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GRACE STANLEY

a novel

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time — 1943, wartime

place — Dayton, Ohio, near the Army air base at Wright Field

characters — women without men, men without women

Chapter 1

She Opens Her Door

“Captain! You’re scaring me out of my wits.”

“I apologize, Ma’am. I’m not trying to scare you.”

“Don’t you know what a woman fears -- when an officer knocks on her door? How could you not know?”

“Oh. You mean, if somebody was killed in action, and the government wanted --”

“My husband’s in the South Pacific on a destroyer,” she said trembling. She couldn’t catch her breath.

“But if he’s in the Navy,” the captain protested, “why would I --”

“How many times do you think I’ve imagined his ship going down?”

“But I’m in the Army Air Corps. Why would I come here and --”

“Obviously there’s no Navy around here,” said Grace. “Are there destroyers in the Miami River?” she demanded.

“That little shallow river?” the captain said trying to keep up.

“So I thought, if Douglas was killed the Navy would call the Air Corps and send somebody to notify me.”

“But I’m just a billeting officer.”

“How am I supposed to know what that means?” she said still half terrorized and half furious.

“I was trying to explain,” said the captain.

“Yes, you wanted a room, but does this look like a rooming house?”

“No Ma’am. We don’t pay rent. We need temporary housing for pilots and bombardier-navigators. It’s my job to search for big houses and good families willing to take in a few officers -- educated, clean-living lieutenants and captains -- till we can build enough housing at the Field -- but now we -- you know, we’re building like mad but we need -- for a few men --”

“Yes, yes. Clean living, educated -- I bet! Don’t just stand there, come in.”

Now she understood. Her neighbors Nancy and Keezee were already giving rooms to pilots.

He entered. Name: Captain Foster. Job: billeting US Army Air Corps pilots. Station: Wright Field, Dayton, Ohio. Date: September 1943: wartime.

“How many bedrooms do you have not in use?” Captain Foster asked.

“Two,” she said, “and one bath. Now that you’ve taken off your hat I think I know you.”

“I was the broker that showed the house next door when the Humphreys sold it to Dr. Brennan. I know the history of this house too. Built in 1929, stood vacant through the Depression, finally sold for a song to Mr. Hatch, who sold it to your husband for a handsome profit after the war started in Europe. The war has been good for business.”

“Wonderful. And you are --”

“Ted Foster.”

Smiling, she extended her hand and said: “Grace Stanley. Do you want to see the bedrooms?”

“Please,” said Captain Ted Foster.

Grace thought: “Why couldn’t Douglas have gotten a job with the Air Corps right here in town?” Douglas on a ship -- ridiculous! He had never seen an ocean in his life. And why was she showing her bedrooms? She wasn’t enthusiastic about picking up wet towels and so forth that some unknown pilots would scatter all over her house.

Grace Stanley and Captain Foster mounted the stairs, a wide flight carpeted in burgundy, with walnut panels on the right and a sturdy hand-rail on the left. Grace showed the captain the two spare bedrooms and bath. A third bedroom served her two sons, Douglas Junior, age fourteen, and Little Phil, age nine. The master bedroom, a kind of suite set apart from the rest of the upstairs, where she slept, had its own bath.

Captain Foster commented that two pilots could share one of the spare rooms and a third could take the other, the one over the garage that had been the maid’s room before the war. Grace Stanley acknowledged that this was indeed possible but cautioned: “I haven’t decided anything.”

To help her along Captain Foster said the roomers would bring their own towels, sheets and pillows, but it would help if she could provide blankets. He said the men would be picked up in the morning and returned in the evening by an Air Corps bus, and they would eat their meals at the Field and take their laundry there.

“They are men of good character,” the captain assured her, “commissioned officers, gentlemen. The commission itself begins: ‘The President of the United States, reposing special trust and confidence in -- Joe Doaks or whoever he is --’ and they are subject to military discipline. We yank’em out at the first sign of trouble.”

