

A PROJECT RESTORATION NOVEL

THE TRANSFORMATION

by
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P R O L O G U E

Shadyside
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
1888

THE HOT IRON HISSED as it made contact with the solder, the silvery metal turning to liquid, rivulets running along the lead channel. Perrin Millet worked fast, not wanting the heat to shatter the shards of thickly tinted glass. He bent the lead frame easily, and with a deft touch, soldered the channel to the master frame.

Close to finishing, he stepped back. The large window was cradled at an angle in a large, supporting, adjustable wooden frame. A small coal stove held a dozen heating rods, all glowing bright orange, each ready to melt and bend the puzzle of glass and metal slowly growing into sharp definition.

The Presbyterians had indeed been generous with the budget for their new church. As an artist, Perrin liked Presbyterians. Not so much the Lutherans, whom he thought were somewhat dour, their church designs lacking ambition and creativity. The group of Presbyterian elders, seeking to make a statement with their fine new church on South Aiken Avenue in bucolic Shadyside, on the east side of Pittsburgh, far away from the belching sulfuric steel mills along the river, had presented him a commission to construct nine large storytelling windows. They even allowed him

some latitude: He could select the scenes for his windows from more than a dozen approved Bible stories.

“We only ask that you make the windows big and impressive ... and, of course, accurate,” he was instructed.

Perrin, a master artisan who had created stained-glass windows all his life, was surprisingly not a religious man; he was also given to hard drink and coarse language. But this commission for the Presbyterians had done something to him. Exactly what it had done, Perrin wasn't certain, yet somehow he felt his completed subjects staring down on him—not in condemnation, but as witnesses to his genius, providing encouragement to his spirit as he labored, almost lost in the process of his handiwork.

His selections: Adam and Eve with the Serpent; Moses holding the Ten Commandments; Samson destroying the temple (it was Perrin's first time illustrating that wonderfully horrific story); Jesus holding a gentle lamb (an image Perrin could have done in his sleep); an anguished Jesus in the garden with the disciples, slumbering, in the background; the Last Supper, with Jesus standing off to one side (a novel approach, Perrin thought); Jesus being sentenced before Pilate; the crucifixion, with a wildly stormy background; and the day of Pentecost, complete with dancing flames and beatific expressions.

The last window, the great circular window to be hung above the high altar, would be a more nebulous subject.

“We want to see the power of God in that window,” the elders had stated.

“Power of God?” Perrin had asked.

The elders were clear: the unbridled power of the almighty God.

And so Perrin labored for weeks and weeks—poring over pages of sketches, surrounded by wads of discarded papers, tossing and turning in the night with indecision. Then, finally, with his vision clearly before him, he built the large circular frame and meticulously selected the glass. Painstakingly he cut each intricate piece, carefully laying out the lead and solder and sensitively designing the placement of the colors from the center out in a shape that suggested an all-seeing eye. For what could express the power of God more accurately than the Almighty's ability to look inside the soul of man, casting His scathing light on its innermost parts in search

of the truth?

As Perrin finished the darkness at the edge of the circle, the eye stared back at him. Colors melded from a near-black midnight blue at the edge to true blue, to purple, to burnt sienna, to umber, to a deep, thick, translucent gold in the very center. It was now midday. The work was complete at last.

Perrin called over two of his assistants, had them pull hard on the ropes, shouting that they must not loosen their holds, even for a moment, and then the window was upright.

“Turn it,” Perrin commanded.

They slowly rotated the frame on its wheels, letting the light shine through the glass, allowing the full force of the sunlight to burst onto that all-seeing eye for the first time in all of creation.

As Perrin stared up at his work, the blues washed over his body and the gold spilled over his face and shoulders, making it necessary to squint; his eyes were filled with too much light and too much color. After a moment, he closed his eyes and let the golden light warm his face, the blue cool his body.

Finally, he opened them again.

The entire window erupted with color, filling and penetrating his soul and invading every inch of him. Blinking, he drew in deep breaths, spreading his arms to embrace the light.

“Let no man claim there is no God,” Perrin said, maybe to himself, maybe to his assistants. “Whoever remains in this light will know the almighty God exists.”

