

## FROM THE CURIOSI CASEBOOK

### **-CHANCE-**

#### **Part One**

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After I left Ned sitting at the Café contemplating chance or Clare or both, I walked into the Latin Quarter hoping to find some romance to write about. I passed a half dozen clubs pulsing with electronic music and lights before I found a nightclub, a Paris boîte de nuit with a dark interior and no vibration. The middle-aged man who greeted me at the door was dressed in a slim black suit, crisp white shirt and thin black tie. He seated me at a table just inside the door. Everything was dim with candles flickering on the tables and a solitary light, cloudy with smoke, covering the back of the man sitting at an upright piano. When the door opened the light from the street came flooding across the floor, like the tide, washing over the soles of my shoes and then receded just as quickly when the door slammed shut. Occasionally the pianist looked sideways. He, at least the left side of his face that I could see, looked a lot younger than he sounded. The small tables that filled the room formed a semi circle behind the back of the piano player. Most had at least two people. The waitress asked me what I wanted. I wanted a cigarette, a Gauloises, and something with vodka or gin and a stick to swizzle it with, but I ordered a coke.

A couple was dancing. They were very close, moving in a constricted circle in the center of the small space between the piano player and the tables. Her face was buried in his shoulder. A cigarette glowed on his lip. His hand moved up and down her spine. They were both wearing black. How would one of my readers see the image in their mind? Would it appear to them romantic? I took out my notebook and opened it. Then, I realized I'd been there years before. Instead of a piano player there was a folksinger with a guitar sitting on a stool. He'd sung Leonard Cohen, Cat Stevens and, even, Bob Dylan. I remember the singer did Like a Rolling Stone and I was alone. I closed my notebook.

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Max was sitting outside at the café. It was the same table where Ned and I sat the night before. After I left Ned and spent an hour at the nightclub I went back to my hotel room, turned on my computer and wrote up my conversation with Ned and the nightclub. I could use the nightclub for the article and maybe Clare paying here cello with Notre Dame lit up in the background before Ned arrived.

“So what did you think of Ned?” Max asked as I sat down.

“Opinionated.”

“He sure as hell is.” Then Max told me a story “A couple days ago Ned got into an argument with some kid from the States who’s over here studying art history. You know, the kind of kid

that goes to one of those colleges where you get to spend lots of money for the chance to learn how to do stuff that doesn't pay anything? I have to confess that I taught at one of those places once. In fact, I taught some of those courses. Ned and I were looking at some books on aesthetics and art criticism at Shakespeare and Company and Ned started telling me that they were all rot because they were full of half baked philosophy and that what was good and bad art could be understood logically. Well, this kid was standing next to us and told Ned that he disagreed. Ned told him to imagine a box that had an opening on one side that you shove the art into, the input so to speak, and on the other side there was another opening where the piece of art comes out, but with a grade attached. That would be the output. He said that most people, and there was no doubt that he was kid was including the kid, think that making an aesthetic judgment about art is a process that's as mysterious as what goes on inside the box, so they insist you can't really talk about it in a logical manner. But Ned said that just because you can't see inside the box doesn't mean that you can't figure out what's going on inside. He contended that by knowing all the types of art that go into the box and all of the types of aesthetic judgments that come out the other side you could figure out the process of aesthetic reasoning that went on inside the box and that you could reveal everything that was going on inside the black box even if you could never open it up and observe it directly. Then, Ned told the kid that this was his theory of aesthetic taxonomy because all judgments about art could be understood scientifically once you put everything you knew into categories so you could compare what came out with what went in."

"Of course the fellow, actually he looked like he was just a teenager, didn't agree at all with Ned's opinion and told him so." Max chuckled. "He said that deciding what was good or bad art wasn't something you could understand through logic and that was the whole point. It was a poetic, spiritual, even mystical sort of truth. You just knew what was good and bad by looking at the stuff for a long time. Those who were really good devoted their lives to communing with art. Sort of ascetic aesthetics I suppose is what he was getting at. Then he said that he didn't understand how Ned could compare art to displaying dead animals. Ned told him that he hadn't thought about the connection until the guy had confused taxonomy with taxidermy but that maybe they did have a lot in common."