Grace Stanley was asking herself: “What kind of trouble is he talking about?” She hesitated. She was thinking of her husband Douglas. Would he be jealous? “I don’t know,” said Grace doubtfully.

“You’re not alone, are you?”

“I just showed you, my sons sleep in that room.”

She and Captain Foster were standing in a foyer measuring about ten by ten, with four doors opening in four directions -- to the bath, to her sons’ room, to the master bedroom and bath, and to a closet.

“These men, like your husband, are serving their country,” the captain ventured to remind her.

Grace looked at him in exasperation but he went on:

“We are losing many -- scores -- of heavy bombers over Europe. The Germans have a terrific antiaircraft capability and hundreds of fighter planes, and our fighters cannot escort the bombers all the way to their targets in Germany.”

Grace knew this; everybody in America knew it.

“The loss rate,” the captain continued, “of our heavy bombers flying missions out of England to occupied Europe and Germany, is awful.”

Grace said: “But if somebody were living in my house he would not be flying all the way to Germany.”

“No,” the captain conceded, “but some of our guys are being ordered to Eighth Air Force, and Eighth is bombing Germany.”

He looked around, checked the bathroom again and opened the closet. It contained shelves of towels and blankets and an upright wooden box with a sloping lid. He lifted the lid and looked down as if he expected to find something interesting.

“That’s the laundry chute,” Grace explained, irritated at the way he was nosing around.

Turning to Grace he said: “If you decide to take two or three of these -- brave --”

“Captain, I understand,” said Grace Stanley.

The captain wrote his phone number in a notebook, tore out the sheet and handed it to Grace, saying: “For the war effort, Mrs. Stanley.”

“Don’t do it!” her friend Nancy cried.

“I’m thinking about it,” said Grace with defiance and uncertainty in her voice.

“No no no! Don’t let those bozos loose in your house. A woman’s house is her castle.”

“You’ve got two -- bozos,” Grace spluttered, “in your own castle.”

“And I have Aunt Polly to protect my reputation.”

“Aunt Polly, the one who’s completely deaf?”

“So what? She lends an air of respectability, and anyway I’m a dowdy mouse. You, on the other hand, my dear girl, are a number.”

“I am not a ‘number.’ I’m more conventional than you are, if the truth be known.”

“Men look at you and drool,” Nancy said.

“How sloppy.”

“Didn’t your mother teach you that a woman’s reputation is precious and irreplaceable?”

“Nancy, you are talking nonsense.”

“Someday the war will come to an end,” said Nancy, ignoring this, “and you’ll still be living in this town and people will remember.”

“Remember what? Nothing. And since you’re so proud of your logic-machine mathematical brain, listen to the logic on my side. First, I love Douglas. Second, love is my shield against temptation. If I see a heroic aviator with huge terrible shoulders and a toothy smile I just crouch behind my shield and I’m safe as your Aunt Polly.”

“You left something out,” said Nancy.

Grace waited to be instructed.

Said Nancy: “You have confessed to me that you were seldom -- pleased — by your husband -- and I suspect that ‘seldom’ means never.”

“Which I told you in strict confidence,” Grace shot back. “I reveal an intimate fact to a friend and this is --”

“I have honored your confidence,” Nancy interrupted, “but I seem to remember something about an ‘arid’ life -- really poetic stuff. And don’t get so excited. I don’t mean anything technical.”

This was a narrow escape for Grace, who had used the word to mean exactly what she said it didn’t.

Crossing the old pasture at a faster pace than usual she was thinking: “Never tell anybody anything. They use it. Friend or foe, they throw it back at you. But wait: I’d tell Keezee anything -- or ask her any question.”

At a level beneath language she was thinking that Keezee (Kelly Suzanne Smith, her other close friend) was just as predictable as Nancy. The difference was that Nancy was always right because she never took a chance, and Keezee was generally wrong or maybe just reckless.

“I know what she’s doing and of course it’s wrong, and I’d never do it myself, but she adds drama to my life just by letting me guess what she’s up to.”