Then he knelt quietly, wondering why in the name of heaven those words had fallen from his lips ... and if that great pellucid light had indeed transformed him.

*Holy Trinity Church
Jeannette, Pennsylvania
Thirty years ago*

Seated in the front row next to his mother, young Oliver Barnett was afraid to raise his head. The pastor had called for a time of silent prayer, so

Oliver prayed then was done. Yet every other head in the church remained bowed. He lifted his head a degree or two and opened his eyes a bit to see what might happen during a silent prayer, wanting to see if God really filled the room with something. Oliver looked for a magical presence, something that glowed perhaps, or hovered above them.

He did not see anything.

Above the pastor, over his left shoulder, stood Jesus in a thick, dark wooden frame, rendered in stained-glass in colors almost too vivid to be found in nature. Oliver never had sat this close to the front of the church before. From the back of the church, where he normally sat, Jesus appeared kinder, gentler, almost ambiguous in intent. But some twenty pews closer, Jesus' look became more distinct. There was a intensity in His expression, and His eyes—which Oliver once thought were closed in prayer—were open slightly, as if paying attention to those out in the pews who did not close their eyes during prayer.

Jesus sees me. Oh, God, Jesus sees me.

Oliver snapped his eyes shut and bowed his head deeper, scrunching his young body like a turtle at the sight of a fox or a badger. He hardly allowed himself to breathe. He prayed again that Jesus had not seen him, had not detected his disrespect.

The pastor rumbled and called for everyone to rise.

They sang a song that Oliver did not know. He tried to follow along, but the black squiggles on the page meant nothing to him. He heard his mother's voice, pitched sharp, knifelike, next to him.

They sat down again, and the pastor spoke for a few minutes, saying nice things about his father. Oliver heard his mother's name mentioned, his own name, then his brother's name. Tolliver was not in church because their mother said he was too young and so he was staying with a neighbor lady from across the street that morning.

A soloist stood up, an old lady with white hair, and began to sing. Oliver felt like crying, but he refused to cry where anyone could see him. Behind the soloist, in a large metal box, lay the body of his father. Oliver knew his father was dead. The pastor said he would be with Jesus. But that fact didn't make Oliver feel any better—not one bit.

As the old lady stopped singing, Rose, his mother, turned to Oliver

and placed her hand on his knee, grabbing it with more force than necessary, almost hard, like when she wanted him to listen and listen good. She leaned down, her mouth near his ear.

“You’re the man of the house now, Oliver. You know that, don’t you?”

Oliver did not know what that meant exactly but nodded as if he did.

“You’ll be a good boy, won’t you, Oliver?” she asked, but it was more a demand than a request.

He nodded again.

“And, Oliver, you must remember about our secret. You must never tell anyone about our secret. Never. Do you understand?”

When she squeezed his knee harder still, he was afraid he would cry out in pain if he did not agree. He knew what the secret was. He knew how to keep secrets. He had kept lots and lots of secrets before.

He nodded.

“I need to hear you say it, Oliver,” his mother said in almost a hiss. “Stop your nodding and shrugging and tell me with words.”

Oliver fought the urge to nod again. “I’ll keep the secret, Ma. I promise.”

She relaxed the pressure on his knee, then smiled. But to Oliver, it looked like that sort of fake smile you give to teachers and big people when you really don’t want to smile, but you have to.

“I promise, Ma. I promise.”

*Taylor Allderdice High School
Squirrel Hill
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Twenty years ago*

Samantha Cohen stood at her locker in the long hallway of the west wing of Taylor Allderdice High School, all but oblivious to the maelstrom of students spinning past her, jostling her, shouting and crowing and laughing. Most of them didn’t know what had happened.

They couldn't know—could they?

Samantha was well known, with all her extracurricular activities, but close to only a few other students in the sophomore class. She stood a nickel under six feet tall, so most of the boys ignored her; and her classic good looks, with a touch of the exotic, made her an outsider to most of the girls.

She slipped her books onto the top shelf of the locker, took her notebook and math book, slammed the door, spun the lock, and headed to study hall. No one would care if she was a few minutes late. No one would dare say a word to her, not today of all days.

