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## Mobilis in Mobili

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# **Mobilis in Mobili**

**By Natasha Lvovich**

*Brooklyn, circa 1950*

"Put that book down!" Mom is yelling from the kitchen, but the only sound I hear is a muffled shriek. "Steve! Stevie! Come on! It's Sunday! Your grandfather will be here in a minute! You have been nagging me all week . . . and now I can't get you away from this book! Can you hear me?"

She plants herself in front of me, her summer dress with fading forget-me-nots and her stained linen apron still smelling of the chicken cutlets she was frying. Her wavy chestnut hair is pinned on both sides, with tiny stubborn curls around her forehead. Now she is laughing and trying to yank the book out of my hands in a mock tug. "Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. . . . Come on, get up, you are going to the real sea now! Put on your new shorts. . . . no not these, the blue ones . . . and your cap please. It is hot outside!" And with the back of her palm, she wipes the droplets of sweat from her upper lip.

I do what she says but my movements are dreamlike and slow. I have just sailed from Brooklyn Navy Yard with Professor Aronnax and Ned Land on the *Abraham Lincoln* and discovered that a mysterious sea monster was Captain Nemo's submarine, *Nautilus*. I am stranded there, with Captain Nemo, who reminds me of course of the Count of Monte Cristo (that I have just finished reading), both of them enigmatic noble men with a dramatic past, on a revenge mission. . . .

Pushing through my mental fog, I am trying to come back to Brooklyn, to the house, and to myself, crouched on our worn-out little couch, forming a niche between bookcase shelves, like a cave, perfect for a little person to curl up in with a book. Above my head, there is a small foggy mirror and on the top shelf I keep my books next to a framed photograph of young pretty Mom in a sundress with a bright smile on her tanned face, her hair flowing in the wind, standing on Coney Island boardwalk against the backdrop of Childs, which looks like a palace or a temple adorned with arches and columns.

Every day when I get home from school, I can't wait to get back to my book, to pick up where I left it the day before, but I must eat lunch first. Mom and I sit across from each other at the oval dinner table that is covered by a glossy plastic tablecloth. She puts a steaming bowl of soup in front of me, either my favorite white bean or another one I like that I call "orange soup" (pureed vegetables of a bright orange color from carrots and sweet potatoes). She slices the fluffy white bread from the Jewish bakery that she likes to eat with smoked fish and olives, and we eat in silence for a minute, until I can't hold it in anymore and jump up to grab my book from the shelf. I set it up in front of me, leaning it against the fruit bowl, and pressing the pages from both sides with salt and pepper shakers for stability, so that they don't flip. While I create my intricate read-and-eat construction, I watch Mom from the corner of the eye. She sighs but lets me, saying, "Oh gosh! You won't know what you are eating. . . ." And these are the last words I hear.

Only yesterday I couldn't wait for Sunday to come, for my grandfather, whom I call Sam, to ring our doorbell, as he usually does on Sunday mornings, sporting a clean starched shirt and ironed slacks, his gray wiry hair spiked by the wind. Only yesterday, after I had finished the last Dumas

from the library and had galloped, the wind in my hair, with triumphant Edmond Dantès on his wild horse, justice finally restored in the world, I couldn't wait to go with Sam to Coney Island.

When the book is as thrilling as that Dumas one, I usually get a sucking hollow feeling in my stomach when I finish it, like being hungry and full at the same time. The only thing that makes my separation from a book bearable is a tiny seed of excited anticipation for the next one, just like I feel on Labor Day when the summer is over and school is about to start. Mom doesn't allow me to check out several books, only one at a time, because once I checked out five and missed my piano lesson, did not do my homework, did not make my bed, and lost track of time.

Mom allows me to walk by myself to our branch of the Brooklyn Library where a librarian, a sad deer-eyed Mrs. Cohen, always gives me a friendly nod and a smile. Mom told me she had recently lost her son, my age, who had been run over by a car, and, when I see her, I vaguely feel as if I had something to do with it, although I had never even seen her son. Usually she is the one to go to the stacks to pick out a book for me, but sometimes she allows me to come with her to the Adventure section and even lets me stay there for a while by myself, contemplating my choices. When she leaves, I secretly touch the books with my finger and inhale their magic scent of dust, glue, and of something else that I can't quite name, which has to do with me and with Edmond Dantès, or maybe with the librarian's son. . . .