The three women -- Grace, Keezee and Nancy -- lived within a radius of half a mile on land that had been a farm until the 1920s. A developer had cut streets through the rolling terrain and installed the infrastructure of a neighborhood, but had never built the houses. The Crash of 1929 had ruined his market, and now a half dozen large, handsome houses stood isolated in the midst of old hayfields and undulating pastures, where scattered maples and hickory trees had once provided the cattle a refuge from the summer sun.

Nancy and Grace had been classmates in high school and at Ohio State. Nancy went to the school of education while Grace took liberal arts. Nancy’s big interest was math and Grace read literature. After getting her teaching certificate Nancy taught for three years until she married Bob, an electrical engineer, now a captain in the Signal Corps. She and Bob tried to start a family but with no result. When the war came and the high school began losing male faculty the principal asked Nancy back. She was now teaching algebra and trigonometry.

The third in their trio, Keezee, lived within a five-minute walk of Grace Stanley’s house. She was a new arrival in town, having come with her husband Harold, who worked at NCR until Pearl Harbor. He was now on an admiral’s staff in the South Pacific. Harold and Grace’s husband Douglas were in the same theater of war but the women never knew where either man

was. The three wives were great walkers, especially in the fall when the air turned cool and the leaves gave up their green for russet and gold.

Keezee lived in a half-timbered house on a wooded site.

Gathering her coat closer Grace rang the bell. The door opened and Keezee broke into a smile and said, "I know what you want. 'Let's take a walk,' right?"

"Right," said Grace. "On with your coat."

"But I'm feeling lazy. I even look lazy. Just passed a truth-telling mirror. So can we have a cup of coffee?"

Keezee rummaged around and came up with a plate of crackers and two cups of coffee that was mostly chicory.

"My roomers are supposed to liberate a pound of coffee for me," Keezee said, "but they let me down again."

Grace's mind lunged off its leash and she saw a pilot lowering a naked woman on to a bed. The woman of course was her friend.

Grace asked: "Do you think fantasies are dangerous?"

"Oh God, Mrs. Stanley!"

"Well do you?"

"Oh God, oh God, oh God!"

Contemplating this "answer" Grace decided she could move to a bigger question. "Do you remember," she ventured, "when they went overseas, when we asked ourselves if we could live without them? And we said if it was necessary we could do it."

"Yes," Keezee recalled, "our big tell-all. How could I forget?"

"Well," said Grace, "I find it very difficult."

"And I find it impossible," said Keezee.

"But you are doing it."

"Am I?"

"There it is, the confession at last," Grace thought. Aloud she said: "I believe some marriages are good enough to make us -- to keep us honest, and some are bad enough to free us." Grace was searching for a way to express her question other than a straightforward: "How good is your marriage?"

"O.K.," Keezee said impulsively, "I'll ask you a question."

Grace looked up in surprise. The woman she saw had turned red, her Irish coming to the fore, and her bosom rising visibly with her next breath.

Keezee put her question: "Did you come here to warn me?"

"Warn you of what?"

"You are my friend, I know that," Keezee said, "maybe my only friend, and I think you care about me."

"Yes I do," said Grace.

"So -- what are people saying?"

"What is who saying?" Grace said trying to figure out a response.

"Jeepers, Grace, just answer the question."

"No, I'm serious," Grace insisted. "Different people are saying different things."

"The gossips, the self-righteous prigs. That group. What are they saying?"

"But why should you care?"

"I shouldn't," Keezee admitted, "but I want to know their names."

"They say you are having a good war," Grace admitted.

"That's a lie."

Grace sat in silence.

"But you believe it," Keezee realized. "Your eyes at least are truthful."

Grace lifted her eyes fearlessly and met Keezee's -- blazing eyes -- and thought she was seeing the price of freedom displayed in those hurt blue eyes.

"You believe it," Keezee repeated grimly, "and yet you're my friend."

"I am, and therefore I don't care what they say."

"Bravo!"

"I envy you," said Grace.

"You must be laboring under some illusion then, that I live in a state of intoxicated bliss or something."

