IN A YELLOW WOOD

By
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For Anais Nin

All of the characters, all of the events and most of the places in this book are fictitious.

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DAY

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller.…
—FROST

Chapter One

Robert Holton removed several dark hairs from his comb and wondered if his hairline was receding. He squinted for a moment at himself in the mirror and decided that he was not losing his hair, not yet anyway.

Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and put on his shoes. He started to tie the laces of the left shoe when he began to think of his dream. He had many dreams: of flying through the air, of walking in empty rooms, of all the standard things that psychiatrists like to hear about. Unfortunately, in the morning he could seldom recall what he had dreamed the night before. He would remember the sensation of the dream but nothing else. He would remember if it had been good or bad but that was all. Last night his dream had been unpleasant and something in the room had suddenly recalled it to him.

Robert Holton frowned and tried to remember. Was it the carpet? He had looked at the carpet while tying his shoe. He looked at it

now. The carpet was dusty and uninteresting. It was a solid brown color; the same carpet that covered the floor of every hotel room in New York. No, the carpet was not connected with his dream.

He had been standing at the dresser while combing his hair. He looked at the dresser: plain dull wood with dull scroll work about the mirror. On the dresser was a dingy white cloth and on the cloth were a pair of brushes, his wallet, and a collection of small things. Nothing suggested an unpleasant dream.

The morning light glowed yellowly through the window shade. There was a band of brighter light between the bottom of the shade and the window sill and here the daylight shone into the square room where Robert Holton lived. He looked at the sunlight a moment and forgot his dream.

He glanced at his watch: fifteen minutes to eight. He had to be at the office at eight-thirty. Quickly he tied his shoes and got to his feet. He searched through the bureau drawers for a shirt. He found a white one and put it on. Before the war he had worn colored shirts but now plain white ones seemed more sound. And then it was a good idea not to be too vivid when you worked for a brokerage house.

His tie was pretty, though. It was a striped one, blue and white. Not a dark sullen blue but a light and casual blue. As he knotted his tie in front of the mirror he noticed his face was pale. He was always pale in the morning, of course; still, he looked unhealthy in the city. This morning he looked paler than usual. There were no pouches under his eyes, though, and he was glad of that. Robert Holton looked younger than twenty-six. His features were boyish and

undistinguished and certain women had said that he was handsome. Robert Holton had looked well in uniform.

He put on his trousers and tightened the belt. Robert Holton, though he had never been much of an athlete, had a good build. Sitting at desks, however, would ruin it sooner or later and the thought made him sad. There was nothing he could do, of course, for he would always sit at desks.

He picked up his coat from the chair where he had hung it the night before and put it on. He posed for a moment in front of the mirror. Perhaps he was not handsome but he was nicer looking than a great many people and it is better to be nicer looking than a great many people than to be unusually handsome.

Robert Holton turned from the window and went into the bathroom. His watch was on the tile floor beside the bathtub where he had left it the night before. He set the watch by his alarm clock.

Again he tried to recall his dream. On the wall there was a picture of some apples on a table. A Frenchman had painted the picture twenty years before. It had been reproduced and the hotel had bought several copies because they were cheap and because the manager's wife had thought the picture pleasant. Robert Holton liked the picture. It seemed to suggest his dream to him more than anything else in the room. He studied the picture but he could not remember the dream. The picture only made him uneasy. He looked away.

He went to the closet and took out his trench coat. He had bought it when he became a lieutenant three years before.

It was almost eight o'clock now. Robert Holton opened the door of his room and stepped out into the corridor.

There was a difference in smell. The corridor smelled old and dusty as though no one had walked down it in years. Robert Holton in the one year he had lived in this hotel had never seen anyone else come out of a room. Sometimes he wondered if he might not be the only person living on this floor, or in this hotel, or in the world.

The ceiling of the corridor was high and he enjoyed walking under such a high ceiling. He walked to the elevator and pressed the button marked "Down."

There was a large pot filled with white sand beside the elevator door. He had always wanted to put something into that white sand. A cigarette butt, anything at all to spoil the white smooth surface. One day he would spit on the sand; he made himself that promise.

There was a clatter as the elevator went past his floor. That always happened. He pushed the button angrily.

Robert Holton tried to recall what he was supposed to do that day at the office. He could think of nothing very important that had to be done. In the afternoon he was supposed to go to a cocktail party and he looked forward to that. Mrs Raymond Stevanson was giving it and she was a very proper person to know. She had been a friend of his mother's and she had been nice to Robert Holton when his mother had died several years earlier. His father thought Mrs Raymond Stevanson was stupid but his father was often harsh and she was, after all, important socially. When one was starting out in the brokerage business contacts were important. He began to map his day in detail.

There was a loud rattling and the elevator stopped at his floor. The door opened and Robert Holton stepped into the elevator.

“Good morning, Mr Holton,” said the elevator boy, a young man in his middle teens.

“Good morning, Joe. What kind of a day is it?”

“Wonderful out. Real warm for this time of year. Real Indian summer outside. Real nice weather.”

