

'The Last Mohican' was first published in *Partisan Review*, an American literary and political quarterly, in Spring 1958. It then appeared in Malamud's first, acclaimed, collection of short stories, *The Magic Barrel*, the same year, and in a prestigious *Best American Short Stories* anthology² the following year. But Malamud had not finished with the story's central character, Arthur Fidelman. 'After I wrote the story in Rome I jotted down ideas for several incidents in the form of a picaresque novel. I was out to loosen up – experiment a little – with narrative structure.'³ The eventual result was *Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition* (1968), composed of six stories, most of them previously published elsewhere, tracing Fidelman's misadventures in Italy, during which he tries without success to attach himself to Christian traditions of art. He finally gives up painting and discovers his identity as a glass-blower in Venice, returning at the end of the final story to America where 'he worked as a craftsman in glass and loved men and women'.⁴ The first story's title alludes ironically to James Fenimore Cooper's classic adventure-novel of the American frontier, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). In Malamud's story, old and new civilizations meet, with Fidelman, the American innocent, being confronted by Susskind, the European Jew who is an exile from everywhere, and taking his first steps towards acceptance of self and others.

Notes

1. R. Tyler, 'A Talk with the Novelist' (1979), in *Conversations with Bernard Malamud*, ed. L. Lasher (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), p. 84.
2. M. Foley and D. Burnett (eds), *The Best American Short Stories of 1959* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1959).
3. D. Stern, 'The Art of Fiction: Bernard Malamud' (1975), in *Conversations with Bernard Malamud*, p. 65.
4. B. Malamud, *Pictures of Fidelman* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1969), p. 179.

The Last Mohican

Fidelman, a self-confessed failure as a painter, came to Italy to prepare a critical study of Giotto, the opening chapter of which he had carried across the ocean in a new pigskin leather brief-case, now gripped in his perspiring hand. Also new were his gum-soled oxblood shoes, a tweed suit he had on despite the late-September sun slanting hot in the Roman sky, although there was a lighter one in his bag; and a dacron shirt and set of cotton-dacron underwear, good for quick and easy washing for the traveller. His suitcase, a bulky, two-strapped affair which embarrassed him slightly, he had borrowed from his sister Bessie. He planned, if he had any money left at the end of the year, to buy a new one in Florence. Although he had been in not much of a mood when he had left the U.S.A., Fidelman picked up in Naples, and at the moment, as he stood in front of the Rome railroad station, after twenty minutes still absorbed in his first sight of the Eternal City, he was conscious of a certain exaltation that devolved on him after he had discovered that directly across the many-vehicled piazza stood the remains of the Baths of Diocletian. Fidelman remembered having read that Michelangelo had had a hand in converting the baths into a church and convent, the latter ultimately changed into the museum that presently was there. 'Imagine,' he muttered. 'Imagine all that history.'

In the midst of his imagining, Fidelman experienced the sensation of suddenly seeing himself as he was, to the pin-point, outside and in, not without bittersweet pleasure; and as the well-known image of his face rose before him he was taken by the depth of pure feeling in his eyes, slightly magnified by glasses, and the sensitivity of his elongated nostrils and often tremulous lips, nose divided from lips by a moustache of recent vintage that looked, Fidelman thought, as if it had been sculptured there, adding to his dignified appearance although he was a little on the short side. But almost at the same moment, this unexpectedly intense sense of his being – it was more than appearance – faded, exaltation having gone where exaltation goes, and Fidelman became aware that there was an exterior source to the strange, almost tri-dimensional reflection of himself he had felt as well as seen. Behind him, a short distance

to the right, he had noticed a stranger – give a skeleton a couple of pounds – loitering near a bronze statue on a stone pedestal of the heavy-dugged Etruscan wolf suckling the infant Romulus and Remus, the man contemplating Fidelman already acquisitively so as to suggest to the traveller that he had been mirrored (lock, stock, barrel) in the other's gaze for some time, perhaps since he had stepped off the train. Casually studying him, though pretending no, Fidelman beheld a person of about his own height, oddly dressed in brown knickers and black, knee-length woollen socks drawn up over slightly bowed, broomstick legs, these grounded in small, porous, pointed shoes. His yellowed shirt was open at the gaunt throat, both sleeves rolled up over skinny, hairy arms. The stranger's high forehead was bronzed, his black hair thick behind small ears, the dark, close-shaven beard tight on the face; his experienced nose was weighted at the tip, and the soft brown eyes, above all, *wanted*. Though his expression suggested humility, he all but licked his lips as he approached the ex-painter.

'Shalom,' he greeted Fidelman.

'Shalom,' the other hesitantly replied, uttering the word – so far as he recalled – for the first time in his life. My God, he thought, a handout for sure. My first hello in Rome and it has to be a schnorrer.

The stranger extended a smiling hand. 'Susskind,' he said, 'Shimon Susskind.'

'Arthur Fidelman.' Transferring his brief-case to under his left arm while standing astride the big suit-case, he shook hands with Susskind. A blue-smocked porter came by, glanced at Fidelman's bag, looked at him, then walked away.

Whether he knew it or not Susskind was rubbing his palms contemplatively together.

'Parla italiano?'

'Not with ease, although I read it fluently. You might say I need the practice.'

'Yiddish?'

'I express myself best in English.'