"Maybe I am," Grace said."

"Would you care to describe it? Do you dare to describe it?"

"My illusion, you mean? I see you as a free woman. If I'm wrong, tell me. By 'free' I mean --"

"I know what you mean," Keezee declared and rose from her chair as from a hot seat.

They were in soft chairs in the living room, a sunken, elegant party space walled on one side by leaded glass windows giving on a back yard where several giant old elms still survived. At the far end of the room a pair of french doors opened on a glassed-in porch.

Keezee paced around like a lioness and Grace observed a strongly shaped body, “every inch a woman” -- and as she turned toward Grace Stanley she -- her lips and her eyes, her flushed complexion -- looked aroused and brave.

Coming closer, bringing an aura of the French perfume she had been eking out since the war started, Keezee said:

“Some people seem to forget that these men are under threat of death. Well I know it, and if I am free to do what I think is my right, then I’m free to choose my friends.”

Grace hesitated as if to soften disagreement and said: “I can’t live in a certain way because somebody is threatened with death. Douglas is too.”

Keezee stood over her, evidently thinking.

Grace almost said she had to govern her conduct by the rule of loyalty. Instead she said: “So much depends on your marriage.”

Keezee resumed her seat and began moving objects on the coffee table till she found cigarettes and a lighter. She did all this without looking at Grace.

Grace began: “If marriage is a bond of love, which it’s supposed to be, not a trap, a prison --”

“Is your marriage a trap and a prison?” Keezee asked sharply.

“Not at all,” Grace said hastily. “I’m speaking of possibilities. Maybe of your marriage.”

“Mine! I never said ‘trap’ or ‘prison.’”

“Isn’t that pretty much what you meant?”

“No. It’s nothing so glamorous as that. It’s a perfectly all-right marriage.”

“That’s what I mean by a trap,” said Grace.

Walking home Grace had a new idea. At first it seemed too clever but after weighing it she decided it was true. The idea was that her husband’s absence was not radically different from his presence. As to physical love she had been a virgin on her wedding night and in one sense she

still was. Lovemaking for Douglas was a one-man exercise, for which, naturally, he needed a woman's body, but he did not need her person.

There was a letter in the mailbox and she read it with an avid hunger. It offered the usual professions of love and assurances that he was safe. And it left her unchanged. She regretted having let the words "trap" and "prison" escape her, as if she were blaming Douglas. More, she blamed herself. But she could trust Keezee. Keezee would never throw her words back at her. She wanted to go back and say that Douglas was a good man, that he loved her, was a great father to the boys -- was faithful --

"He is good," she said in her mind, and her eyes burned. "I love him."

She entered the house and laid out "war cookies" -- chocolate-chip without the chocolate -- for her boys, and poured two glasses of milk.

Closing her eyes she saw a menacing destroyer piercing gray rolling waves in the Pacific night. She thought: "Come home!"

Chapter 2

The Listener

With his little brother safely asleep Douglas Junior opened the door leading to the hall foyer and looked to the left. A bar of mellow light shone under his mother's door indicating that she was reading in bed. The little night-light plugged into the wall next to her door sent its faint illumination across the surface of the carpet.

Douglas Junior pulled the door closed behind him and stood still. -- The bar of light, the point of light, his mother, the stillness and darkness behind him, his brother.

He crossed the space, entered the closet and silently closed the door. Reaching out in the darkness he placed his hand on the edge of the wooden structure that enclosed the metal laundry chute. Lifting the lid he encountered a masculine mix of beer smell and cigar and cigarette smoke. Ugly but bracing. He looked two stories down into a jumble of clothes half lighted and shadowed by the light bulb in the ceiling between the laundry hamper and the furnace. The bulb -- if the pilots hadn't moved their card table from where Doug Junior had dragged it -- would be directly over their cards. He had seen movies of men gathered around a card table, arguing, cursing, drinking, smoking. Now he heard the *chink* of a half-dollar landing in the pile of coins in the center of the table. He set the scene -- five or six pilots, whiskey glasses and beer bottles, cards, money, ash trays, cigars, cigarettes -- voices.