She was right. The room, filled with raucous laughter, swirling with students who didn't pay her one bit of unaccustomed attention, didn't settle down when she entered. A few noticed her, whispered to a friend, pointed, made gestures with their hands. Samantha paid none of them any mind. She took her seat, opened her math book, leafed through her notebook, took a pencil from her purse, and began trying to catch up on a week's worth of missed assignments.

Mr. Wansour entered the room, put a finger from each hand in his mouth, and attempted an ear-piercing whistle. The shrill sound was worse than the worst train whistle Samantha had ever heard. She hated him when he whistled like that.

"Settle down, people. Everyone. Quiet. Sit still, please. No hall passes for the first fifteen minutes."

The room stilled to a gentle undercurrent of whispers and passing notes and opening books. Mr. Wansour flapped a manila folder onto the desk and opened it, extracting a test sheet from two periods earlier. He took a pen from the pocket of his sport coat and began to click it methodically, obsessively.

Twenty minutes into the period, the classroom door opened and everyone looked up. An older woman, gray hair combed into a severe mannish style that caused most of the student body to wonder, entered the room, cradling a clipboard the way a fisherman would cradle a prize trout. "Samantha Cohen?"

The room erupted in a chorus of "Ooohhh," as if Samantha had already been indicted, tried, and convicted of some heinous student crime

against authority.

Samantha hesitated, then raised her hand.

“Come with me,” Miss Rosenberg, one of the school’s four guidance counselors, said.

Another chorus of “Ooohhh” erupted, then snickers.

Samantha gathered her purse, book, and notebook to her chest and meekly got up from the desk. The soft soles of Miss Rosenberg’s sensible shoes were hushed on the tile, her heels making a *squish, squish, squish* sound down the empty halls.

Samantha followed the counselor to a series of compact offices by the general administration office. To the right was the principal’s secretary, presiding over his waiting room. To the left were the guidance offices.

“Come in. Sit down, Miss Cohen,” Miss Rosenberg invited.

Over the counselor’s right shoulder was a wire rack with neatly stacked college brochures lining the pockets. Samantha had never set foot in this office; she wasn’t thinking about college yet, so she wondered why in the world she had been summoned.

“Miss Cohen, we are aware of what’s happened. We know that losing your mother that way can be a shock. We just want you to know that if you need to talk to someone, you can always make an appointment with one of the guidance counselors. We’re always available for appointments.”

Samantha nodded.

“You understand?”

“I do,” Samantha replied. “But I think I’ll be fine.”

Miss Rosenberg narrowed her eyes, obviously not believing a word Samantha said. “Look, Samantha, sometimes children think that this sort of behavior is hereditary or something equally as foolish. It isn’t. I’ve done a lot of reading on the subject. You don’t have anything to be worried about. You know, as I like to say, the sins of the father ... or mother ... don’t always visit the children. Sometimes children think it’s their fault. The school has a list of qualified therapists if you find that you are troubled. Or can’t sleep. Or get weepy.”

Samantha had no questions for this strange woman.

“You’ll let us know if you run into problems? Help is only a phone call away. If you’re having a hard time coping, there are a number of

medications available, and I'll bet your family doctor would be happy to help you with that."

"No, Miss Rosenberg. I think I'm fine. Really."

The counselor allowed a long, long silence to fill the room. "Or a member of the clergy. We could call one for you."

"No. Thank you, though. I've ... I've talked to our rabbi." Samantha, not skilled at lying, hoped keeping a solemn expression would help her made-up stories sound true.

"Okay then. Since it's almost time for your next class, why don't you stay here until the bell rings?"

Samantha had already stood up, smoothing her skirt. "No. If it's okay with you, I'll go back to study hall."

Miss Rosenberg shrugged. "Have it your way. Here's a pass to get back to class," she said. Then she began to write something in a notebook.

Samantha slowly gathered her books together. One of Samantha's talents was reading upside down—honed from reading her father's writing as he worked at his desk. As she unhurriedly collected her belongings, she watched Miss Rosenberg write.