'Let it be English then.' Susskind spoke with a slight British intonation. 'I knew you were Jewish,' he said, 'the minute my eyes saw you.'

Fidelman chose to ignore the remark. 'Where did you pick up your knowledge of English?'

'In Israel.'

Israel interested Fidelman. 'You live there?'

'Once, not now,' Susskind answered vaguely. He seemed suddenly bored.

'How so?'

Susskind twitched a shoulder. 'Too much heavy labour for a man of my modest health. Also I couldn't stand the suspense.'

Fidelman nodded.

'Furthermore, the desert air makes me constipated. In Rome I am light hearted.'

'A Jewish refugee from Israel, no less,' Fidelman said good humouredly.

'I'm always running,' Susskind answered mirthlessly. If he was light hearted, he had yet to show it.

'Where else from, if I may ask?'

'Where else but Germany, Hungary, Poland? Where not?'

'Ah, that's so long ago.' Fidelman then noticed the grey in the man's hair. 'Well, I'd better be going,' he said. He picked up his bag as two porters hovered uncertainly near by.

But Susskind offered certain services. 'You got a hotel?'

'All picked and reserved.'

'How long are you staying?'

What business is it of his? However, Fidelman courteously replied, 'Two weeks in Rome, the rest of the year in Florence, with a few side trips to Siena, Assisi, Padua and maybe also Venice.'

'You wish a guide in Rome?'

'Are you a guide?'

'Why not?'

'No,' said Fidelman. 'I'll look as I go along to museums, libraries, et cetera.'

This caught Susskind's attention. 'What are you, a professor?'

Fidelman couldn't help blushing. 'Not exactly, really just a student.'

'From which institution?'

He coughed a little. 'By that I mean a professional student, you might say. Call me Trofimov, from Chekov. If there's something to learn I want to learn it.'

'You have some kind of a project?' the other persisted. 'A grant?'

'No grant. My money is hard earned. I worked and saved a long time to take a year in Italy. I made certain sacrifices. As for a project, I'm writing on the painter Giotto. He was one of the most important -'

'You don't have to tell me about Giotto,' Susskind interrupted with a little smile.

'You've studied his work?'

'Who doesn't know Giotto?'

'That's interesting to me,' said Fidelman, secretly irritated. 'How do you happen to know him?'

'How do you?'

'I've given a good deal of time and study to his work.'

'So I know him too.'

I'd better get this over with before it begins to amount up to something, Fidelman thought. He set down his bag and fished with a finger in his leather coin purse. The two porters watched with interest, one taking a sandwich out of his pocket, unwrapping the newspaper and beginning to eat.

'This is for yourself,' Fidelman said.

Susskind hardly glanced at the coin as he let it drop into his pants pocket. The porters then left.

The refugee had an odd way of standing motionless, like a cigar store Indian about to burst into flight. 'In your luggage,' he said vaguely, 'would you maybe have a suit you can't use? I could use a suit.'

At last he comes to the point. Fidelman, though annoyed, controlled himself. 'All I have is a change from the one you now see me wearing. Don't get the wrong idea about me, Mr Susskind. I'm not rich. In fact, I'm poor. Don't let a few new clothes deceive you. I owe my sister money for them.'

Susskind glanced down at his shabby, baggy knickers. 'I haven't had a suit for years. The one I was wearing when I ran away from Germany, fell apart. One day I was walking around naked.'

'Isn't there a welfare organization that could help you out - some group in the Jewish community, interested in refugees?'

'The Jewish organizations wish to give me what they wish, not what I wish,' Susskind replied bitterly. 'The only thing they offer me is a ticket back to Israel.'

'Why don't you take it?'

'I told you already, here I feel free.'

'Freedom is a relative term.'

'Don't tell me about freedom.'

He knows all about that, too, Fidelman thought. 'So you feel free,' he said, 'but how do you live?'

Susskind coughed, a brutal cough.

Fidelman was about to say something more on the subject of freedom but left it unsaid. Jesus, I'll be saddled with him all day if I don't watch out.

'I'd better be getting off to the hotel.' He bent again for his bag.

Susskind touched him on the shoulder and when Fidelman exasperatedly straightened up, the half dollar he had given the man was staring him in the eye.

'On this we both lose money.'

'How do you mean?'

'Today the lira sells six twenty-three on the dollar, but for specie they only give you five hundred.'

'In that case, give it here and I'll let you have a dollar.' From his billfold Fidelman quickly extracted a crisp bill and handed it to the refugee.

'Not more?' Susskind sighed.

'Not more,' the student answered emphatically.

'Maybe you would like to see Diocletian's bath? There are some enjoyable Roman coffins inside. I will guide you for another dollar.'

'No, thanks.' Fidelman said good-bye, and lifting the suit-case, lugged it to the kerb. A porter appeared and the student, after some hesitation, let him carry it towards the line of small dark-green taxis in the piazza. The porter offered to carry the brief-case too, but Fidelman wouldn't part with it. He gave the cab driver the address of the hotel, and the taxi took off with a lurch. Fidelman at last relaxed. Susskind, he noticed, had disappeared. Gone with his breeze, he thought. But on the way to the hotel he had an uneasy feeling that

the refugee, crouched low, might be clinging to the little tyre on the back of the cab; however, he didn't look out to see.