"A half-dollar and raise you a half-dollar." Doug Junior didn't recognize the voice. It must be a man from a neighboring house, maybe Nancy's or Keezee's.

Doug waited while the furnace wheezed, smothering the conversation. When it resumed he recognized three voices -- Blake Allen, Zack Jarman and Wes Welles -- who roomed in this house. They were talking poker -- pushes, raises, calls and so on -- so he didn't much care. He waited for sex or war.

He heard "deep penetration," which meant a delay-fused bomb, but the laughter and shouting made him suspicious, and so did:

"For depth, man, you go up."

Was this sex or war?

"Up, up and away. Nothing can stop the Army Air Corps."

Halloos, chuckles and guffaws.

Then came Zack Jarman: “I got a buddy in artillery that told me they do a sensing before they make an adjustment, and the sensings are ‘air burst,’ means you’re too eager, ‘hair burst’ means you’re getting close, and ‘target’ means you’ve got deep penetration.”

“And she hollers,” somebody added.

“Up, up and away!”

“Will you please deal?” This was Wes Welles, a nice guy, you could tell just by looking at him. Wes Welles had a wife and baby in Pittsburgh.

The other two roomers, Blake Allen and Zack Jarman, were not married. Doug Junior knew nothing about the two or three from other houses but he felt he knew Blake Allen.

By his own admission Blake Allen had been a paper shuffler at GM before he joined the Air Corps. But Doug Junior had thrown a football with Blake, and the man flung a flat spiral and did it without effort. When Doug asked if he had played football in college he said, “Yeah, frat ball, no big deal.” He told Doug to fade, and Doug ran all the way from the victory garden to the road, where Blake Allen hit him with a perfect strike.

But Zack Jarman was a puzzle. He imitated voices and accents. You could never tell who was behind the dialects. Right now he was talking British. “I say, I say old chap, do you fancy her?” And he answered himself with an old geezer’s rasp: “Awv caws I do. She’d be a fine piece, matey, that’n would. Have you seen her ahs? Have you observed the protuberating eminences half concealed under her pinafore? Tut, tut, she’d give a man a ride, she would.”

This came after a furnace cycle and Doug Junior couldn’t find out who “she” was.

Wes Welles said: “Are you going to take the job?”

Blake Allen answered: “Maybe. Me and statistics are old friends.”

“What job?” Jarman asked.

“G-Two is looking for somebody to work on statistics,” Blake Allen said. Then: “Another dollar or get out, Jarman.”

Grumbling, curses, a few “fucks,” till Zack Jarman said:

“If you take a desk job you might as well be a draft-dodger.”

Blake Allen: “Watch your lip, Jarman.”

“Can we just play the game?” This from Wes Welles, recognizable to Doug Junior by the gentleness, the reasonableness of his tone. Wes Welles was a likable guy, not a “dashing flyboy.”

“Where’s your dollar, Jarman?” Blake Allen demanded calmly.

There was a chink of, maybe, two half-dollars and Zack Jarman said:

“So you know statistics? I hear the loss rate’s five per cent, not too terrible, I’d say.”

“Is that what you’d say?” Blake Allen asked.

“Yeah. I’d be willing take a chance on five per cent.”

“You might be asked to do so,” said Blake Allen.

“So might you,” Zack Jarman retorted, “unless you get a desk job. Are you an expert on statistics?”

“I had a course in business school.”

“One course makes you an expert?”

“Expert,” said Blake Allen, “is a relative term. If I know more than some other people -- for instance you -- I’m an expert.”

“So they give you a desk job for the duration?”

The furnace whirred and puffed, and Doug Junior lost several minutes, till he heard Blake Allen again:

“All I know is ‘bad.’”

For several minutes Doug Junior heard the flutter of shuffling cards and the chink of quarters and halves landing in the pile. Occasionally somebody said “hit me” or “it’s a push,” or some other poker jargon.