Miss Cohen refused all efforts at outreach. Contact all teachers to keep watch. May be in denial. We want no repetition of what occurred last year.

Samantha knew what had happened last year. A fellow classmate had committed suicide after his older brother had been killed in a car accident. It was the talk of the school for weeks and weeks.

"Thank you, Miss Rosenberg," Samantha said as she slipped out the door.

It won't happen to me. It won't happen to me. I am nothing like her. Nothing like her at all.

She turned the corner and headed to the restroom, where she would wait until it was time for French class.

*Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Five years ago*

Tolliver Barnett let the crowds churn around him, a great wash of humanity all bent on celebrating. *Bent and twisted*, he thought. He grinned as faces passed before him—leering, joyful, drunk, some only semiconscious, desperate, hopeful, yearning. Tolliver could see it all in their faces, as if each were transparent, their souls and hearts and longings visible to him alone.

It's a gift, he thought as he smiled back at the ebb and flow of people.

It was New Year's Eve, and he was in downtown Pittsburgh. He had been invited to one of the more prestigious parties—a swank gala affair, hosted by the friend of a friend who happened to be some ranking officer in a national real-estate firm.

Tolliver had no connection to anyone here, but he enjoyed parties. He enjoyed seeking out the wounded.

No ... not the wounded, really. But those women in need. You can tell who they are. The ones who laugh too loud. The ones who try to hard to please, or impress. The ones who drink too much. You can see it in their eyes.

The party, held in the ornately decorated grand ballroom of the historic William Penn Hotel, overlooking downtown Pittsburgh, grew louder and more frenzied the closer the hour drew to midnight.

A woman he had never met latched onto his arm.

She's one of the wounded—one of the drinkers.

“Enjoying yourself?” she said, her words a bit too loud even for a boisterous party.

“I am,” Tolliver responded.

The blonde, attractive in a sharp, angular way and on the brink of being labeled “mature,” eyed Tolliver intently. “Are you a realtor?”

Tolliver laughed. “No. Just friends with someone who is friends with one of them. You folks have poor security, letting someone like me in.”

The woman screeched out a laugh. “I could tell you weren't one of those realtors. You're much too cute.”

Tolliver simply smiled in return.

The woman pointed to the large clock hung over the bar. It was clicking down—only minutes until the magic hour.

“You mind if I bring in the new year with you?” she asked, almost stroking his arm.

"I would be honored," Tolliver replied. He knew how to handle himself in these situations.

The clock struck twelve, and horns and shouts and squeals erupted. The woman grabbed his neck and pulled him down to herself, latching onto his lips like a lamprey. He kept his eyes open. In the corner he noticed an older couple, obviously married, quietly holding hands. They exchanged a nearly chaste kiss, looking into each other's eyes with reverence, love ... and admiration.

In that moment, Tolliver hated the couple, hated their so-called happiness, hated the brazen flaunting of their blissful togetherness. They were taunting him, his past, and probably his future. He hated all they represented.

Tolliver angrily shut his eyes and returned the lamprey's kiss with one of his own, knowing exactly how this night would play itself out.

Caldwell, Ohio
Five years ago

Henry Pratt parked his car almost in the shadow of a great expanse of stone wall of the Noble Correctional Institute. He hated this place, had hated it every time he visited it. He despised the hard chiseled walls and the gate's echoed slam of metal on metal. He loathed the cold glisten of razor wire that adorned the top of the wall.

But today was different. It would be the last visit. Never again would he be drawn to the darkness inside the massive walls.

He made his way to the entrance and waited. He looked at his watch: nearly noon. He could hear the rumbled announcements inside the walls, like a distant thunderstorm, and was just barely able to make out the words.

He waited longer. A few men with wide smiles passed him as he stood on one side of the walkway, each man trailing a mother, or a girlfriend, or a wife. There were no other men waiting with Henry. There were seldom men in the visiting area, either.

Men hold grudges more than women, I guess. And what father wants to

see his son in this place?

Henry saw him as he exited the double doors—his youngest brother, Steven, walking slowly toward him, carrying only a paper sack. Henry did not move toward him but waited until his brother came within an arm's reach, then stuck out his hand. Steven did not accept the hand but embraced his brother with a ferocity that scared him.