Max stopped and drew on his pipe. "That's when the kid got really pissed off and told Ned that since he felt art was explained by a black box he would certainly want to see Schrodinger's Box at the Pompidou."

"And that just proved that the jerk didn't understand a thing I was saying." Ned was standing next to the table with the pack slung around his right shoulder.

Max finished his coffee and got up. "In any case, we need to get going if we want to figure out some things ourselves".

We caught the Metro at St. Michel and got off at Bastille, or where the Bastille had been before it was torn down after the French Revolution. As we stopped so that Max could look his street map a young couple holding hands skated directly at us on roller blades. Just before a collision they let go of each other's hands and glided past us on either side.

“I’m glad those two managed to untangle themselves in time,” Ned said.

“Who’s doing the tango?” Max asked as he looked up from the map.

“Those two and I said tangle not tango,” Ned pointed at the couple skating into the distance, their hands clasped together once again, their hips swaying in unison as they skated.

“Same difference as they say. Well, we’re still standing and that’s the important thing. We need to take the Rue St. Antoine toward the Rue de Rivoli.” He folded the map and put it in one of the side pockets of his sports coat. We walked quickly along St. Antoine past the Rue de Biraque, a narrow street running into the Place des Voges and then turned north onto the Rue Malher that runs diagonally into the twisted streets of the Marais.

“This is the Rue des Rosiers,” Max announced as he stopped and pointed to a slab of beef hanging in the window in the building we faced. “And this must be it since Marjorie told me it was above a butcher shop.”

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Marjorie sat in the middle of the sagging couch facing Max and I, who had sunk into two easy chairs that had the firmness of quicksand. Her short auburn hair and slight figure made her look like a child although the fine lines around her mouth and eyes and the pitch of her voice as she spoke in American accented English were closer to my own age. The rear room was quiet except for the ticking of a clock and a scratching against one of the windows. Two windows looked out onto a courtyard and the yellow leafed fingers of an oak pressed against their panes. Ned sat at a desk in front of the windows and on the desk were stacks of papers and under it there were more stacks forming an archipelago from the end of the desk to the bookcase that set against the wall behind the couch. It reminded me of Max’s office except that this was not the natural order.

“As I explained on the phone last night when you called, my Aunt Harriet died last month and I’m still in the middle of sorting things out.” Marjorie turned her head slightly toward the desk. “This is where I do the sorting, obviously. Usually where you’re sitting would be piled with these papers.” She pointed at the stacks on the floor.

“I can see that you’ve been hard at work. How’s it going?” Max asked, sympathetically.

“As long as I keep the piles separate I’m okay,” She answered, wiping her hands on the pair of blue jeans she was wearing. “I thought it would take a week or so. I don’t think Aunt Harriet has anything of value although some of the furniture might be worth something. But, you never know so I’ve spent a lot more time than I thought going through everything.”

“So you didn’t know your Aunt very well?” Ned asked.

“No. We live in Toronto. Lived, I mean. My parents are dead. I live in Windsor at the moment. That’s just across the border from Detroit. Aunt Harriet came over here when she graduated from college in 1938, before the war. She came over to study art and never returned to

Canada except to visit a couple of times. I hardly knew anything about her. My mom and she weren't particularly close even though there aren't any other sisters or brothers. She didn't talk very much about herself and when she did she talked about things that seemed pretty dull." She sighed, and gave a tired smile. "At least to me, but I wasn't paying attention, I have to admit. I volunteered to do this. My brother and sister both have families and I don't have any obligations since I'm not teaching this term." She looked out the window as if she was searching for something. She turned back to us. "I mean it is Paris, supposedly the most romantic city in the world. So now you know about as much as I do."

"Mind if I smoke?" Max asked holding up his pipe.

"If you don't mind if I do?" Marjorie said, walking over to her purse and extracting a pack of Marlboros.

"I guess I've got the all clear as well," Ned said tapping his pack of Gauloises.

"Do you want one?" She held the pack toward me.

"No, I quit a few years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry," She answered. "Will this bother you?"

"No. As you said, it's Paris."

"Makes me wonder about my Aunt because she didn't smoke. At least I couldn't smell any smoke and there isn't a single ashtray in the whole apartment so I've been using her bowls." She nodded toward the ceramic bowl on the table next to her. "You told me on the phone that you're doing some research for an article on surrealists. What does that have to do with my aunt?"