He was thinking: “Many will die.” He had read this in the *Dayton Daily News*. He knew, and so did the whole country, that the British-American bombing offensive against the Germans was being prosecuted mercilessly and that the German resistance, like the offensive itself, was “unprecedented in the history of warfare.”

Zack Jarman was singing:

Ven der fuehrer says

Vee iss der master race,

Vee heil! [fart] heil! [fart]

Right in der fuehrer’s face!

This was the greatest song on the radio, and Doug Junior had sung it as his solo in music class. The teacher took him to the principal’s office for a command performance, the only

student so honored. The principal was probably drunk -- he kept a bottle in his rolltop desk -- but he applauded and clapped Doug Junior on the back.

“Many will die,” Doug Junior thought as he listened to:

Ven Herr Goering says

Dey'll never bomb diss place,

Vee heil! [fart] heil! [fart]

Right in Herr Goering's face!

The pilots lived in Doug Junior's mind as he had first seen them, piling out of a staff car, carrying white pillow cases stuffed with bedding, crossing the front yard and entering his mother's house, everybody saying what a beautiful place it was -- and he saw them with equal clarity flying into the puffing, blooming bursts of German flak.

“I'll tell you just how bad if I get the job,” Blake Allen promised.

“You can't,” said Wes Welles. “It's classified.”

“Don't worry, Wes, I'll tell you,” Blake Allen said, then: “It'll cost you half a dollar to stay in.”

“I'm out,” said Wes Welles.

“If you get the statistics job would you quit flying?” The question came from Zack Jarman.

“No, hell no,” said Blake Allen. “It'd be a collateral duty.”

“So you'd still be eligible for Eighth Air Force?”

“I guess. How would I know?”

“But maybe your boss would whine to Washington, ‘Don't take my boy.’”

Said Blake Allen: “Deal the cards and quit worrying about whether I'm a coward.”

Then: several minutes of poker talk, while Doug Junior's mind returned to the flak and attacks of German fighters on American bombers, and to great cascades of black bombs sailing down on Hitler's cruel land.

“You can't touch her,” said the voice of Wes Welles.

“Who says?” From Zack Jarman.

“Her husband's in the South Pacific.”

Doug Junior went cold.

“So?”

“So figure it out.”

“I’ll let her figure it out,” Zack Jarman said.

Wes Welles: “It’d be pretty low, don’t you think?”

Blake Allen intervened: “A stab in the back.”

“She’s available or she’s not,” Jarman insisted. “I don’t decide that, she does.”

“You’re a swine if you take advantage of her,” said Blake Allen, and Doug Junior thought:

“Here comes a fight.”

Said Wes Welles: “Anyway, my guess is she’s not available.”

Blake Allen declared: “She’s clean. Anybody can see that.”

“Take a closer look, buster,” said Zack Jarman. “With a figure like hers -- did you see those ankles? That supernatural ass? Imagine being imprisoned by those legs.”

“I already have,” said one of the voices Doug did not recognize.

“Tits are not for babies, or lips for --”

“By the way, Jarman,” Blake Allen inquired as if courteously, respectfully, “did you call me buster?”

Now Doug Junior was sure they’d fight. Blake Allen’s tone was like a cowboy’s in a movie, who says to a thief, “Funny, that horse looks a lot like mine.”

“Are you calling me buster?” The question came again, but no answer.

“What if I did?”

“Don’t do it again. Call me Blake.”

“O.K. -- Blake. I never called you a draft-dodger. Take the fucking job for all I care.”

“She seems like a nice woman,” Wes Welles said. “She’s giving us a good place to stay. I don’t think we should talk about her.”

“Jesus. A fucking Sunday school,” Jarman complained.

When the game broke up Doug Junior slipped back to his room. There was no light under his mother’s door, just the light night-light plugged into the wall.

His legs twitched, his heart thudded in his chest and sent blood jumping in his ears. His dad had said, “You’re the man of the house now, Doug.”