“That’s fine,” said Robert Holton, glad to hear that the weather was good.

“Any news on the market?” asked Joe, stopping at the seventh floor.

“Nothing new.” A middle-aged man, tall and thin, came into the elevator. Robert Holton had seen him almost every day for a year but they never spoke. The middle-aged man wore a black shiny topcoat and he carried a large leather brief case in which the outlines of an apple could be seen.

“I guess there’s nothing for me to put my money in, I guess,” said Joe.

“I shouldn’t advise buying now,” said Robert Holton. It was a daily joke of theirs. Joe would pretend he had money to invest and wanted advice.

They stopped at the second floor and another tall thin man in a shiny black overcoat got into the elevator. This man had a red face, though, and the other man had a white face. Neither of them ever spoke. Robert Holton often wondered what they did for a living, whether they had wives or not.

“Well, here we are,” said Joe, opening the door. “We made it all right this time.”

“We certainly did.” Robert Holton followed the two older men out of the elevator and into the lobby.

The lobby was high-ceilinged and old-fashioned. Tropical bushes grew in buckets and a gray chandelier was suspended from the center of the ceiling. At the desk sat a faded little woman.

She nodded to Robert Holton and he nodded to her. They never spoke. He picked up a newspaper from the desk, looked at his mail box to see if he might have overlooked something the night before. Finding nothing, he put three cents in a saucer beside the newspapers.

Robert Holton went outside. The morning was clear and cool. There was a depth, a golden depth in the air. There was no time of the year as pleasant as autumn, thought Robert Holton; unless it was spring. He liked spring, too.

He walked down the not yet busy side street where he lived. His footsteps sounded sharp and loud on the pavement. The brownstone houses that lined the street seemed large and significant this morning. Perhaps it was because of the clearness of the day. He noticed details in the stone that he had never noticed before. For instance, one of the houses was built of oddly pitted stone. He had seen another place built of pitted stone. He thought a moment: Notre Dame, the cathedral in Paris. During the war he had seen it. He had even walked up a great many winding steps to get to the top. At the top he had noticed the pitted stone which had proved, somehow or other, that the building was very old.

Sleepy children were coming out of the houses. They walked down the street to the bus stop, schoolbooks under their arms. There was a smell of bacon and coffee in the air and Robert Holton's stomach contracted hungrily.

At the end of the street was the subway station. Every morning he disappeared down it and every evening he came up out of it. He spent a lot of time in the subway.

He went down the dirty cement steps. He put a nickel into the turnstile and walked out onto the cement platform. Twenty or thirty men and women stood on the platform with him, waiting for the downtown train.

The express went crashing by them. The noise of these trains was terrific. After it had passed he had to yawn several times to clear the deafness from his ears. Then the local stopped and he got aboard.

He sat next to a stout man who lived in his hotel. Occasionally they would speak.

"How's the market?" asked the fat man, deciding not to read his paper.

"The market's doing fine, should go up."

"Well, that sure is good news. I've a little bit that I'd like to put in it. I'd like to put it in something safe, though. You know of something safe? Something that's going to go way up, say?"

"Well, that's a hard question. It's very hard to tell just yet. Sugar's doing well," said Robert Holton. He always said the same things to these questions. No one cared what he said. They would repeat it to

acquaintances, saying that a friend of theirs in Wall Street had advised them to buy sugar but they didn't feel it was such a good buy at this time.

"You was in the army, weren't you?" asked the stout man suddenly.

Robert Holton nodded.

"Been out long?"

"Over a year."

"I'll bet you was glad to get out. To get away from all those rules and things, those restrictions. I was in the army in the last war. I guess the one before last, you'd call it now. I was sure glad to get out."

"Everyone is," said Robert Holton and he thought of the things that he had done in London. He had liked London.

"You went to college, didn't you?" asked the stout man; he was trying to clear up something in his mind.

"That's right."

"That's what I thought. Me, I never had the opportunity. I had to go to work," said the stout man with pride. "I had to work when I was a youngster. I never went to college."

"It's a good experience," said Robert Holton, wishing the man would read his paper and stop asking questions. The train went around a corner noisily; blue electric sparks sparkled outside the window. Then the train straightened out again.

"I'm in the grocery business," said the stout man.

“I know,” said Robert Holton, “we’ve talked about that before.”

“I started right in at the bottom,” said the stout man.

“That’s the best place to start,” said Robert Holton, feeling that there was no answer to this. He was wrong.

“Well, I don’t know. It’s hard to say. How *did* you like the army?”

“It wasn’t bad.”

“It wasn’t good neither. I never got overseas last time, I mean time before last, but we had it rough in training.”

“I can imagine.” Robert Holton looked away and the stout man stopped talking. Robert Holton looked at the upper moulding of the car to see if there were any new advertisements. There weren’t any. His special favorite, a girl advertising beer, was behind him and he couldn’t see it. Gloomily he examined a fat red child devouring a piece of bread. This was the advertisement he liked least. He looked away.