Fidelman had reserved a room in an inexpensive hotel not far from the station, with its very convenient bus terminal. Then, as was his habit, he got himself quickly and tightly organized. He was always concerned with not wasting time, as if it were his only wealth – not true, of course, though Fidelman admitted he was an ambitious person – and he soon arranged a schedule that made the most of his working hours. Mornings he usually visited the Italian libraries, searching their catalogues and archives, read in poor light, and made profuse notes. He napped for an hour after lunch, then at four, when the churches and museums were re-opening, hurried off to them with lists of frescoes and paintings he must see. He was anxious to get to Florence, at the same time a little unhappy at all he would not have time to take in in Rome. Fidelman promised himself to return again if he could afford it, perhaps in the spring, and look at anything he pleased.

After dark he managed to unwind himself and relax. He ate as the Romans did, late, enjoyed a half litre of white wine and smoked a cigarette. Afterward he liked to wander – especially in the old sections near the Tiber. He had read that here, under his feet, were the ruins of Ancient Rome. It was an inspiring business, he, Arthur Fidelman, after all, born a Bronx boy, walking around in all this history. History was mysterious, the remembrance of things unknown, in a way burdensome, in a way a sensuous experience. It uplifted and depressed, why he did not know, except that it excited his thoughts more than he thought good for him. This kind of excitement was all right up to a point, perfect maybe for a creative artist, but less so for a critic. A critic, he thought, should live on beans. He walked for miles along the winding river, gazing at the star-strewn skies. Once, after a couple of days in the Vatican Museum, he saw flights of angels – gold, blue, white – intermingled in the sky. 'My God, I got to stop using my eyes so much,' Fidelman said to himself. But back in his room he sometimes wrote till morning.

Late one night, about a week after his arrival in Rome, as Fidelman was writing notes on the Byzantine style mosaics he had seen during

the day, there was a knock on the door, and though the student, immersed in his work, was not conscious he had said 'Avanti,' he must have, for the door opened, and instead of an angel, in came Susskind in his shirt and baggy knickers.

Fidelman, who had all but forgotten the refugee, certainly never thought of him, half rose in astonishment. 'Susskind,' he exclaimed, 'how did you get in here?'

Susskind for a moment stood motionless, then answered with a weary smile, 'I'll tell you the truth, I know the desk clerk.'

'But how did you know where I live?'

'I saw you walking in the street so I followed you.'

'You mean you saw me accidentally?'

'How else? Did you leave me your address?'

Fidelman resumed his seat. 'What can I do for you, Susskind?' He spoke grimly.

The refugee cleared his throat. 'Professor, the days are warm but the nights are cold. You see how I go around naked.' He held forth bluish arms, goosefleshed. 'I came to ask you to reconsider about giving away your old suit.'

'And who says it's an old suit?' Despite himself, Fidelman's voice thickened.

'One suit is new, so the other is old.'

'Not precisely. I am afraid I have no suit for you, Susskind. The one I presently have hanging in the closet is a little more than a year old and I can't afford to give it away. Besides, it's gabardine, more like a summer suit.'

'On me it will be for all seasons.'

After a moment's reflection, Fidelman drew out his billfold and counted four single dollars. These he handed to Susskind.

'Buy yourself a warm sweater.'

Susskind also counted the money. 'If four,' he said, 'then why not five?'

Fidelman flushed. The man's warped nerve. 'Because I happen to have four available,' he answered. 'That's twenty-five hundred lire. You should be able to buy a warm sweater and have something left over besides.'

'I need a suit,' Susskind said. 'The days are warm but the nights are cold.' He rubbed his arms. 'What else I need I won't say.'

'At least roll down your sleeves if you're so cold.'

'That won't help me.'

'Listen, Susskind,' Fidelman said gently, 'I would gladly give you the suit if I could afford to, but I can't. I have barely enough money to squeeze out a year for myself here. I've already told you I am indebted to my sister. Why don't you try to get yourself a job somewhere, no matter how menial? I'm sure that in a short while you'll work yourself up into a decent position.'

'A job, he says,' Susskind muttered gloomily. 'Do you know what it means to get a job in Italy? Who will give me a job?'

'Who gives anybody a job? They have to go out and look for it.'

'You don't understand, professor. I am an Israeli citizen and this means I can only work for an Israeli company. How many Israeli companies are there here? – maybe two, El Al and Zim, and even if they had a job, they wouldn't give it to me because I have lost my passport. I would be better off now if I were stateless. A stateless person shows his *laissez passer* and sometimes he can find a small job.'

'But if you lost your passport why didn't you put in for a duplicate?'

'I did, but did they give it to me?'

'Why not?'

'Why not? They say I sold it.'

'Had they reason to think that?'

'I swear to you somebody stole it from me.'

'Under such circumstances,' Fidelman asked, 'how do you live?'

'How do I live?' He chomped with his teeth. 'I eat air.'

'Seriously?'

'Seriously, on air. I also peddle,' he confessed, 'but to peddle you need a licence, and that the Italians won't give me. When they caught me peddling I was interned for six months in a work camp.'

'Didn't they attempt to deport you?'

'They did, but I sold my mother's old wedding ring that I kept in my pocket so many years. The Italians are a humane people. They took the money and let me go but they told me not to peddle anymore.'

'So what do you do now?'