When Steven dropped his arms, he drew a deep breath, then another, and another. "Air smells different out here. Cleaner, for sure."

Henry stood silently as his brother breathed fresh air for the first time in years, then asked, "You all set to head home?"

"I am, Henry. I am *so* ready."

Neither man moved.

"You're never coming back here, are you?" Henry asked, really more of a statement than a question. He had waited five years to say those words to his brother.

Steven shook his head. "With God as my witness, I'm never coming back here. That, I promise."

Henry waited. "Gene's at work. He wants us to hold off celebrating until he gets home."

"I've been waiting five years," Steven answered. "A few more hours won't kill me, I suppose."

And they walked, side by side, into the brilliant sunshine of an Ohio afternoon, in early summer, with only a hint of rain to come in the air.

Kane County, Pennsylvania
Five years ago

Bartholomew "Barth" Mills inspected each one of his tires, making sure all had the proper pressure and inflation, checking for nails and nicks in the rims. Everything looked good. He had checked the oil the night before, after loading the last of his belongings into the trailer. All he owned didn't amount to enough to hire a moving company; his possessions fit into his battered old Jeep and a rented U-Haul he'd hitched onto the back. On this morning, Rascal, his dog, sat in the front seat, his tongue lolling out. The

window was open; a slight mountain breeze fluttered down the valley.

Barth checked the trailer hitch once again, making sure the chains were secure and that the wires running to the taillights were well taped.

He stood in the gravel driveway of the parsonage, the place he and his wife, Ellen—God rest her soul—had called home for nearly two decades. The last two years had been less than pleasant, much less than pleasant, and Barth almost looked forward to leaving ... to starting over again, to living once more in the neighborhood where he was born and raised.

Almost.

He had retired from the church two months prior and had received his first check from his retirement funds. It was not a large amount, but then again, he had simpler needs now—just him and the dog.

He walked slowly to the wooden front doors of the church. When he was pastor, the doors were never locked. Now they were only unlocked when the new pastor decided to grace the building with his presence—which didn't seem to be all that often. Barth tried his best not to feel bitter.

He peered through a pane of glass to the inside: just a dozen pews in depth, a small pulpit, and a wonderful, beveled window in the shape of a cross behind it. When he'd preached on certain days of the year, light had poured through that window and lit him up like he was some sort of Christmas tree—a tree standing up for Christ, he'd told himself. Even now, as he looked through the window once more, he could feel that warm light on his shoulder. He could feel the sunshine of better days.

I'll miss that, he thought. *I'll miss that window. I'll miss this sacred space.*

Today's weather promised to be overcast; maybe later there would be a thick mist or a rain shower. That sort of damp cold bothered his bones, and he wondered once again why he wasn't heading farther south than Pittsburgh as his final destination.

He touched the wood of the door with the tip of his finger, as if the building might say its good-byes. But he didn't feel anything other than the dry rasp of a door in need of fresh stain.

He climbed into the Jeep, slipped in the key, and the engine turned over. The little red man on the dash beeped and beeped until he fastened

his seat belt—a practice he had never taken to and would never get accustomed to performing.

He pulled out of the driveway, carefully backing out onto Route 6, though traffic was seldom heavy at any time of day.

“Well, Rascal, say good-bye.”

Rascal snuffled and wheezed in the brisk air as he leaned out the window.

“Now get inside, boy. Too cold to have an open window.”

The dog obeyed and, within a few miles, was fast asleep, snoring as he napped, curled up tight against the seat.

Twenty miles down the road, Barth came to a stop sign. He stepped on the brake, looked, then continued. A troubling thought entered his consciousness—one that had been there for weeks and months ... one he kept pushing away and denying.

Good Lord, what am I going to do now?

The thought clamored about for another twenty miles of empty highway.

Lord, take me home ... or give me a reason to stay.

Rascal kicked his leg, evidently dreaming of rabbits or squirrels, two of his most hated animals.

Other than this blasted dog, that is. Give me a reason beyond Rascal. Please, Lord.