

THE WORLD'S FAIR

A Picaresque Novel



JOAN FERRY

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to my mother and father



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CHAPTER ONE

Prologue

EMER WATCHES THEM through the car window as they run up the church steps. The baby sleeps beside her on the back seat. Her mother returns to the car as if she's forgotten something.

Emer rolls down the window and looks at her questioninglly. Her mother whispers, "We're getting married. We won't be long. Just look after Zack." Emer rolls the window up quickly. The air is a little cool in Ottawa for May. She studies the date over the portals of the United Church. "1937." It's a brand new church, she thinks. Wow! I'm six years older than this church.

Later that night she remembers standing at the foot of her father's bed. Her feet were cold. Her father was shouting and coughing. She saw his chest heaving. His feverish body contorted as he struggled to control the wracking cough. His black curly hair glistened with sweat. His body was drenched. He shouts as his fists thud against the mattress. "No! No! No!"

Her mother sits up in the bed. "Michael, what is it? Wake up!" She looks worried. "Is it because we got married?"

He slowly sits up and spits into a handkerchief. "Nothing to do with that."

"Not the same dream, Michael? Not the same dream?"

Zack starts to cry from the next room.

Michael slumps back, too exhausted to tell her. "That tasted like blood, Bella. Where's the sputum cup?"

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Bella hands it to him.

“Can I get you a glass of water, Dad?” Emer asks.

Together they go to the kitchen.

Emer wraps her toes around the spindle legs of the chair and watches him as he pours each of them a glass of water. He is tall and thin with dark brown hair, brown eyes, and a straight nose. They look alike. What she loves best about him is his kindhearted eyes. To her they are regal. They radiate the warmth of a king. That and the variety of ways he finds to express himself.

“What happened, Dad?”

”I just had a bad dream, that’s all.”

His cough subsides.

Emer sees him trying to shrug it off.

He changes the subject, “You know that tomorrow I’m going into the hospital. The sanatorium. I have tuberculosis.” He enunciates every word clearly.

Emer feels the urgency in his voice and whispers, “What’s that?”

How can he explain to his six-year-old? “It’s a disease of the lungs.” He repeats, “a disease of the lungs,” to reassure himself that he had actually said it.

“Will you get better?”

He pulls himself together. “Yes, of course I will.”

The doctor said that even with plenty of rest, cod liver oil, and sunshine, “getting better” would still be in the lap of the gods. But he is determined that he will beat this thing, if for no other reason than to confront his mother and grandmother. One of them has to tell him the truth. He has to get to the bottom of these damnable recurring dreams. He knows that the TB diagnosis has something to do with unresolved issues. He feels sure of it. It isn’t only his lifestyle that had brought it on.

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As he looks at her querying eyes, he knows that he also must secure a future for his family.

“There’s nothing to worry about, really. Your life will continue here with your mother and Zack, much the same as always.”

“But without you?”

“Yes, for the present.”

“Is that what made you shout in your sleep?” she asks.

“Not exactly.” He looks away. “I don’t know. I just know that I had a nightmare. It keeps coming back.” He lowers his voice as if he were talking to himself. “Has for years now.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a dream I have of me as a baby, sitting on the floor. Two women are fighting over me.”

“Who, Dad?”

“Your grandmother Silvy and your great-grandmother Alma.”

“Why are they fighting?”

“They’re saying bad things, Emer. I don’t quite hear what they say but I hear that they are bad things.”

“What, Dad?”

Michael bites his lips, knowing he can’t tell his young daughter the dream. It is too shocking even for him to absorb.

He shudders. Their voices still ring in his ears.

Alma repeatedly screamed to his mother, “You don’t even know who the father is.” She pointed to the baby sitting on the floor. Him. Michael.

And then Silvy’s recurring chant of “I couldn’t help it! I couldn’t help it! I couldn’t help it!”

“The hell you couldn’t! He’s a bastard!” Alma shouted.

And then in the midst of his wails his Aunt Maura scooped him up off the floor and ran away with him to her house.

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To Emer, he says, "I don't really know who my father is."

Her young voice cracks. "Is that important, Dad?"

"Yes, Emer. Very."