'I peddle. What should I do, beg? – I peddle. But last spring I got sick and gave my little money away to the doctors. I still have a bad cough.' He coughed fruitily. 'Now I have no capital to buy stock with. Listen, professor, maybe we can go in partnership together? Lend me twenty thousand lire and I will buy ladies' nylon stockings. After I sell them I will return you your money.'

'I have no funds to invest, Susskind.'

'You will get it back, with interest.'

'I honestly am sorry for you,' Fidelman said, 'but why don't you at least do something practical? Why don't you go to the Joint Distribution Committee, for instance, and ask them to assist you? That's their business.'

'I already told you why. They wish me to go back, but I wish to stay here.'

'I still think going back would be the best thing for you.'

'No,' cried Susskind angrily.

'If that's your decision, freely made, then why pick on me? Am I responsible for you then, Susskind?'

'Who else?' Susskind loudly replied.

'Lower your voice, please, people are sleeping around here,' said Fidelman, beginning to perspire. 'Why should I be?'

'You know what responsibility means?'

'I think so.'

'Then you are responsible. Because you are a man. Because you are a Jew, aren't you?'

'Yes, goddamn it, but I'm not the only one in the whole wide world. Without prejudice, I refuse the obligation. I am a single individual and can't take on everybody's personal burden. I have the weight of my own to contend with.'

He reached for his billfold and plucked out another dollar.

'This makes five. It's more than I can afford, but take it and after this please leave me alone. I have made my contribution.'

Susskind stood there, oddly motionless, an impassioned statue, and for a moment Fidelman wondered if he would stay all night, but at last the refugee thrust forth a stiff arm, took the fifth dollar and departed.

Early the next morning Fidelman moved out of the hotel into another, less convenient for him, but far away from Shimon Susskind and his endless demands.

This was Tuesday. On Wednesday, after a busy morning in the library, Fidelman entered a nearby trattoria and ordered a plate of spaghetti with tomato sauce. He was reading his *Messaggero*, anticipating the coming of the food, for he was unusually hungry, when he sensed a presence at the table. He looked up, expecting the waiter, but beheld instead Susskind standing there, alas, unchanged.

Is there no escape from him? thought Fidelman, severely vexed. Is this why I came to Rome?

'Shalom, professor,' Susskind said, keeping his eyes off the table. 'I was passing and saw you sitting here alone, so I came in to say shalom.'

'Susskind,' Fidelman said in anger, 'have you been following me again?'

'How could I follow you?' asked the astonished Susskind. 'Do I know where you live now?'

Though Fidelman blushed a little, he told himself he owed nobody an explanation. So he had found out he had moved – good.

'My feet are tired. Can I sit five minutes?'

'Sit.'

Susskind drew out a chair. The spaghetti arrived, steaming hot. Fidelman sprinkled it with cheese and wound his fork into several tender strands. One of the strings of spaghetti seemed to stretch for miles, so he stopped at a certain point and swallowed the forkful. Having foolishly neglected to cut the long spaghetti string he was left sucking it, seemingly endlessly. This embarrassed him.

Susskind watched with rapt attention.

Fidelman at last reached the end of the long spaghetti, patted his mouth with a napkin, and paused in his eating.

'Would you care for a plateful?'

Susskind, eyes hungry, hesitated. 'Thanks,' he said.

'Thanks yes or thanks no?'

'Thanks no.' The eyes looked away.

Fidelman resumed eating, carefully winding his fork; he had had not too much practice with this sort of thing and was soon

involved in the same dilemma with the spaghetti. Seeing Susskind still watching him, he soon became tense.

'We are not Italians, professor,' the refugee said. 'Cut it in small pieces with your knife. Then you will swallow it easier.'

'I'll handle it as I please,' Fidelman responded testily. 'This is my business. You attend to yours.'

'My business,' Susskind sighed, 'don't exist. This morning I had to let a wonderful chance get away from me. I had a chance to buy ladies' stockings at three hundred lire if I had money to buy half a gross. I could easily sell them for five hundred a pair. We would have made a nice profit.'

'The news doesn't interest me.'

'So if not ladies' stockings, I can also get sweaters, scarves, men's socks, also cheap leather goods, ceramics – whatever would interest you.'

'What interests me is what you did with the money I gave you for a sweater.'

'It's getting cold, professor,' Susskind said worriedly. 'Soon comes the November rains, and in winter the tramontana. I thought I ought to save your money to buy a couple of kilos of chestnuts and a bag of charcoal for my burner. If you sit all day on a busy street corner you can sometimes make a thousand lire. Italians like hot chestnuts. But if I do this I will need some warm clothes, maybe a suit.'

'A suit,' Fidelman remarked sarcastically, 'why not an overcoat?'

'I have a coat, poor that it is, but now I need a suit. How can anybody come in company without a suit?'

Fidelman's hand trembled as he laid down his fork. 'To my mind you are utterly irresponsible and I won't be saddled with you. I have the right to choose my own problems and the right to my privacy.'

'Don't get excited, professor, it's bad for your digestion. Eat in peace.' Susskind got up and left the trattoria.

Fidelman hadn't the appetite to finish his spaghetti. He paid the bill, waited ten minutes, then departed, glancing around from time to time to see if he were being followed. He headed down the sloping street to a small piazza where he saw a couple of cabs. Not that he could afford one, but he wanted to make sure Susskind didn't tail him back to his new hotel. He would warn the clerk at the desk never

to allow anybody of the refugee's name or description even to make inquiries about him.

