gun weeping for assistance and he flinching from the murderous fire, from the chance he'd always craved, the chance to shine. Luckily, the soldier had pitched forward and there'd never been a face to scold Martin but he stalled and the minutes passed. The glory passed.

The patrol found them in the posture they'd died: the soldier having bled to death and Martin cowering out of danger. Falaise. Faillir. The French ring for failure. It had soured his appetite for turkey.

"Is this it?"

"Already?"

"This is the address, ain't it?"

"How much?"

"\$6.90."

Martin handed the driver the ten-dollar bill wadded in his fist. "Thanks," the driver grinned, showing his missing front tooth. He returned two dollars and ten cents. Martin stuck the change in his pants. "And thanks for the tip," the driver said sarcastically.

Martin managed the stairs with the aid of the banister and a series of weary pulls. He couldn't remember when he'd last awakened beside a woman. Not since the night he'd returned home and heard lovemaking sounds in his bedroom. Imprinted alongside this memory was the weekend long ago when, drunk and believing himself to have been rolled, he'd held up a downtown bawdy house with a toy pistol. It had cost him a thousand in lawyer's fees to extricate himself. Sometimes, as he freshened up for Eva, the incident reasserted itself.

She doused the lights, a requirement of his, and they undressed.

"Your skin is so very smooth," he said, stroking her arms.

"Should I be wrinkled at my age?"

"Not necessary. I bring my own wrinkles."

"You're not old in bed."

He touched the mysterious, silhouetted breasts pointing their muzzles at him. "Where's your family from, Eva?"

"You're yappy tonight. Andernach, near Koblenz. Were you there?"

"I never got that far."

"There's an old fort on a hill in Koblenz. You can see the Rhine and Mosel splitting. I'm going at Christmas for a holiday. My cousin wants me to bring him a hockey stick and a puck."

Neglecting kisses and caresses, he set about applying himself to the task as he did to the spigots and couplings. He was quite thorough and afterwards lay beached by the outflow of desire.

"You haven't lost it," she said, trampolining off the bed.

He knew better than to believe her. "My wife used to say that."

"Did she?"

"Can you stay longer? I'll pay."

"I'm a popular girl. Book me for a night."

He re-formed her body from the mattress depressions and placed it alongside her price. He couldn't afford her but the squalor of his room oppressed him. "Okay. I'll take the night."

"Another time. I got an appointment. Book ahead. Don't be disappointed. That's what I read at the travel agency."

Martin thought it a jingle for a hotel chain. Or a butcher taking orders for Thanksgiving turkeys.

Light leapt into the room and menaced him. She was fully clothed. It's rapidly done, he marvelled; she wears so little. He was ashamed of his flabby nakedness and pulled up the sheet.

"You let yourself out. Be quick cause I'm bringing him up in fifteen."

He was vaguely offended, though unclear over what. That another customer was escorted while he made his own way?

He sat up and studied the fat on his belly. Though repulsive, it elated him momentarily. He pictured his fastidious wife screaming with her foul, unrelenting mouth, "You're a wino! Nothing but a lousy wino!"

"Go to hell," he said aloud, drowsily.

He wanted his maraschino cherries, to savour their sweetness, and to polish off the whiskey. A powerful lassitude was springing up behind his eyes and expanding down his neck. It clubbed his head back onto the pillow.

An eerie brightness—an automobile headlight—flashed across the windowpane. His nose twitched and he braced for an attack. These sneezes that hounded him from August to the frosts of September were not allergic; they were commemorative. Yes, here came the sneeze, his punishment for being awake. He had a man-size kleenex, big as a shroud, in his jacket. If he got it to his face, he might smother the burst.

But the sneeze retreated. False alarm. As he lay spent, he caught the fragrance of a hand lotion or other pleasant ointment that, denied to him, she'd dabbed on for the next client.