The reason why he'd married Bella the day before, he thought.

His children at least would know who their father was. Even if he did die.

Emer sips her water. "But it's Grandfather Maguire, Aunt Maura's brother."

"That is no longer clear to me."

Emer folds both legs up on the chair and hunches her shoulders over them in deep thought. She loves her father. He always speaks his deepest truth, no matter what. It hurts to see him in such pain. In her heart she resolves to watch her family closely. She is determined to get to the bottom of it.



Life was not the same after her father left. In her view, her eighth birthday came and went almost unnoticed. Almost two years had passed and the excitement of his presence had vanished. Her mother was totally wrapped up in three-year-old Zack.

Emer felt as though she no longer existed.

She dipped her fingers into Bella's emollients, unguents, and face creams in the hope that if she rubbed them on her skin her mother would smell them on her and grow to love her too. She even painted her toenails in imitation of her mother, though she herself didn't favour the look of it. Still, nothing happened.

One night she woke up screaming. Bella came rushing in.

"What is it?"

"There's a rat crawling up my arm."

Her mother felt her forehead. She was feverish and sweating.

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The next day they went to see Doctor Carmichael at the Sanatorium. All three of them had X-rays, including Zack.

Emer was admitted to the San a week later with a shadow on her lung. She was delighted. She didn't feel sick. She felt perfectly fine. She could see her father once a week!

In the beginning he was in the Perley Building, but after she arrived he moved to the Grey Building to be closer to her. This gave everyone reason to hope that he would make it. Admission to the Grey indicated that the disease was beginning to go into remission.

On Saturdays they walked together hand in hand in the deep snow along the boulevard lined with ghostly maple trees shorn of leaves, their branches draped in snow and icicles. The maple was a sacred tree in his view, "because in spring it gives us its sap, which when boiled turns into a beautiful syrup. It's relatively more nutritious than straight sugar, you know." They walked all the way to the frozen creek and back through the middle of a pine forest covered in pancake-sized clumps of snow.

"We're having a good run at life in the country, aren't we?" They may be in there to die, but they are going to have a good time doing it.

"The snow stays so much whiter, longer," she whispered, enchanted with the silence of this new sparkling world, away from the city and apartment living.

The San had given her a winter snowsuit of tomato-red woollen leggings with a matching sweater, toque, and mittens. The snowsuit was a size five but it was still a bit big for her. At eight she was small for her age.

He held her hand tightly as he spoke. It was important to him that she should know the details of family folklore, however inglorious they might be.

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“You see, Emer, it goes this way,” he began. “Silvy, my mother, ran away to the circus when I was three months old.”

“Wow! What a wonderful thing to do!”

“Yes, but I was very young, and I needed her.” His knowledge of basic psychology told him that a nurturing mother was a necessity to the infant child. Where else would he learn love except at his mother’s side?

She could tell from his serious tone that it wasn’t the right thing for Granny to have done. “Did you love her, Dad?”

He smiled sadly. “At three months old? I suppose so. I don’t know. I needed her, let’s put it that way. I suppose she was too young to have known any better,” he said in a forgiving tone.

“So then what happened?”

“Aunt Maura raised me.”

Michael suddenly whirled his daughter around, threw her up in the air with gales of laughter, and caught her, shouting, “I lived with Aunt Maura and we all lived happily ever after, so there!” He was forever grateful to the woman who had taken on the responsibility of mothering him when she herself at sixteen barely had enough to live on. Maura was the only woman he knew who could translate spiritual values into pragmatic action with detachment.

Emer loved her father’s spontaneity. She wasn’t sure what motivated his excitement, but if it was like hers, it came from a passionate love of life.

He continued to talk about himself.

She watched his words forming vapour puffs that disappeared into the blue-white air. The new snow scrunched underfoot. Emer watched thick scatterings of snowflake words forming intricate lacework connections in mid-air.

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“You see, I entered Ottawa University when I was eighteen, and majored in mathematics. I was pretty successful, so much so that when I began graduate studies, my advisors told me that if I went on and completed a doctorate I’d be granted tenure as a professor. First, of course, I’d have to complete my Master of Science degree...”

“And have you?”