Susskind, however, stepped out from behind a splashing fountain at the centre of the little piazza. Modestly addressing the speechless Fidelman, he said, 'I don't wish to take only, professor. If I had something to give you, I would give it to you.'

'Thanks,' snapped Fidelman, 'just give me some peace of mind.'

'That you have to find yourself,' Susskind answered.

In the taxi Fidelman decided to leave for Florence the next day, rather than at the end of the week, and once and for all be done with the pest.

That night, after returning to his room from an unpleasurable walk in the Trastevere – he had a headache from too much wine at supper – Fidelman found his door ajar and at once recalled that he had forgotten to lock it, although he had as usual left the key with the desk clerk. He was at first frightened, but when he tried the armadio in which he kept his clothes and suit-case, it was shut tight. Hastily unlocking it, he was relieved to see his blue gabardine suit – a one-button jacket affair, the trousers a little frayed on the cuffs, but all in good shape and usable for years to come – hanging amid some shirts the maid had pressed for him; and when he examined the contents of the suitcase he found nothing missing, including, thank God, his passport and travellers' cheques. Gazing around the room, Fidelman saw all in place. Satisfied, he picked up a book and read ten pages before he thought of his brief-case. He jumped to his feet and began to search everywhere, remembering distinctly that it had been on the night table as he had laid on the bed that afternoon, re-reading his chapter. He searched under the bed and behind the night table, then again throughout the room, even on top of and behind the armadio. Fidelman hopelessly opened every drawer, no matter how small, but found neither the brief-case, nor, what was worse, the chapter in it.

With a groan he sank down on the bed, insulting himself for not having made a copy of the manuscript, for he had more than once warned himself that something like this might happen to it. But he hadn't because there were some revisions he had contemplated making, and he had planned to retype the entire chapter before beginning the next. He thought now of complaining to the owner

of the hotel, who lived on the floor below, but it was already past midnight and he realized nothing could be done until morning. Who could have taken it? The maid or hall porter? It seemed unlikely they would risk their jobs to steal a piece of leather goods that would bring them only a few thousand lire in a pawn shop. Possibly a sneak thief? He would ask tomorrow if other persons on the floor were missing something. He somehow doubted it. If a thief, he would then and there have ditched the chapter and stuffed the brief-case with Fidelman's oxblood shoes, left by the bed, and the fifteen-dollar R. A. Macy sweater that lay in full view of the desk. But if not the maid or porter or a sneak thief, then who? Though Fidelman had not the slightest shred of evidence to support his suspicions he could think of only one person – Susskind. This thought stung him. But if Susskind, why? Out of pique, perhaps, that he had not been given the suit he had coveted, nor was able to pry it out of the armadio? Try as he would, Fidelman could think of no one else and no other reason. Somehow the pedlar had followed him home (he suspected their meeting at the fountain) and had got into his room while he was out to supper.

Fidelman's sleep that night was wretched. He dreamed of pursuing the refugee in the Jewish catacombs under the ancient Appian Way, threatening him a blow on the presumptuous head with a seven-flamed candelabrum he clutched in his hand; while Susskind, clever ghost, who knew the ins and outs of all the crypts and alleys, eluded him at every turn. Then Fidelman's candles all blew out, leaving him sightless and alone in the cemeterial dark; but when the student arose in the morning and wearily drew up the blinds, the yellow Italian sun winked him cheerfully in both bleary eyes.

Fidelman postponed going to Florence. He reported his loss to the Questura, and though the police were polite and eager to help, they could do nothing for him. On the form on which the inspector noted the complaint, he listed the brief-case as worth ten thousand lire, and for 'valor del manuscritto' he drew a line. Fidelman, after giving the matter a good deal of thought, did not report Susskind, first, because he had absolutely no proof, for the desk clerk swore he had seen no stranger around in knickerbockers; second, because he was afraid of the consequences for the refugee if he were written down 'suspected

thief' as well as 'unlicensed pedlar' and inveterate refugee. He tried instead to rewrite the chapter, which he felt sure he knew by heart, but when he sat down at the desk, there were important thoughts, whole paragraphs, even pages, that went blank in the mind. He considered sending to America for his notes for the chapter but they were in a barrel in his sister's attic in Levittown, among many notes for other projects. The thought of Bessie, a mother of five, poking around in his things, and the work entailed in sorting the cards, then getting them packaged and mailed to him across the ocean, wearied Fidelman unspeakably; he was certain she would send the wrong ones. He laid down his pen and went into the street, seeking Susskind. He searched for him in neighbourhoods where he had seen him before, and though Fidelman spent hours looking, literally days, Susskind never appeared; or if he perhaps did, the sight of Fidelman caused him to vanish. And when the student inquired about him at the Israeli consulate, the clerk, a new man on the job, said he had no record of such a person or his lost passport; on the other hand, he was known at the Joint Distribution Committee, but by name and address only, an impossibility, Fidelman thought. They gave him a number to go to but the place had long since been torn down to make way for an apartment house.