“Ah,” she says, “Steve, returning Dumas? So Jules Verne is next?” And she pulls out a volume with a huge squid on its cover: *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. “Mobilis in Mobili,” she

reads out loud the caption under the drawing of a cigar-shaped submarine: "Moving amidst mobility—or something like that," she translates.

This is how I "traded" *The Count of Monte Cristo* for *Captain Nemo*, and, well, by Sunday morning I was pretty deep "under the sea."

Mom took off her apron and poured herself another cup of coffee, when the doorbell rang: two sharp silver rings, like tiny apostrophes in Sam's calligraphic handwriting.

"Ah! My wonderful reader!" he exclaimed right from the doorway, spotting me with Jules Verne under my arm. "You will be a writer one day, huh?" Sam winked and gave me a big hearty hug that we call *Ob* in our secret language, short from Russian *obnimayu*, the word for embrace he has been trying to teach me but that I could never pronounce right. He was a big believer in my future in the "republic of letters," as he called it, and he always sang praises to my parents about how precocious I was, and what a wunderkind— but they usually rolled their eyes.

Today he seemed unusually quiet and preoccupied. He murmured a few Yiddish words to my Mom, from which I could hear *gornisht* and *gevald*, and they whispered for a while mixing Yiddish and English. I couldn't help catching a few words here and there as I looked for my hat in the hallway closet. I heard the name "Arthur" quite a few times. Also, "hearings," "blacklisted," and something odd like "non-American" or "un-American," I am not sure. I think I did not hear it right. "Mexico" also came up a few times, and then my grandfather looked in my direction and said to

Mom, whose face had turned gray: “I will tell him today.” And she waved me toward the door: “Just go now. Have a great time in Coney Island.”

It has been our *shtik*, since I was very little and didn't even know how to read, these Sunday outings to Coney Island: the train, the stroll, the beach, the carousel, and lunch at Childs, in a repetitive merry-go-round comforting pattern. On our way there, on the train, and often at lunch, I would beg Sam to tell me about his childhood in Russia, the tales sounding faraway yet familiar, like his chanting Russian-Yiddish accent, his rolling *r* and the hard *g* of his *-ing*. It is strange and almost unimaginable that at some point in his life, he had spoken another language (or rather languages, Yiddish and Russian), had lived his life in a shtetl, and had been a different person—as if unrelated to me, to us, to America, to Brooklyn. . . .

His Jewish name was Shmuel and he grew up in a shtetl in Russia. His family had owned a small grocery stand, but they were *shlimazels*, Sam said, even poorer than their customers. Sam and his siblings had to work all day, taking care of the cow, their most treasured possession, of their vegetable garden, of the house, and of each other. They were always in debt and had to find ways to survive. Once there was a devastating fire and they lost everything.

He was not yet seventeen when he made the decision to go to America. It was right before World War I broke out, a time of chaos, unrest, and pogroms, and Sam knew he would be drafted into the Russian army any day. At the time, recruiters from steamship companies were traveling from shtetl to shtetl to sign up Jews to go to America. They told stories about the “Promised Land,” about its riches and palaces, and the gold and money waiting to be picked up from the streets. They lined

up deals and loans and schemes, but no matter what, there was a deposit to be paid upfront, and an unheard amount of a fifty-dollar entrance fee to be paid to the American government. Sam's family did not have that money. But he got it in his head that he had to leave. He was bold, adventurous, and charismatic. He told me how, after his bar mitzvah, he convinced his religious father to let him attend a Russian middle school in Vitebsk, and he promised him he would sit in class wearing his hat and would not write on Saturdays. He was the only child in the family to attend school beyond heder.

He said that by the time he was a teenager, he felt "different," and he suffocated in the shtetl's rigorous Orthodox rules. Once, with his favorite sister Mina, who was so broad-minded that she rode a bicycle, they made havoc among bewildered Jewish kids, claiming that people had originated from monkeys—everybody, including them!

Although, unlike me, he had never read adventure books, he said he heard a call within him, the world calling out for him, telling him to leave. He promised his parents, his brother, and sisters that in a few years, when he was done picking up gold from the streets in America, he would bring them there. The family borrowed from everyone, scraped up the money, and sold their cow and their silver menorah. . . .