“No, darling, I haven’t.”

She thought about this for a moment. “What’s tenure, Dad?”

“Tenure is a position that is bestowed upon you for life.”

“Bestowed?”

He straightened her toque. “Well, yes. It’s given to you for as long as you live.”

She clapped her mittens together. “A gift forever? Can you make it happen?”

He cleared his throat and looked away. There were some complications here, of course, if and when he got better: the solving of Fermat’s last theorem for the master’s degree, the church’s sanctions on marrying Bella in the United Church, and his precarious health. He would clear up the mess with Father Bruneau, the Dean of Science Studies. The pink-cheeked priest had no room in his heart for non-conformists. To Emer he said, “We will only know that when I get out.” He hoped it was going to be the case. He intended to realize this goal, if he lived.

He talked about his student days at Ottawa University, and how he’d met her mother when he was playing violin in the orchestra at the Standish Hall in Hull.

“Where is that?”

“On the other side of the provincial bridge.”

“That’s in Quebec, huh?”

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“Yes, that’s where your mother is from, Gatineau Pointe, Quebec.”

Emer felt as if she was a grown woman. She didn’t understand a lot of what he said, but she absorbed all of his words much as a flower absorbs the sun and the rain.

Sometimes the walks were spent catching up on her school-work. He made a game out of every subject he taught her. She knew from his laughter that he loved to teach.

Under cold, crisp, blue sunlit skies he drew triangles in the glittering snow, to explain the Pythagorean theorem. On other days it would be *Hamlet*, or Plato’s *Republic*, or a one-sided discussion on the theory of relativity. One Saturday she watched as his leather-gloved hand meticulously wrote Fermat’s last theorem into the crusty snow.

“One day,” he said, standing back to study the equation, “I will resolve this problem, make some money, and then we will move to Peru, where the sun shines the year round. Where there’s pounding surf, palm trees, and warmth in the very air we breathe. And that’s a promise!” He squeezed her hand tight. She never forgot this. On still other days, it was meditative walks and quiet talks about their future lives in Peru. “Oh Daddy, imagine that. Just imagine it!” She could barely breathe with the thought of it.

“Imagination is reality, so yes, let’s just work on that.” She followed the word-puffs as they travelled, merging into the ice-blue sky.

Her mother came to visit her every Sunday. She came with Grandmaman, or *Memère*, as Emer calls her. They drape themselves around the white wrought-iron knobs at the foot of her bed.

Memère’s gold ciborium-shaped pendants dangled into the prickly wire fur of her brown muskrat. Her mother wore a brown tweed coat, her golden brown curls piled high in the manner of a

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movie actress. Was it Barbara Stanwyck or Irene Dunne? Hard to tell. The upswept hairdo looks stunning with her sea-green eyes.

Emer lay flat on her back in a tent the nurses made for her because she had bronchitis. They placed a little steamer inside the tent so that she could breathe more easily. As she lay there in the euphoric haze of friar's balsam, she could see their anxious faces through the mist.

"Penses-tu qu'a va mourir?" Memère said. Do you think she'll die?

Emer's attention riveted on her mother's response.

Bella merely shrugged, appearing indifferent.

Emer's heart stopped for a second. She felt nothing coming from her mother. Absolutely nothing. Silence.

Bella died for Emer, then and there, standing right at the foot of her bed.

Both of them dissolved into puddles under their coats like the bad witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. She raged inside, screaming soundlessly. "You fools! Insensitive fools! I'm going to live! I will live!"

They were too lost in their own "mellow-drama" to hear her. That much she knew.

Emer's shutdown toward her mother and Memère was complete by age eight. From that moment on she became her own best support. No bitterness. No rancour.

The day her father walked through the grey-stone Sanatorium gates, both thumbs up, would live in her memory forever. He knew how to turn darkness into light. He let her see that he was unafraid to experience his own darkness from within himself and move forward from that point.

"We have the ability to transform ourselves, Emer. Life is a gift. We are here to experience it fully. Good, bad, or indifferent. We have the power within ourselves to change our so-called negative

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emotions by experiencing them fully. The trick is to catch myself ignoring them. From that point, I can then move forward into a healthy body. All is energy, including thoughts and feelings. They are neither 'good' nor 'bad.' All of life's experience is power at our disposal to use consciously."