"I'm really sorry about your loss. As I told you, your aunt's name came up in our research. Apparently she knew some of the surrealists we are interested in writing about, in particular Henri Berthold. We were hoping she might have some information on him and, although it's a long shot, maybe something he did. We're sorry that we won't have an opportunity to speak with her."

"I think she would have preferred that as well," Marjorie said

Max responded quickly. "We certainly don't want to intrude on your grief."

"You're not intruding. I didn't mean it that way when I said that she would prefer to be here. It's just a bit of black humor on my part. "Henri Berthold, isn't he a famous artist?"

"Famous for Schrodinger's Cat, which happens to be one of the most famous Surrealist works," Ned said.

"Oh, well I don't know much about art not to mention the surrealists. In fact, I probably wouldn't know a surrealist from an impressionist. In any case, I really don't think any of the

paintings here would be one of his or by anyone with talent.” She pointed the red end of her cigarette to the wall behind Max and me. “They’re awful if you ask me. I can’t imagine her wanting to look at them once, much less have them on her walls. I don’t even want to get near them. Of, course, as I said, I’m no expert so maybe they’re worth something to someone. Please let me know and I’ll be happy to give them the lot. Otherwise I’ll be tossing them in the trash.”

We looked at paintings on the wall behind us that she was pointing at. “Well, I have to agree,” Max said. “They certainly don’t look very good although they’re painted in the surrealistic style. Certainly nothing like Berthold’s work. We do know that your Aunt knew a surrealist named Jacob Sternlieb. When I say knew, they were apparently quite fond of each other from what we’ve been told.”

“You mean romantically?”

“Lovers.”

She grinned. “And we all thought Aunt Harriet was an old maid, the virgin aunt. It seemed particularly tragic since she lived in Paris of all places. When she visited us she never said anything about artists and all of that. We thought she just taught English. We knew she loved French language and culture.”

“Well she loved more than that.” Ned said.

“I’ll say.” Marjorie answered. “It sort of makes you feel there’s hope after all. Who was this artist anyway? You say his name was Sternlieb?”

“Jacob Sternlieb,” Max said. “He was a Surrealist painter. He was Jewish.”

“Well that explains even more why Aunt Harriet didn’t mention him. Lovers would have been quite a shock but a Jewish lover would have probably been too much for the family. I mean the older generation, not mine. What happened to him? Is he still alive? It would be great if he could tell me about the Aunt Harriet I never knew existed.”

“He was rounded up with other Jews during the Nazi occupation of Paris and he died in a concentration camp.”

Marjorie looked at the paintings. “How tragic. Than these must be his and she kept them there because they reminded her of him. There are a lot more of them in another room in the back.” She stopped for a second. “I mean the front. This is the back of the apartment. It’s a bit confusing which is which. In any case, it’s in that direction overlooking the street and the sign for the butcher shop.”

Max pulled himself out of the overstuffed chair and walked over to the wall. He looked at several of the paintings, touched their frames and then lifted the side of one of them away from the wall. “Do you mind if I take this one down?”

“No, go right ahead. I haven’t taken any of them down. I sort of think of them as my Aunt’s homemade wallpaper.” Marjorie said. “I’ve been leaving them for the last. It doesn’t seem right to just toss them now that they seem to have been painted by her lover and they meant so much to her but, as I said, who else would want to look at them?”

Max pulled one of the paintings off the wall, leaving a patch of faded paint behind with a black smudge of the nail in the center. He carried it over to the desk and took out a small magnifying glass and bent over the canvas.

Max grunted as he looked at the side facing him, then bent closer. Finally he straightened and turned to Ned who had been looking over his shoulder. “Can you read that signature? It’s almost on the edge but I think it’s his name.”

Ned bent closer to the spot that Max pointed at and then announced. “It’s his name alright. It could be forged, of course, but there wouldn’t be any reason since they weren’t for sale?”

“A brilliant observation my friend.” Max answered.

“You said his work, so it is his?” Marjorie rose from the couch, a movement that created a small avalanche of papers from the piles on either side of her.

“Not your Aunt’s lover, Sternlieb, but Henri Berthold’s.”