Time went without work, without accomplishment. To put an end to this appalling waste Fidelman tried to force himself back into his routine of research and picture viewing. He moved out of the hotel, which he now could not stand for the harm it had done him (leaving a telephone number and urging he be called if the slightest clue turned up), and he took a room in a small pensione near the Stazione and here had breakfast and supper rather than go out. He was much concerned with expenditures and carefully recorded them in a notebook he had acquired for the purpose. Nights, instead of wandering in the city, feasting himself upon its beauty and mystery, he kept his eyes glued to paper, sitting steadfastly at his desk in an attempt to recreate his initial chapter, because he was lost without a beginning. He had tried writing the second chapter from notes in his possession but it had come to nothing. Always Fidelman needed something solid behind him before he could advance, some worthwhile accomplishment upon which to build another. He worked late, but his mood, or inspiration, or whatever it was, had deserted

him, leaving him with growing anxiety, almost disorientation; of not knowing – it seemed to him for the first time in months – what he must do next, a feeling that was torture. Therefore he again took up his search for the refugee. He thought now that once he had settled it, knew that the man had or hadn't stolen his chapter – whether he recovered it or not seemed at the moment immaterial – just the knowing of it would ease his mind and again he would *feel* like working, the crucial element.

Daily he combed the crowded streets, searching for Susskind wherever people peddled. On successive Sunday mornings he took the long ride to the Porta Portese market and hunted for hours among the piles of second-hand goods and junk lining the back streets, hoping his brief-case would magically appear, though it never did. He visited the open market at Piazza Fontanella Borghese, and observed the ambulant vendors at Piazza Dante. He looked among fruit and vegetable stalls set up in the streets, whenever he chanced upon them, and dawdled on busy street corners after dark, among beggars and fly-by-night pedlars. After the first cold snap at the end of October, when the chestnut sellers appeared throughout the city, huddled over pails of glowing coals, he sought in their faces the missing Susskind. Where in all of modern and ancient Rome was he? The man lived in the open air – he had to appear somewhere. Sometimes when riding in a bus or tram, Fidelman thought he had glimpsed somebody in a crowd, dressed in the refugee's clothes, and he invariably got off to run after whoever it was – once a man standing in front of the Banco di Santo Spirito, gone when Fidelman breathlessly arrived; and another time he overtook a person in knickers, but this one wore a monocle. Sir Ian Susskind?

In November it rained. Fidelman wore a blue beret with his trench coat and a pair of black Italian shoes, smaller, despite their pointed toes, than his burly oxbloods which overheated his feet and whose colour he detested. But instead of visiting museums he frequented movie houses sitting in the cheapest seats and regretting the cost. He was, at odd hours in certain streets, several times accosted by prostitutes, some heart-breakingly pretty, one a slender, unhappy-looking girl with bags under her eyes whom he desired mightily, but Fidelman feared for his health. He had got to know the face of Rome

and spoke Italian fairly fluently, but his heart was burdened, and in his blood raged a murderous hatred of the bandy-legged refugee – although there were times when he bethought himself he might be wrong – so Fidelman more than once cursed him to perdition.

One Friday night, as the first star glowed over the Tiber, Fidelman, walking aimlessly along the left riverbank, came upon a synagogue and wandered in among a crowd of Sephardim with Italianate faces. One by one they paused before a sink in an antechamber to dip their hands under a flowing faucet, then in the house of worship touched with loose fingers their brows, mouths, and breasts as they bowed to the Arc, Fidelman doing likewise. Where in the world am I? Three rabbis rose from a bench and the service began, a long prayer, sometimes chanted, sometimes accompanied by invisible organ music, but no Susskind anywhere. Fidelman sat at a desk-like pew in the last row, where he could inspect the congregants yet keep an eye on the door. The synagogue was unheated and the cold rose like an exudation from the marble floor. The student's freezing nose burned like a lit candle. He got up to go, but the beadle, a stout man in a high hat and short caftan, wearing a long thick silver chain around his neck, fixed the student with his powerful left eye.

'From New York?' he inquired, slowly approaching.

Half the congregation turned to see who.

'State, not city,' answered Fidelman, nursing an active guilt for the attention he was attracting. Then, taking advantage of a pause, he whispered, 'Do you happen to know a man named Susskind? He wears knickers.'

'A relative?' The beadle gazed at him sadly.

'Not exactly.'

'My own son – killed in the Ardeatine Caves.' Tears stood forth in his eyes.

'Ah, for that I'm sorry.'

But the beadle had exhausted the subject. He wiped his wet lids with pudgy fingers and the curious Sephardim turned back to their prayer books.

'Which Susskind?' the beadle wanted to know.

'Shimon.'

He scratched his ear. 'Look in the ghetto.'

'I looked.'

'Look again.'

The beadle walked slowly away and Fidelman sneaked out.

The ghetto lay behind the synagogue for several crooked, well-packed blocks, encompassing aristocratic palazzi ruined by age and unbearable numbers, their discoloured façades strung with lines of withered wet wash, the fountains in the piazzas, dirt-laden, dry. And dark stone tenements, built partly on centuries-old ghetto walls, inclined towards one another across narrow, cobblestoned streets. In and among the impoverished houses were the wholesale establishments of wealthy Jews, dark holes ending in jewelled interiors, silks and silver of all colours. In the mazed streets wandered the present-day poor, Fidelman among them, oppressed by history, although, he joked to himself, it added years to his life.

A white moon shone upon the ghetto, lighting it like dark day. Once he thought he saw a ghost he knew by sight, and hastily followed him through a thick stone passage to a blank wall where shone in white letters under a tiny electric bulb: VIETATO URINARE. Here was a smell but no Susskind.