At the time, all Emer understood was that, although he might have been going into the hospital to die, he chose to go down like the *Titanic*, "with all his lights on."

"No defeats," he'd said. "Only powerful lessons to learn."

Emer chose to make the family incident at the foot of her bed serve her. Death's door was death's door.



Aunt Maura sits in a chair by his bed. He watches her snow-white head bent attentively over the makeshift bookcase on the window ledge.

She smiles. "Still reading all your books, Michael?"

He whispers, "Got it from you, I guess."

"I see your interests are more varied than ever," she says, reading the titles. "Books on magic tricks, chess, theatre; where are the ones on music?"

"Over here. And I brought the violin with me to keep in practice."

"That was a good added income, wasn't it? Best to keep it up."

"Yup. Never know what's around the old corner." Friends that helped him through the day.

"You've got several books on mathematics."

"Was thinking I'd work on Fermat's theorem while I'm here. This episode kind of cut me off at the starting post."

"It will happen. It will and you know that!"

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“I want to crack that one day.”

“Is that a vow?”

“Actually, yes.”

“Then it will happen,” she says matter-of-factly.

He is thankful for her light touch.

She looks at him quizzically. “What’s this one?”

“It’s a book on yoga. The exercises. How to breathe.”

“Yes, well, breathing is of the essence, isn’t it?”

Michael laughs. He feels her gentle comfort as if they were back home in Clarkstown. “A chap in this wing happens to be a yoga instructor. He’s teaching me about breathing. Pranayama, he calls it.”

“What does the doctor say to this?”

“The more oxygen I get into this the better, he says.”

“Good, you’re on the right track then, aren’t you?” There is a moment of silence between them.

“Conscious breathing is it then?”

“Yes.” Her knowledge always surprises him. “How do you know?”

“Toussaint,” she says. And then, as if to remind herself to be quiet, she puts a finger to her lips.

His name startles Michael. He scans Maura’s face, trying to detect her intention behind mentioning him. “Could I have the glass of milk on the cabinet there?”

“Certainly,” she says.

He drinks the cool liquid down and sinks back into the pillow. Some mistakes you never forget, he thinks.

He remembers his mother’s brother, Uncle Toussaint, making a slingshot for him. From the moment he got it, he was a natural shot. Could knock any milk bottle clear off its pedestal by the age of six. Ping! The bottles resounded and echoed into the back woods.

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The kids had thought he was a marvel. He'd thought so too! Such satisfaction in being able to make a thing vanish. Magical feeling. He loved his old slingshot.

Uncle Toussaint, though, was another matter. Michael had not liked the brusque way he treated his mother. He was mean to her.

He was called Toussaint because he'd been born November first, All Saints' Day. "A holy day of obligation," he would say leeringly. A masher with the women, he brought a few home every Saturday night to Alma's house from the Byward Market. His taxi service was especially busy on weekends. Whether the girls paid him or not, they got free lodgings and food. Toussaint's excuse to his mother was always the same. "They have no place to sleep on the weekend, Ma." The less fortunate in Alma's and Choe's house had always been given a big welcome on Murray Street. The recollection of the girls sitting around his grandmother's kitchen table on a Sunday afternoon eating thick, homemade soup and bread made Michael smile in spite of himself. It had been an exciting place for a boy of nine, despite the admonitions from Aunt Maura and her sister Meg. "The Longprés!" they exclaimed almost in unison, with Meg always adding, "Toussaint, indeed!"

One summer day when Michael was eight, Maura's radio antenna fell over after a bad thunderstorm. It needed repairs.

The Maguire house, a duplex in Clarkstown, was minutes away from Eastview, where Toussaint lived and ran his business. He was known locally to be the only man in the neighbourhood that did that kind of work.

Toussaint arrived on the Maguire doorstep, all French charm and grace. Michael saw that Aunt Maura was hypnotized by his uncle's reverence for her.