“And I was about to toss them in the trash. Shows you how ignorant I am about art. I thought they were terrible and here you’re telling me they were done by a famous artist.”

“They are terrible but they’re his,” Max said as he held the painting up so we could all get a better view of the signature. Then, as we gathered in front of it he announced from behind the painting. “Actually, they’re only half his – the side that you’re looking at but not the back.” He turned it around and on the other side was another painting, one that was of the same subject but vastly superior, even to someone like me with an untrained eye.

“But whose painting is that?” Marjorie asked in astonishment.

“It says J. Sternlieb down here in the corner along with the date of the painting.” Ned answered.

“Really?” She held it up and examined both sides closely. “This is all so amazing. I mean, my aunt having a lover and now this and... You say he was a surrealist as well?”

“Yes.” Max answered.

“Like Salvador Dali?”

“Uh huh. There were a number of them. Even Pablo Picasso for awhile.”

“I guess that it reminds me of one of them then.” She put it down. “Do you think there are any more?”

“Let’s see,” Ned said removing the other paintings from the wall and turning them around.

“They’re all Berthold’s on the front and Sternlieb’s on the back. Same subject or theme but a hell of lot better.”

“I suspect that most of your Aunt’s paintings have a side to them you’ve never seen. We’d like to look at all of them if we can.”

“Go right ahead. As I said, this is a real mind blower. First, to find out Aunt Harriet had a lover and then that she was hiding his works and that these ugly paintings are by a famous artist. Sort of bizarre, well you know, its...”

“Surrealistic?” Ned suggested, with a grin.

“You say there are more of paintings in the front room?” Max asked.

“Yes, they’re hung from floor to ceiling, I’ll show you.” She walked quickly toward the hallway and past the front door with us following. It was a long hallway past the kitchen and the bathroom and a bedroom. She opened the door at the end and we entered a large room with a high ceiling and white walls covered with paintings.

After asking again if it was okay to take down the paintings, Max took each from the wall, verified Berthold’s signature on the front and then turned them around to reveal another painting by Sternlieb on the back side. As he did this Ned photographed the paintings on both sides with a small digital camera. Even working quickly it took an hour to photograph all of the paintings on the wall.

As we stood looking at the wall with only the Sternlieb's facing us, Ned asked. “I don’t get why your Aunt Harriet would leave them hanging with Jacob Sternlieb’s paintings not showing? The Nazi’s are long gone so it couldn’t be because she was afraid they would see them and destroy them?”

“Oh, I understand,” Marjorie answered. “Maybe she didn’t just hide his paintings, she hid the passion, the feelings, the side of her that she hid from everyone, including herself. Maybe she was afraid of what would happen if she ever looked at the other side again.”

“Is that all?” Max asked, breaking the silence that followed Marjorie’s observation.

“Isn’t it enough?” Marjorie answered.

Ned pointed to the corner and asked. “What’s in that black box over there?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t gotten to it yet. Go ahead and look if you want.”

Ned and Max examined the outside of the box. It was about three feet high and wide by four feet long and it was secured with a padlock. "Do you have a key?" Max asked.

"No."

"Can we break it? We'll pay to fix it."

"Well, I guess. I mean I'll have to look inside myself at some point."

Before she has finished, Ned had pulled out a Swiss Army knife and was prying at the clasp. It broke free and he pulled the lock off. We circled the box as he opened it. Inside was something wrapped in heavy brown wrapping paper. He pulled it out and placed it flat on the floor. Gingerly, Max unwrapped the brittle paper to reveal a framed blank canvas. Ned knelt beside Max as he turned it over so the other side faced us.

"No wonder Aunt Harriet locked this one away." Marjorie gasped. "She loved cats. She had two of them when she died that I had to find homes for in fact. They were even mentioned in her will. To put such a horrible picture of a cat on her wall, at least I think its supposed to be a cat, would have been too much for her, even if the other side had a painting by her lover."

"There isn't another side," Max answered turning it around. "Although there's a slot for the other painting to be attached to the back, it's missing. There's only this dead cat signed by Henri Berthold."

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"Monsieur Beck? I am a very busy man so please get to the point."

"You bet." Max said as he walked quickly across the Turkish carpet to the Armani clad man with a note in his hand. The man sat behind a Louis the something desk, while we settled into several chairs that looked like they had escaped the French revolution. Behind him the gold curtains were drawn back from the windows revealing the Ritz on the opposite side of the Place Vendome.