A woman with a small child sat across from him, directly under the bread advertisement. The woman was heavy with a roll of flesh around her middle; she wore a tight black dress. The child with her was about the age of the one in the picture. This child was pale, though, pale and fat.

A Negro was asleep next to the woman and child. He was long and thin and his bare ankles and wrists looked like brown wood. Two Jewish secretaries with yellow hair talked brightly together. They were young women and wore gaily colored clothes and their plump legs were hairless and pink.

An old woman with gray hair and deep lines in her face looked at the two young women and seemed to hate them in a secret womanly manner. Several young boys, wearing discarded army clothing, sat in a corner, their schoolbooks beside them. They talked in hoarse changing voices. Robert Holton could not hear what they were saying but their voices seemed to speak of sexual things.

The train stopped at a station and the stout man left. Two more stops and Robert Holton would get off.

The car was beginning to empty. Only the two girls were opposite him. They still talked brightly and laughed too loudly, conscious that he was watching them.

The train made its two stops and the girls got off. No one sat opposite him now. He studied the advertisements.

Then his stop was made. Quickly he got up, his trench coat under his arm. He went out onto the platform and before the train left he looked in again through the window. Slightly to the right of where he had been sitting was the picture of the girl advertising beer. He looked at her until the train pulled out.

When the train was gone he turned and walked up the dirty cement steps and as he walked he wished that he had a girl as pretty as the one who advertised beer.

Chapter Two

“Hurry up, Marjorie. Let’s get those tables cleaned up.”

“Yes,” said Marjorie Ventusa, “yes, Mrs Merrin, I certainly will,” she spoke sweetly, hoping that Mrs Merrin would get the sarcasm in her voice but Mrs Merrin was already at the other end of the restaurant talking to another waitress.

Marjorie pushed her natural blonde hair out of her eyes. She was never able to keep it in order; perhaps she should have it cut shorter, wear a snood perhaps. Mrs Merrin was watching her, she noticed. Quickly Marjorie began to put the dirty dishes on her tray.

People were coming in and out of the restaurant. It got a lot of the less wealthy Wall Street trade. Clerks and secretaries and stenographers had breakfast and lunch here and the lonelier ones had supper here. When her tray was full she went back to the kitchen.

On the other side of the swinging doors the cooks, wearing fairly clean aprons and white hats, were cooking at ranges. There was always steam and the smell of soap in the air. People shouted at one another and it was like a war. Marjorie hated the kitchen. The front part of the restaurant was all right. She had been a waitress off and on for fifteen years and she didn’t mind noisy people and the clattering of dishes.

She put some glasses of water on her tray before she left the kitchen. Then Marjorie Ventusa gave the swinging door a kick and

walked back into the dining room. She had five tables to take care of.

Two women were seated at the table she had just cleared. She could tell from the backs of their heads that they were secretaries and older women; this meant they would be very particular and leave a ten-cent tip for both of them.

“Good morning,” said Marjorie Ventusa, smiling brightly and thinking of nothing at all. She put the water glasses on the table. The two women were frowning at their menus.

“How much extra is a large orange juice?” asked one.

“It’s ten cents more if you take it with the breakfast.”

“All right, I’ll take a double orange juice, some toast and coffee. Do you have any marmalade?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, bring some of that, too.”

The other woman said, “The same for me.” Marjorie Ventusa picked up their menus. As she was turning to go she saw Robert Holton come into the restaurant and she was suddenly happy. She smiled at him and he, seeing her, smiled back. She pointed to one of her tables and he sat down at it. Quickly she went back to the kitchen to give her orders. She pushed her hair back from her face and promised herself that she would get a snood the next day.

Marjorie Ventusa liked Robert Holton. For a year he had been coming into the restaurant; he always spoke pleasantly to her and they would joke together. She had never seen him anywhere except in the restaurant. She knew that he never really noticed her but she

was always glad to see him and she was delighted when he talked to her and smiled at her; his smile was pleasant and he had nice teeth. She thought him handsome.

“Good morning, Mr Holton,” she said, putting a glass of water and some silverware on his table.

“How’re you today, Marjorie? You look perfect.”

“Sure, sure, I do; I’m a real beauty.” Marjorie always felt awkward with him, as though she couldn’t think of the right words to say. She was older than he was, too. Marjorie was thirty-seven; she had known a lot of men and still she was awkward with him.

“What you going to have this morning?” she asked.

“Well....” He drawled the word as he looked at the menu and she had a strong urge to touch the short dark hairs on the back of his neck. She tried to think of some excuse to do so. Then she was angry with herself for having thought of such a thing.

“I guess I’ll have some orange juice and scrambled eggs and bacon.”

“Is that all you going to eat? Why, how you ever going to get big and strong?”

He laughed. “Not sitting at a desk and eating your cooking.”

“Oh, is that so?” Marjorie Ventusa walked slowly back to the kitchen. She felt strained as she walked for she could feel he was watching her. She wished suddenly that her hips weren’t so big and that her legs were slimmer.