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The house had a peaked roof. Toussaint reached it through an attic trap door and walked up its steep, wet slope. Michael was in the backyard watching him work. Maura was in the back summer kitchen baking some pies for Toussaint, as payment. Every now and again her face appeared at the screen door. To Michael she looked overly concerned. She even came out on the back porch, shading her eyes against the sun to make sure of his uncle's safety, for God's sake! The practical joker, the prankster in him, ran into the wet bushes, took out his slingshot, the one Toussaint had made for him, and delicately "pinged" the antenna. Toussaint turned his head abruptly to see where the sound had come from, and in so doing, rolled down the roof to the ground, where his body fell in a crumpled heap. Maura ran screaming for help. Terrified, Michael hid in the bushes, crying, "I didn't mean it! I didn't mean it! Please, God, let him be okay. It was just a joke," over and over again as he writhed in anguish.

The ambulance came, but it was too late. Toussaint's neck was broken. He was already dead.

Michael had cried in the bushes for hours while Maura ran for help. He never knew whether she had seen him do it. She never mentioned it. Life in her home continued as if nothing had ever happened. If anything, her love and support for him increased, until he graduated from Ottawa University with a four-year Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in mathematics. She had helped initially with his violin fees by working at St. Brigid's Orphanage. Later on she even paid for his tuition at university when his father refused to do so.

He looked at Maura long and hard, feeling the pain once again of what he had done as a child. Tears roll down his face.

"There now," she says, taking his hand and squeezing it hard, "everything has a reason. We don't always see the larger canvas."

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Michael didn't know if she was talking about Toussaint. Had she in fact seen him do it, or was she talking about the tuberculosis that had taken a turn for the worse? He was too tired to ask.

She sat beside his bed, well past visiting hours, her legs crossed at thin ankles, hands clasped together in her lap.

She had always been present for him in all of his growing crises and she was present now. He wondered where she got the strength.

Michael fell asleep in a state of exhaustion.

The leaves of the poplar outside his window started their rustling sound, throwing dappled shadows interspersed with glimmers of light across the white counterpane on his bed.

Maura gazed on his beloved face. She rose and gently wiped his forehead with a cool face cloth. He resembled him so much that she thought her heart would break with the pain.

Remembering her promise to the only man she had ever loved, she gathered herself up staunchly and tiptoed out of the room.

As she walked back through the tree-lined boulevard to the stone gate, the coolness of the October breeze forced her to gather her cardigan tightly around her hunched shoulders.

Maura thought of Emerald, and silently prayed that she would make it. Her one and only godchild, whom she herself had named. The brilliant little chess player with the big brown all-seeing eyes. She was sure Emerald had a tremendous future ahead of her. She glanced up at the second storey of the Children's Building. The ghostly dimness of the night lights in the main corridor cast long shadows. Shadows of nurses on the walls as they moved in and out of rooms, tucking the children in. It reminded her of the nights when she was on duty at St. Brigid's Orphanage caring for the youngsters in the Babies' Wing. Unwanted babies. The babies of young unwed mothers and fathers who didn't have the means of supporting their child.

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He'd come to visit his daughter, three-month-old Jesse. The smiling baby that welcomed you at any time of the day or night. She handed him her favourite baby.

The picture of this strong, dark, curly-headed man gazing into his infant's face touched her deeply.

He had allowed Maura to see his vulnerability. In that moment she fell in love with him. They were both twenty-one years old.

The month previously, Sister Walter Marie had scanned her application form. "Your experience with children fully qualifies you for a job caring for the babies at our orphanage." As she stood up, her headdress made her look three feet taller. She extended her hand warmly. "Welcome to the staff!"

By then Michael was six and had been living with her since she was fifteen. Her brother John had brought him to her at three months old.

That had been her "qualification," as the nun put it.

Then came laughing Jesse. Then Jesse's father. Her face was wet with tears. She wondered if she would ever forget him. A tinkling melody of some old jazz tune wafted to her from somewhere. Everywhere. Nowhere. A melody they had danced to. God knows.

Leaving Michael behind her after a visit always left her limp.



Michael was packing his books when Dr. Carmichael entered the room. He hitched up his long white smock and sat down at the end of Michael's bed. "Well, it's been a long time coming, hasn't it?" he said drily.