"You told my secretary that you wish to return something that belongs to the Geldhart Collection."

"I think it says exchange."

"Yes, I see that is what you have written but if it belongs to the Geldhart Collection why should we have to give you anything in return? I warn you if this is some attempt at extortion I will call the police immediately."

"Although I agree, Monsieur Gaspert, that it most definitely belongs with the Penny Geldhart Collection. However, when you see it you'll realize that you have in your possession something



that belongs to someone else's collection. I call it an exchange, although I will agree it's not an equal exchange."

"I don't see what the problem is then? We certainly do not wish to have anything that doesn't belong to us."

"I'm glad you see it that way, Monsieur Gaspert. Mind if I smoke?" Max held up his pipe.

"Yes, I do mind. Do you have any idea what smoke does to these priceless antiques?" Gaspert replied pointing at the furniture. "Please, could you just show me what you have?"

"Okay then," Max shoved the pipe back into the pocket of his tweed coat. "Ned, would you be so kind as to show Monsieur Gaspert the photo of the object that belongs with the Geldhart Collection? We didn't bring the actual work until the real exchange takes place but this photo should tell you all you need to know."

Ned stood up and slid a long cardboard cylinder from his backpack. He opened the top and pulled out a tube that he unrolled on the table.

Gaspert bent over and looked at the photograph. "But this, this is preposterous," he said spitting out the word. "It's a photo of a very bad imitation of Berthold's Schrodinger's Cat. It's not even correct in its depiction of the cat's state. The cat shown here is most definitely a dead one and everyone knows that Schrodinger's Cat is alive. This is an insult."

"I agree it's an insult but it's not an insult to Berthold. It's one of his originals as you can clearly see by his signature at the bottom and the date, which was just a week before his death."

"Yes, well anyone can forge a name. This is really of no interest to anyone," he said waving his hand dismissively.

"On the contrary, we think there will be a good deal of interest in this discovery. Particularly, when we explain where we found it and they get a look at all of his other work."

"His other works? Everyone knows that the Nazis destroyed them. It is one of the great tragedies of the art world."

"It turns out the Nazis missed most, if not all of his work. Although it might still be a tragedy depending on your point of view."

"But if that's true than these works of his belong to us and I demand you turn them over."

"Turn them over. Why, that's exactly what we did when we discovered them and guess what we found?" Max smiled. He looked over at Ned, who unrolled another sheet with photos.

"Ah," Gaspert sighed with relief. "Just as I said. These are the true works of Berthold. One can clearly see the genius and no one can mistake that they are the work of the same artist who

painted the Cat. What a magnificent discovery. I demand you hand them over to us immediately.”

“Oh you’ll get all of Berthold’s works,” he nodded to Ned. “But, like I said, you can’t have Berthold’s paintings unless there’s an exchange for something you have that belongs to someone else.”

“You keep talking about an exchange. What is it, exactly, that you want in exchange for Berthold’s paintings?”

“Look at the photos more closely, Monsieur Gaspert, particularly the signatures.” Max said.

“They’re smaller and at the very bottom so here’s a magnifying glass in case you need it.” Ned said pulling out the magnifying glass from his backpack and handing it to Gaspert.

Gaspert examined the photos with the magnifying glass in silence. Finally he unbent himself. “But the signature on all of these is that of J. Sternlieb not Berthold.”

“Oh, yes, if you want to see Berthold’s signature you can turn the sheet over. As I said, we turned them each over ourselves only in the reverse order. ”

Gaspert flipped the sheet revealing photos of Berthold’s work from the apartment. He winced and then picked up the magnifying glass. As he bent over and examined them his hand began to shake so badly that he finally dropped the magnifying glass and collapsed onto one of the gilded chairs.

“Those are your Berthold’s and as such they most definitely belong with the Geldhart Collection and I imagine you will want them if for no other reason than to make sure no one else ever sees them. However, you have to give us the Jacob Sternlieb that you have or there will be quite a public exhibition of Berthold’s collected works.”

“Of course, we want them but why would we have something by Jacob Sternlieb?”