For thirty lire the student bought a dwarfed, blackened banana from a street vendor (not S) on a bicycle, and stopped to eat. A crowd of ragazzi gathered to watch.

'Anybody here know Susskind, a refugee wearing knickers?' Fidelman announced, stooping to point with the banana where the pants went beneath the knees. He also made his legs a trifle bowed but nobody noticed.

There was no response until he had finished his fruit, then a thin-faced boy with brown liquescent eyes out of Murillo, piped: 'He sometimes works in the Cimitero Verano, the Jewish section.'

There too? thought Fidelman. 'Works in the cemetery?' he inquired. 'With a shovel?'

'He prays for the dead,' the boy answered, 'for a small fee.'

Fidelman bought him a quick banana and the others dispersed.

In the cemetery, deserted on the Sabbath – he should have come Sunday – Fidelman went among the graves, reading legends carved on tombstones, many topped with small brass candelabra, whilst withered yellow chrysanthemums lay on the stone tablets of other

graves, dropped stealthily, Fidelman imagined, on All Souls Day – a festival in another part of the cemetery – by renegade sons and daughters unable to bear the sight of their dead bereft of flowers, while the crypts of the goyim were lit and in bloom. Many were burial places, he read on the stained stones, of those who, for one reason or another, had died in the late large war, including an empty place, it said under a six-pointed star engraved upon a marble slab that lay on the ground, for 'My beloved father / Betrayed by the damned Fascists / Murdered at Auschwitz by the barbarous Nazis / *O Crime Orribile.*' But no Susskind.

Three months had gone by since Fidelman's arrival in Rome. Should he, he many times asked himself, leave the city and this foolish search? Why not off to Florence, and there, amid the art splendours of the world, be inspired to resume his work? But the loss of his first chapter was like a spell cast over him. There were times he scorned it as a man-made thing, like all such, replaceable; other times he feared it was not the chapter per se, but that his volatile curiosity had become somehow entangled with Susskind's strange personality – Had he repaid generosity by stealing a man's life work? Was he so distorted? To satisfy himself, to know man, Fidelman had to know, though at what a cost in precious time and effort. Sometimes he smiled wryly at all this; ridiculous, the chapter grieved him for itself only – the precious thing he had created then lost – especially when he got to thinking of the long diligent labour, how painstakingly he had built each idea, how cleverly mastered problems of order, form, how impressive the finished product, Giotto reborn! It broke the heart. What else, if after months he was here, still seeking?

And Fidelman was unchangingly convinced that Susskind had taken it, or why would he still be hiding? He sighed much and gained weight. Mulling over his frustrated career, on the backs of envelopes containing unanswered letters from his sister Bessie he aimlessly sketched little angels flying. Once, studying his minuscule drawings, it occurred to him that he might someday return to painting, but the thought was more painful than Fidelman could bear.

One bright morning in mid-December, after a good night's sleep, his first in weeks, he vowed he would have another look at the Navicella and then be off to Florence. Shortly before noon he visited the porch of St Peter's, trying, from his remembrance of Giotto's sketch, to see the mosaic as it had been before its many restorations. He hazarded a note or two in shaky handwriting, then left the church and was walking down the sweeping flight of stairs, when he beheld at the bottom – his heart misgave him, was he still seeing pictures, a sneaky apostle added to the overloaded boatful? – ecco, Susskind! The refugee, in beret and long green G.I. raincoat, from under whose skirts showed his black-stockinged, rooster's ankles – indicating knickers going on above though hidden – was selling black and white rosaries to all who would buy. He held several strands of beads in one hand, while in the palm of the other a few gilded medallions glinted in the winter sun. Despite his outer clothing, Susskind looked, it must be said, unchanged, not a pound more of meat or muscle, the face though aged, ageless. Gazing at him, the student ground his teeth in remembrance. He was tempted quickly to hide, and unobserved observe the thief; but his impatience, after the long unhappy search, was too much for him. With controlled trepidation he approached Susskind on his left as the refugee was busily engaged on the right, urging a sale of beads upon a woman drenched in black.

'Beads, rosaries, say your prayers with holy beads.'

'Greetings, Susskind,' Fidelman said, coming shakily down the stairs, disassembling the Unified Man, all peace and contentment. 'One looks for you everywhere and finds you here. Wie gehts?'

Susskind, though his eyes flickered, showed no surprise to speak of. For a moment his expression seemed to say he had no idea who was this, had forgotten Fidelman's existence, but then at last remembered – somebody long ago from another country, whom you smiled on, then forgot.

'Still here?' he perhaps ironically joked.

'Still,' Fidelman was embarrassed at his voice slipping.

'Rome holds you?'

'Rome,' faltered Fidelman, '– the air.' He breathed deep and exhaled with emotion.

Noticing the refugee was not truly attentive, his eyes roving upon potential customers, Fidelman, girding himself, remarked, 'By the way, Susskind, you didn't happen to notice – did you? – the brief-case I was carrying with me around the time we met in September?'

'Brief-case – what kind?' This he said absently, his eyes on the church doors.

'Pigskin. I had in it –' Here Fidelman's voice could be heard cracking, '– a chapter of a critical work on Giotto I was writing. You know, I'm sure, the Trecento painter?'

'Who doesn't know Giotto?'

