

max
Frisch

Im Not
Siller
a novel



VINTAGE BOOK V-219 \$2.95 • IN CANADA \$3.75

I'M NOT STILLER

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TRANSLATED FROM ~~THE GERMAN BY~~ MICHAEL BULLOCK



NEW YORK : VINTAGE BOOKS

A Division of Random House

VINTAGE BOOKS

are published by ALFRED A. KNOPF, INC.
and RANDOM HOUSE, INC.

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

I'M NOT
STILLER

A NOTE TO THE READER

THE strange history of Anatol Ludwig Stiller, sculptor, husband, lover . . . prisoner, is divided into two parts. Part One contains Stiller's seven notebooks written in prison. Part Two is a Postscript written by the Public Prosecutor.

PART · I



Stiller's Notes in Prison

"BEHOLD, for this reason it is so hard to choose oneself, because in this choice absolute isolation is identical with the most profound continuity, because through this choice every possibility of becoming something else—or rather of remolding oneself into something else—is ruled out."

"As the passion for freedom awakes in him (and it awakes in the choice, as it is already presupposed in the choice), he chooses himself and fights for this possession as for his happiness, and this is his happiness."

Kierkegaard, Either-Or



Ist *Notebook*

I'M not Stiller!—Day after day, ever since I was put into this prison, which I shall describe in a minute, I have been saying it, swearing it, asking for whisky and refusing to make any other statement. For experience has taught me that without whisky I'm not myself, I'm open to all sorts of good influences and liable to play the part they want me to play, although it's not me at all. But since the only thing that matters in my crazy situation (they think I'm a missing resident of their little town) is to refuse to be wheedled and to guard against all their well-meaning attempts to shove me into somebody else's skin, to resist their blandishments even if it means being downright rude—in a word, to be no one else than the man I unfortunately really am—I shall go on shouting for whisky the moment anyone comes near my cell. I told them several days ago it needn't be the very best brand, but it must be drinkable, otherwise I shall remain sober; then they can question me as much as they like, they won't get anything out of me—or at any rate, nothing that's true. In vain. Today they brought me this notebook full of empty

pages. I'm supposed to write down my life story—no doubt to prove I have one, a different one from the life of their missing Herr Stiller.

"Just write the truth," said the defense counsel provided for me by the State, "nothing but the plain, unvarnished truth. They'll fill your pen for you whenever you want."

It's a week today since the clip on the ear that led to my arrest. According to the evidence I was rather drunk; I therefore find it difficult to describe the (outward) course of events.

"Come with me," said the customs officer.

"Please don't make difficulties," I said. "My train will be leaving any minute."

"But without you," said the customs officer.

The way he pulled me off the footboard deprived me of any wish to answer his questions. He had my passport in his hand. The other official, who was stamping the travelers' passports, was still in the train.

"Is there something wrong with my passport?" I asked.

No answer.

"I'm only doing my duty," he said several times. "You know that very well."

Without answering my question as to what was wrong with the passport—an American passport, with which I had been halfway round the world!—he repeated in his Swiss intonation:

"Come with me."

"Now look officer," I said, "if you don't want a clip on the ear, please don't pull me by the sleeve; I can't stand it."

"Come along now."

I boxed the young customs officer's ear just as he was telling me, in spite of my polite but unambiguous warning and with the arrogant air of one protected by the Law, that they would soon let me know who I really

was. His navy blue cap rolled along the platform in a spiral, and for an instant the young customs officer, now capless and consequently much more human, was so flabbergasted—too much taken aback even to be angry—that I could easily have got into the train. It was just beginning to move off, people were leaning out of the windows waving, and one carriage door was still open. I don't know why I didn't jump in. I believe I could have snatched my passport, for, as I have said, the young man was completely dumbfounded, as though his whole soul was in the rolling cap; and it was not until the stiff cap had stopped rolling that he was seized with understandable rage. I ducked down among the people, determined at least to brush some of the dust off his navy blue cap with its Swiss cross badge before handing it back to him. His ears were lobster red. It was strange: I followed him as though under some compulsion to behave myself. He didn't say a word and without taking hold of me, which was quite unnecessary, led me to the police station, where I was kept waiting for fifty minutes.

"Please sit down," said the Inspector.

The passport lay on the table. I was immediately struck by the changed tone in which I was addressed, a kind of solicitous and rather clumsy politeness, from which I gathered that after looking at my passport for an hour the police had no further doubt about my American citizenship. As though to make up for the young customs officer's churlishness, the Inspector even fetched me an armchair.

"You speak German, I hear," he remarked.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Do sit down," he smiled.

I remained standing.

"I'm of German origin," I explained. "An American of German origin—"

He pointed to the empty armchair.