My eyes always fill with tears at this part of the story, although oddly, Sam has never told me about the goodbyes. It took him weeks to get to Glasgow with his cardboard suitcase and a pouch on his neck sewn by his mother to hide the money, and then almost a month at sea in the overcrowded steerage of a steamship, where he almost died of dysentery. He was saved by a Good

Samaritan, a Jew from Lvov named Yakov, who nursed him and became his good friend, and they arrived safe and sound at Ellis Island.

In New York he lived in a tenement and took any work he could find—in grocery stores and garment factories, mopping floors, and delivering newspapers. He says he met vultures who deceived him but also lots of kind people who comforted him and helped him, so he was able to survive, completely alone, sometimes crying himself to sleep but never regretting his move. He was a fast learner, and he attended evening classes, got some training, and landed a job as a radio telegrapher. Wireless (radio) was big at the time. He was smart and entrepreneurial, made the right connections, and gradually rose up the economic ladder.

He never forgot his family in Russia, who, he said, were now living in Moscow and Leningrad, but of course he couldn't bring them to America, as he had promised, because borders with the Soviet Union had closed and nobody was let out. But he missed them so badly that sometime after the Bolshevik Revolution, which he believed had transformed Russia into paradise on earth, he got a job on a steamship and sailed back there. He was young and idealistic, he said, and had many Communist friends, including someone named Arthur, whom he admired and who eventually moved to Russia for good.

Sam said with a smile that Communism was very much like Judaism, only with a different God, and that it was contagious among Jews in the Diaspora, who for centuries had been oppressed and absorbing the ideas of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world): harmony, justice, and brotherhood. As Judaism was not sustainable for many of them anymore, Communism became a replacement, he

said: something to believe in, especially during hard times. However when he got to Russia, he saw nothing but hunger, terror, and civil war instead of paradise, and he was followed, interrogated by secret police, and accused of espionage. He would never have gotten out of there alive had it not been for his Russian relatives, some of whom had become big shot Communists, who helped rescue him from being sent to Siberia, “the land of ice and darkness.” He ran for his life back to America, hiding in a pile of coal on a ship. He said that after that escapade he lost his innocence, and that he was not naive anymore about the “Russian socialist experiment.”

“But let's not throw out the baby with the bath water! You know what I mean by that, Steve?” And, as I nodded, I knew that he had mixed feelings, and that he was trying to convince himself, not me. He said that Lenin had died too early, that Stalin had committed horrific crimes, and that I should know, just for the record, that he continued to believe in equality and justice for all.

Sam had had to start life from scratch in America, where, he said, there was no equality and justice either, but there were opportunities and hope. Back in New York, he met my grandmother, a daughter of Jewish immigrants from Romania; they got married and had a daughter, my mother. He and my grandmother went for a visit to Russia in the 1930s, to stay with his sisters and meet their children, but Sam soon realized that he had brought only trouble to his Russian family, and eventually he stopped writing them. He knew nothing about what happened to them during World War II, which devastated Russia, and worried himself sick – worrying if they were alive. He tried to reach out to his friend Arthur who lived in Moscow, and was able to send word to his sister Mina with a famous Soviet singer, Mark Berness, who was on tour in New York.

When we get out of the house, the air is hot and still. My grandfather walks fast, holding my sweaty hand, and we board the train to Coney Island, only a few stops away, until we finally spill out of the train station with the crowd of moms carrying beach bags and umbrellas and dragging their kids with little pails across the street to the beach.

On the boardwalk, I squint at blinding sunshine and sparkling water. Seagulls are wildly crying, fighting for crumbs on the burning sand and lifting themselves up with loud flaps. Kids are running back and forth with their pails, yelling to their somnolent parents, "Look, look!" and pouring water into the burrows they have just dug out. Sweaty vendors are thumping in the sand with their baskets, rhythmically chanting, "Cold soda, cold soda!" and "Hot corn! Delicious corn!"

The cool breeze messes my hair and my legs take off. I am running or maybe I am flying, who knows, and Sam is waving to me from afar, but my happy feet are in the water already, and salty splashes are all over my shins and thighs. On the water's edge, I like to make forts and canals out of wet sandy mud, squeezing it out of my fist like toothpaste from a tube, and then watch stubborn waves lick and misshape them, dissolving footprints, toe prints, finger prints. I stare for a long while at their gradual disappearance, mesmerized by my creations melting without a trace.