'Do you happen to recall whether you saw, if, that is –'. He stopped, at a loss for words other than accusatory.

'Excuse me – business.' Susskind broke away and bounced up the steps two at a time. A man he approached shied away. He had beads, didn't need others.

Fidelman had followed the refugee. 'Reward,' he muttered up close to his ear. 'Fifteen thousand for the chapter, and who has it can keep the brand new brief-case. That's his business, no questions asked. Fair enough?'

Susskind spied a lady tourist, including camera and guide book. 'Beads – holy beads.' He held up both hands, but she was just a Lutheran, passing through.

'Slow today,' Susskind complained as they walked down the stairs, 'but maybe it's the items. Everybody has the same. If I had some big ceramics of the Holy Mother, they go like hot cakes – a good investment for somebody with a little cash.'

'Use the reward for that,' Fidelman cagily whispered, 'buy Holy Mothers.'

If he heard, Susskind gave no sign. At the sight of a family of nine emerging from the main portal above, the refugee, calling addio over his shoulder, fairly flew up the steps. But Fidelman uttered no response. I'll get the rat yet. He went off to hide behind a high fountain in the square. But the flying spume raised by the wind wet him, so he retreated behind a massive column and peeked out at short intervals to keep the pedlar in sight.

At two o'clock, when St Peter's closed to visitors, Susskind dumped his goods into his raincoat pockets and locked up shop. Fidelman followed him all the way home, indeed the ghetto, although along

a street he had not consciously been on before, which led into an alley where the refugee pulled open a left-handed door, and without transition, was 'home'. Fidelman, sneaking up close, caught a dim glimpse of an overgrown closet containing bed and table. He found no address on wall or door, nor, to his surprise, any door lock. This for a moment depressed him. It meant Susskind had nothing worth stealing. Of his own, that is. The student promised himself to return tomorrow, when the occupant was elsewhere.

Return he did, in the morning, while the entrepreneur was out selling religious articles, glanced around once and was quickly inside. He shivered – a pitch black freezing cave. Fidelman scratched up a thick match and confirmed bed and table, also a rickety chair, but no heat or light except a drippy candle stub in a saucer on the table. He lit the yellow candle and searched all over the place. In the table drawer a few eating implements plus safety razor, though where he shaved was a mystery, probably a public toilet. On a shelf above the thin-blanketed bed stood half a flask of red wine, part of a package of spaghetti, and a hard panino. Also an unexpected little fish bowl with a bony gold fish swimming around in Arctic seas. The fish, reflecting the candle flame, gulped repeatedly, threshing its frigid tail as Fidelman watched. He loves pets, thought the student. Under the bed he found a chamber pot, but nowhere a brief-case with a fine critical chapter in it. The place was not more than an ice-box someone probably had lent the refugee to come in out of the rain. Alas, Fidelman sighed. Back in the pensione, it took a hot water bottle two hours to thaw him out; but from the visit he never fully recovered.

In this latest dream of Fidelman's he was spending the day in a cemetery all crowded with tombstones, when up out of an empty grave rose this long-nosed brown shade, Virgilio Susskind, beckoning.

Fidelman hurried over.

'Have you read Tolstoy?'

'Sparingly.'

'Why is art?' asked the shade, drifting off.

Fidelman, willy nilly, followed, and the ghost, as it vanished, led

him up steps going through the ghetto and into a marble synagogue.

The student, left alone, for no reason he could think of lay down upon the stone floor, his shoulders keeping strangely warm as he stared at the sunlit vault above. The fresco therein revealed this saint in fading blue, the sky flowing from his head, handing an old knight in a thin red robe his gold cloak. Nearby stood a humble horse and two stone hills.

Giotto. San Francesco dona le vesti al cavaliere povero.

Fidelman awoke running. He stuffed his blue gabardine into a paper bag, caught a bus, and knocked early on Susskind's heavy portal.

'Avanti.' The refugee, already garbed in beret and raincoat (probably his pyjamas), was standing at the table, lighting the candle with a flaming sheet of paper. To Fidelman the paper looked the underside of a typewritten page. Despite himself, the student recalled in letters of fire his entire chapter.

'Here, Susskind,' he said in a trembling voice, offering the bundle, 'I bring you my suit. Wear it in good health.'

The refugee glanced at it without expression. 'What do you wish for it?'

'Nothing at all.' Fidelman laid the bag on the table, called goodbye and left.

He soon heard footsteps clattering after him across the cobblestones.

'Excuse me, I kept this under my mattress for you.' Susskind thrust at him the pigskin brief-case.

Fidelman savagely opened it, searching frenziedly in each compartment, but the bag was empty. The refugee was already in flight. With a bellow the student started after him. 'You bastard, you burned my chapter!'

'Have mercy,' cried Susskind, 'I did you a favour.'

'I'll do you one and cut your throat.'

The words were there but the spirit was missing.

In a towering rage, Fidelman forced a burst of speed, but the refugee, light as the wind in his marvellous knickers, his green coat-tails flying, rapidly gained ground.

The ghetto Jews, framed in amazement in their medieval

windows, stared at the wild pursuit. But in the middle of it, Fidelman, stout and short of breath, moved by all he had lately learned, had a triumphant insight.

'Susskind, come back,' he shouted, half sobbing. 'The suit is yours. All is forgiven.'

He came to a dead halt but the refugee ran on. When last seen he was still running.