"Please," he said, and hesitated for a while to sit

down himself. . . . If I had not condescended to speak German in the train I might never have found myself in this scrape. Another passenger, a Swiss, had spoken to me in German. The same traveler, who had been getting on my nerves ever since we left Paris, was also an eyewitness of the blow I gave the customs officer. I didn't know who he was. I'd never seen him before. He got into the compartment in Paris, woke me up by stumbling over my feet, forced his way to the open window with apologies in French and there said good-bye to a lady, speaking in Swiss dialect. No sooner had the train started than I had the disagreeable sensation that he was staring at me. I took refuge behind my *New Yorker*, whose jokes I already knew by heart, in the hope that my traveling companion's curiosity would eventually be exhausted. He was also reading a paper, a Zurich paper. After we had agreed in French to close the window, I avoided every unnecessary glance at the passing landscape; meanwhile my unknown companion, who may have been a charming fellow for all I know, was so obviously waiting on tenterhooks for an opportunity to start a conversation that finally there was nothing for it but the dining-car, where I sat for five hours and had a drink or two. I didn't return to the compartment until compelled to by the approach of the frontier between Mulhouse and Basle. Again the Swiss looked at me as though he knew me. I don't know what it was that suddenly encouraged him to speak to me; possibly the mere fact that we were now on his native soil. "Excuse me," he asked in a rather embarrassed manner, "aren't you Herr Stiller?"

As I have mentioned, I had drunk a certain amount of whisky. I couldn't make out what he was saying. I held my American passport in my hand, while the Swiss, relapsing into his dialect, turned the pages of an illustrated paper. A couple of officials were already standing behind us, a customs officer and another man holding a rubber stamp. I handed over my passport. I

now realized that I had drunk a lot and was being looked at with suspicion. My luggage, of which I had little, was in order.

"Is that your passport?" asked the other man.

At first I laughed, of course. "Why shouldn't it be?" I asked, and added indignantly: "What's wrong with my passport?" It was the first time doubt had been cast on my passport, and all because this gentleman had confused me with a picture in his illustrated paper. . . .

"Herr Doktor," said the Inspector to this same gentleman, "I needn't detain you further. Many thanks for your information."

As the grateful Inspector held the door open for him, the gentleman nodded to me as though we knew each other. He was a Herr Doktor; there are thousands of them. I didn't feel the slightest desire to nod to him. Then the Inspector came back and pointed to the chair again.

"Do take a seat. As I can see, Herr Stiller, you're pretty drunk—"

"Stiller?" I said. "My name's not Stiller."

"I hope," he went on unperturbed, "you can nevertheless understand what I have to say to you, Herr Stiller."

I shook my head, whereupon he offered me a smoke, a Swiss cigar. I naturally refused it, since it was obviously offered not to me, but to a certain Herr Stiller. I also remained standing, although the Inspector had settled down in his chair as though for a long chat.

"Why did you get so excited when you were asked whether it was your proper passport?" he asked.

He turned the pages of my American passport.

"Look, Inspector," I said, "I can't stand being taken by the sleeve. I warned your young customs officer several times. I'm sorry I lost my temper and hit him, and of course, I'll pay the usual fine at once. That goes without saying. What's the damage?"

He smiled indulgently. It wasn't quite as simple as

that, he told me. Then he lit a cigar, carefully, rolling the brown stump between his lips, leisurely, thoroughly, as though time was no object.

"You seem to be an extremely well-known man—"

"I?" I asked. "What makes you think that?"

"I don't know anything about these things," he said, "but this Herr Doktor, who recognized you, seems to have a very high opinion of you."

There was nothing to be done. The confusion had arisen, and whatever I said was taken as affectation or genuine modesty.

"Why do you call yourself Sam White?" he asked.

I talked and talked.

"Where did you get this passport?" he asked.

He took it almost good-naturedly and sat back smoking his rather evil-smelling cigar, his thumbs hooked in his braces, for it was a hot afternoon, so that the Inspector, especially as he no longer considered me a foreigner, had undone some of the buttons of his not very suitable jacket, while he gazed at me without listening to a word I was saying.

"Inspector," I said. "I'm drunk, you're right, perfectly right, but I'm not going to have some wretched Herr Doktor—"

"He says he knows you."

"Where from?" I asked.

"From the illustrated paper," he said and took advantage of my contemptuous silence to add: "You have a wife living in Paris. Is that right?"

"I? A wife?"

"Julika by name."

"I don't come from Paris," I declared. "I come from Mexico, Inspector."

I gave him the name of the ship, the duration of the crossing, the time of my arrival at Le Havre, the time of my departure from Vera Cruz.

"That may be," he said, "but your wife lives in Paris.

A dancer, if I'm not mistaken. She's supposed to be an extremely beautiful woman."

I said nothing.

"Julika is her stage name," the Inspector informed me. "At one time she had T.B. and lived at Davos. But now she runs a ballet school in Paris. Right? For the last six years."

I only looked at him.

"Since your disappearance."

I had involuntarily sat down to hear what the readers of an illustrated paper knew about someone who obviously, at least in the eyes of Herr Doktor, resembled me; I took out a cigarette, whereupon the Inspector, already infected by the esteem spread by this same Herr Doktor, gave me a light.

"So you yourself are a sculptor."

I laughed.

"Is that right?" he asked without waiting for an answer, and immediately proceeded to the next question: "Why are you traveling under an assumed name?"

He did not believe my oath either.