Michael threw some books into the box. "Feels like three years," he said sardonically, not entirely able to hide the bitterness in his words.

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He could hardly forget the date. 1937, the year he'd married Bella and also the date he'd admitted himself into the care of the Sanatorium.

The old man knew Michael's story. He puffed on his glasses and polished them on his handkerchief. "Congratulations, anyway," he said to his glasses with an air of restraint.

Michael caught his acerbic tone but knew that it wasn't directed at him. His doctor hid behind an expressionless tone the way some people hide behind an expressionless mask. It was his protection against the experience of so many lives lost, thought Michael. "Lots of water under the bridge," he said, thinking of the thirty-one others in his ward who hadn't made it.

The doctor shrugged. "Yup! One in thirty-one. Not great odds. You win some. You lose a lot."

Michael saw his shoulders slump under the oversized smock and knew that he took the losses personally.

Carmichael looked up, peering at him intently over his glasses. "But maybe you'll do all the living you can for them."

Michael paused to breathe into the pain of the lost ones, many of them friends. "Sure, will give it a good try."

"You can drop in for X-rays every once in a while. Just to make sure there's no recurrence." He cleared his throat. "Emer too, of course. And here are the sputum cups for testing." He dropped them into the suitcase.

Michael mimicked a military salute. "Yes, Sir!"

"You can tell Bella," he added, "that there's to be no sharing of towels, utensils, or linens. Just in case." He got up to go and turned at the doorway. "And as usual, as I mentioned when you and Emer came in here, no hugs, no kisses. No physical contact. Remember, she had a shadow, you had definite scarring."

Michael laughed. "I know. "Germs, germs, germs!"

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“This is serious, Michael. I’m talking about lives now. I don’t want to see either one of you in here again. Take care of yourself and your family. That is my pleasure.”

“I will, Doctor.”

As he turned to leave he said, “I cleared Emer a month ago, as you know.”

Michael nods.

There is a silence, then, “No heavy work of any kind and definitely no cigarettes.” He fondles the stethoscope at his neck. “Also, I want you to examine the possibilities of another job. One that takes you away from the classroom. Preferably a job that is done in the fresh air.”

Michael looks up from his suitcase in shock. “But teaching math is what I’m trained for. How am I supposed to find a job in the fresh air?”

“Well, look at it, Michael. The world has changed since you arrived here.”

“Not that much. Only a few years ago.”

“When you arrived in May of ’37, Hitler’s strategists were testing new weapons in the Spanish Civil War, and Franco in consequence won.” Dr. Carmichael looks out the window. “Unlike the Spaniards, we got through that war here in Canada unscathed, but I’d say that at this very moment the war machine is in full production, with Krupp at the helm, producing guns for the Germans to aim at the rest of Europe. We might just have to get involved. The depression here has gotten worse. I have a feeling that we’ll either go to hell in a wheelbarrow or it will explode.”

Doctor Carmichael looked around the room, avoiding Michael’s gaze. Normally a very conservative man, he cleared his throat, embarrassed that he’d said so much.

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Michael was astonished at this sudden display of verbiage. He snapped his suitcase shut. "I think you're being too pessimistic. After all, the World's Fair just opened in New York a few weeks ago; the exhibits in those pavilions are from all over the globe—Czechoslovakia, USSR, Britain, to name a few. In my world the Fair sees the future in a very positive light. The combination of those images of the Trylon, the Perisphere, and the Helicline—the sphere and the tower, with the bridge connecting them—spells futuristic to me. Reason for hope about the developing ingenuity we on the American continent display through our creative inventions. War spells gloom and doom."

"Well, anyway, congratulations." The interview was over. "And ... good luck to you!" the doctor called as he sped out of the room. His starched smock flapped loudly at his legs.

"Maybe we'll go to hell in a wheelbarrow and explode!" Michael said to the four walls as he threw the last of his books into the box.

His attention shifted to Bella and the children as he placed their photograph on top of the books.

With the suitcase in one hand and a box in the other, Michael walked out the front door to the waiting cab. "We stumble toward success," he thundered into the curtain of rain.

His strength restored, he relaxed into the back seat. Staring into the May downpour, he readied himself to face the challenge of his new world.