I would play and splash there forever, but Sam is unusually restless and motions me out of the water and onto the boardwalk, where I wash my feet at the water fountain and change my shorts behind a towel he holds for me. We would have to skip the carousel today, he says, and I am disappointed, but I understood enough Yiddish this morning to know not to nag him, and we start walking on the boardwalk that radiates heat, salt, and sweat, toward Childs Restaurant.

The sea god Neptune holding his triptych, playful mermaids with curled tails, goldfish and sea horses in the cameos on the facade beckon me inside, into the open arches, a darkish, breezy space. Sometimes, when it is nice and cool outside, usually in early fall, we go upstairs and take a table on the rooftop under the vine-covered pergola, in the fake exotic garden of potted palms and tangerine trees, where, our Coca-Cola gently bubbling, we watch the water, the beach, and the Luna Park colors and sounds changing with each season.

But today is too hot to sit outside, and we enter a spacious hall with a black-and-white checkered floor, white tile walls with huge mirrors, and marble-top tables lined up in neat rows. Waiters in long white aprons, *Childs'* red signature on their tops, move with dignity between the tables and the swinging kitchen doors, holding gigantic leather-bound menus, trays with steaming food, and tall sweaty glasses with drinks. The only jarring color here is the red of the ketchup bottles on the tables.

The windows are wide open and the breeze is gently flipping paper napkins on our table, where, for a moment both Sam and I sit in silence—and then smile to each other, as if in response to the same thought. Lucky, lucky us. Let it stay like this forever. He sighs and is about to speak, but something stops him, and the moment is gone with our drinks' bubbles, and we proceed to study the menu, as if we are about to order a new dish this time, instead of the usual chicken croquettes for me and the roast beef on rye with coleslaw for him. While we wait for the food, I mention *Nautilus'* ingenious cuisine, made entirely out of local marine produce, including the "sauté of unborn octopus," and we both marvel at Jules Verne's imaginative vision of life in nature and his

scientific utopia, which would free the human world of power battles, bloodshed, and injustice. “I hope you do take on writing,” Sam says. “It would be *tikkun olam* as well—healing the world—if nothing else works. . . .”

My croquettes are crispy and tender, as usual, and I think I still have room for dessert: Childs’ famous butter cakes, spongy with maple syrup dripping into a puddle on the plate. We will take some with us, too, in a doggy bag, along with an extra order of chicken croquettes to go. For Mom—it is her favorite, too.

Sam is quiet on our uneventful train ride back, and my mind is already with Captain Nemo who is waiting for me back home. This time Sam doesn't go upstairs with me, as he usually does, but hands me the doggy bag, gives me an *Ob*, and waits outside the front door until he hears me walk into the apartment. Dad is still not back from his trip and Mom is in the kitchen, slicing carrots in incredibly perfect circles with a rhythmic tap-tap of her favorite knife. She takes the bag from my hands and raises her head for a minute, one eyebrow cocked, as if she wants to ask something—but doesn't—and I run to the living room where I curl up at once in my “cave” with Jules Verne.

It is safe and cozy and I breathe in the delightful salty beach scent on my skin, until my eyelids grow heavy, and the book slips out of my hands with a thump, as the submarine comes to a full stop. I am cradled by the rhythmic splashes of waves against the steel, and the *Nautilus* slides down or maybe melts like my sand forts. I hear from afar voices of the crew, who speak a mysterious language invented by Captain Nemo, which turns out to be a mixture of Yiddish, Russian, and English. The captain himself, with spiked wiry hair, like my grandfather's, is standing on the deck

of the submarine, which is slowly descending into the infinite ocean, somehow unaware and unperturbed by the impending disaster. I want to scream and ask *why why why*—but no sound comes from my throat.

For the next few evenings an unusual commotion goes on in the house: my parents whisper to each other and into the phone, covering their mouths and the receiver, furtively looking at the walls, and at some point I hear Mom's muffled crying in the bathroom. On the kitchen table, a crumpled copy of the *Forward* is folded and unfolded *Childs closed: Going down with Coney island*. On the front page, I spot a headline on the bottom: *Another communist agent*—but at that moment Mom walks in the kitchen, her eyes red and tired. "Your grandfather had to leave. He is in Mexico. We don't know for how long. I am so sorry, Stevie."