"I'm sorry," he said hunting through a drawer, from which he pulled out a blue form. "I'm sorry, Herr Stiller, but if you continue to refuse to show your proper passport I shall have to hand you over to the C.I.D. Make no mistake about that."

Then he tapped the ash from his cigar.

"I'm not Stiller," I reiterated, as he began conscientiously to fill in the voluminous form, but it was as though he simply didn't hear me any more. I tried a different tone of voice. I spoke solemnly and soberly: "Inspector, I haven't got another passport." Or with a laugh: "That's a lot of nonsense." But in spite of my drunkenness I could clearly feel that the more I spoke, the less he listened. Finally I shouted: "I'm not Stiller, devil take it." I yelled and banged my fist on the table.

"Why get so excited?"

"Inspector," I said, "give me my passport."

He didn't even look up.

"You're under arrest," he said, turning the pages of my passport with his left hand, copying down the number, the date of issue, the name of the American consul in Mexico, everything the blue form demanded in such cases, and said in a not unfriendly voice: "Sit down."

My cell—I have just measured it with my shoe, which is a trifle less than twelve inches long—is small, like everything in this country, so clean one can hardly breathe for hygiene, and oppressive precisely because everything is just right. No more and no less. Everything in this country is oppressively adequate. The cell is 10 feet long, 7 feet 10 inches wide and 8 feet 3 inches high. A humane prison, there's no denying it, and that's what makes it so unbearable. Not a cobweb, not a trace of mildew on the walls, nothing to justify indignation. Some prisons get stormed when the people learn about them; here there's nothing to storm. Millions of people, I know, live worse than I do. The bed has springs. The barred window lets in the sun—at this time of the year until about eleven A.M. The table has two drawers and there is also a Bible and a standard lamp. And when I have to do my business I only have to press a white button and I am taken to the appropriate place, which is not supplied with old newspapers one can first read, but with soft crepe paper. And yet it's a prison, and there are moments when you feel like screaming. You don't do so, any more than in a big store; you dry your hands on a towel, walk on linoleum, and say thank you when you're locked into your cabin again. Apart from the already autumnal foliage of a chestnut tree I can see nothing, not even if I climb up on the sprung bed, which incidentally (with shoes) is forbidden. Sounds of unknown origin are the worst torment, of course. Since I discovered they still have trams in this town I

have almost been able to ignore their rumbling. But the unintelligible announcer on a nearby radio, the daily clatter of the dustcart and the wild beating of carpets in echoing courtyards are bad. It seems that in this country people have an almost morbid fear of dirt. Yesterday they started entertaining me with the stutter of a pneumatic drill; somewhere they are tearing up the street so that later they can pave it again. I often feel as though I am the only unoccupied person in this town. To judge by the voices in the street, when the pneumatic drill stops for a minute, there is much cursing and little laughter here. Round midnight the drunks start bawling because at this hour all the pubs are shut. Sometimes students sing as though one were in the heart of Germany. Around one o'clock silence falls. But it's not much use putting out the light; a distant street lamp shines into my cell, the shadows of the bars stretch across the wall and bend over on to the ceiling, and when it is windy outside, so that the street lamp swings, the swaying shadows of the bars are enough to drive you crazy. In the morning, when the sun shines, these shadows do at least lie on the floor.

Without the warder, who brings me my food, I shouldn't know to this day what's really going on here. Every newspaper reader seems to know who Stiller was. This makes it almost impossible to get any information out of anyone; everybody acts as though you were bound to know all about it, and they themselves only have a rough idea.

"—for a time, I believe, they looked for him in the lake," said my warder, "but without success, then all of a sudden people said he was in the Foreign Legion."

While he was speaking, he ladled out the soup.

"Lots of Swiss do that," he told me, "when it gets on their nerves here."

"They join the Foreign Legion?" I asked.

"Because it gets on their nerves here."

"Yes, I know," I said. "But why the Foreign Legion? That's worse still."

"It makes no difference to me."

"So he just left his wife at Davos," I asked, "ill as she was?"

"Maybe it was a blessing for her."

"Do you think so?"

"It makes no difference to me," he said. "Since then she's lived in Paris."

"I know."

"She's a dancer."

"I know."

"As pretty as a picture."

"How's her T.B.?" I inquired sympathetically.

"Cured."

"Who says so?"

"She does."

"How do you know all this?"

"How do I know?" said my warder. "Why, from the papers."

I can't find out much else.

"Eat," says my warder. "Eat the soup while it's still hot, and don't lose your grip, Mr. White. That's what they're waiting for, these Herr Doktors, I know them."

The soup, a *minestra*, was good, in general I can't complain about the food here, and I think my warder has a soft spot for me; at any rate he doesn't address me (like everyone else) as Herr Stiller, but as Mr. White.

So they want me to tell them my life story. And nothing but the plain, unvarnished truth. A pad of white paper, a fountain pen with ink that I can have refilled whenever I like at the expense of the State, and a little good will—what's going to be left of truth, when I get at it with my fountain pen? And if I just stick to the facts, says my counsel, we'll get truth in the corner so to speak, where we can grab it. Where could truth escape to, if I write it down? And by facts, I think my