“I guess technically you don’t have it since it’s on loan to the Pompidou. You’ll find his signature if you remove the frame of the Cat in the box. Unlike Berthold, Sternlieb signed his paintings at the very bottom and the frame for Schrodinger’s Cat covers it up. Of course, if you want to replace it with this Cat by Berthold, the signature will be quite clearly visible for all to see. On the other hand, if the Pompidou doesn’t believe that is a fair exchange I believe the new owner of the Cat that is already there, will agree to let it remain for the exhibit provided the real painter, Jacob Sternlieb, is credited.” Max stopped and gave an amused smile. “Here’s another alternative, you could show both Cats. Every time someone looks into the box one or the other would be randomly displayed just as Berthold and Sternlieb intended for the original show.”

Gaspert glared at the photos of Berthold’s work as if that would make them disappear then sat heavily in one of the delicate chairs. “Merd” he whispered.

“I take that to mean you don’t like the idea,” Max said, taking the photo from the desk where Gaspert had dropped it and looking at it. “I have to say I agree with you since I think his work looks like merd as well.”

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Max had a chance to light his pipe after we left Gaspert’s office. He cupped his hand against the swirling wind of the Place Vendome until a white cloud escaped from the bowl. I thought of the smoke from the Vatican for the election of a new Pope.

“Why did Harriet Baker hide the paintings in her apartment?” I asked. “You’d think she would have shown it to Penny Geldhart.”

Max shrugged his shoulders. “Yes, everything would have been different. But she knew that Penny Geldhart wouldn’t have been interested in promoting the work of Harriet Baker’s dead lover and without Geldhart’s fortune and power behind it what were the chances that it would have gotten anywhere near the recognition it has now? Great art and genius aren’t always recognized on their own. In fact, from what I’ve seen that’s the exception rather than the rule. By saying nothing Harriet assured that Sternlieb work was seen and recognized as that of a genius even if they thought the genius was Berthold. Even though someone else got the credit Harriet knew who really painted it and that was enough for her. On the other hand, maybe she didn’t want to risk what she thought was true by opening the box and finding out who’s Cat was really inside.”

“I have to say that of the two reasons you gave, I prefer the first. It’s certainly more romantic,” Ned said. “Speaking of which,” he added, hoisting his pack onto his shoulder. “I’ve managed to mess things up with Clare so I better get back to the Hotel before she decides to split.”

With that Ned loped off down the Rue Saint Honore, the pack slung over his shoulder bouncing up and down with each stride.

“When do you think you’ll have this written up for Leonard?” Max asked me as we strolled toward the Rue de Rivoli Metro stop.

“I hope to have it done within 24 hours. After that I’ve got this other piece to finish that I agreed to write for a travel magazine. It’s on romantic Paris. Too bad I can’t include this.”

“Yes it is unfortunate that your account will only be for the Curiosi.” Max sucked on his pipe some more, his arms crossed, the seams of his tweed jacket about to burst and knitted his bushy eyebrows. “However,” he said, his eyebrows lifting. “We will need an author of the book that the Palimpsest Press is planning to publish on this very subject.”

“I didn’t know you wanted a book on this.”

“I didn’t either until now. I’m pretty sure I will be able to get the exclusive rights from Marjorie who, by the way, will soon be the center of attention in the art world. Given all the publicity this could be our first best seller.”

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I worked nonstop for the next couple of days hardly leaving my garret hotel room. The two articles were as opposites as the Cats. The one for *Curiosi* was bitter sweet and real while the one on romantic Paris was a sugar rush of phoniness. When I finished I looked through the window of my garret hotel room at the clouds etched into the night sky by the lights of Paris. The wind brushed against the pane. I knew that if I stood up and looked out through the glass I would see over the rooftops as far as the spires of Notre Dame and I would see the street that curved in front of the hotel and then ran straight to the Quai de Montebello. At the end of the street, along the Quai, I would see the trees with their branches bending in the wind. Yellow leaves would be falling onto the stone of the Quai and many of them would be swept beyond my view into the Seine where they would float unseen in the darkness past Fred Loswell as he looked out from his studio across the river to the other side.

Next to the computer was my copy of *The Dubliners*. I opened it where its spine was cracked. On the last page of *The Dead* I read the final line.

*“His soul swooped slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.”*

**THE END**