Chapter 3

Real Coffee

Intending -- according to her new routine -- to put the coffee on the stove before waking the boys, Grace threw a silk robe over her nightgown and opened the door to the hall foyer. She paused, listening at the door to the boys' room. She went down the hall and stood outside the rooms where the pilots were sleeping.

Then came a moment of uncertainty. Ought she to go back and dress? She imagined pulling on her gardening slacks and a sweater, and shoes -- "Too much trouble!" Nobody was awake, and she was after all covered from neck to ankles.

Entering the kitchen she observed six clean glasses standing on the drain board. Feeling inquisitive she went down the cellar stairs to the laundry room. The card table had been moved from its usual place by the wash tubs, where she used it to fold clothes, to a spot closer to the laundry hamper. Three folding chairs, two overturned buckets and a wooden box served as seats surrounding the table. Two ash trays on the table had been emptied and wiped clean. "Gentlemen," she said in her mind. "Possible? Impossible!" Climbing the stairs she was conscious of her strength and health. She did not use the hand rail; she felt a spring in her legs. The crimson robe shifted in the light as her knees rose under the silk.

She set out breakfast utensils for herself and the boys, and plates and cups for the pilots. She lighted the oven, spread hot-cross buns on a metal sheet, slid the sheet into the oven and closed the door. She scooped out ten measures of phony coffee, filled the pot with water and lit the fire.

At that moment she heard a sound, turned, and found herself looking at a strange man. She thought something like "How did he get in?" Then her brain gave the answer in a flash, rather two flashes. He was of course the one called Blake Allen, and the difference was that he was not dressed in a uniform shirt with gold wings and silver bars on it. Rather than looking at a broad chest subdued by military khaki, as she had on the night he arrived, she was looking at -- a broad chest.

He stood there in sharply creased military trousers and a white T-shirt stretched to the limit by his shoulders and pectorals. It jumped into her mind that he was a performer, he was

showing off. “But he has something to show.” She paid him this tribute silently before she said aloud: “You are early, Lieutenant Allen.” Heat rushed to her face and neck; she feared her skin had turned the color of her robe.

He said, “Pardon the shirt. I wanted to catch you before you made the coffee.” He held out a container of Maxwell House, a sight she had not seen in months.

She said: “Thank you, that’s very generous.”

“I can get more,” Blake Allen said.

“That would be a miracle.”

He waved cheerfully and was gone, but his image was not. The whiteness of his shirt, the smile of teeth slightly stained by coffee and tobacco, the striking, limpid blue eyes -- reminding her of Keezee’s -- all this set her mind racing -- somewhere.

She said: “I have to control this,” uncertain what “this” was. Hearing the pot bubbling she shut down the flame and removed the coffee basket from the pot and dumped the phony coffee back into its container. Performing her tasks with concentration, combating an inexplicable excitement, she opened the Maxwell House, inhaled its aroma, then measured out ten servings. She was like a woman who has been struck a rough blow and felt no pain. “Of course,” she said with the thrill welling up her throat, “ -- nothing! Shut up!”

She thought back to the first time she saw him, one of three men in uniform carrying incongruous white bundles across her front yard in the dark. There was the one she now knew as Zack Jarman -- built on a small scale and bent forward, with a face that also bent, somehow, and not quite symmetrical, with small features crowded under a big nose. He was a comedian who talked different voices, so it was hard to decide who he really was. There was Wes Welles, tall, skinny, red face and red hair, a man she understood immediately as gentle and plain. And there was Blake Allen, smiling, confident, the kind who would always be the center of his high school crowd or college fraternity.

They had all stopped just inside the front door and exchanged greetings with Grace and the boys. She was watching her sons, the hero worship in their faces.

She made a guess at Blake Allen’s age -- twenty-five, possibly as high as twenty-eight -- in either case several years her junior.

When he handed her the coffee their eyes met. She had looked, and saw that he was looking. It wasn't simply that they had seen one another. It was that his eyes had taken knowledge from hers.

Two scenes were in collision in her mind, the first when the pilots brought in their bedding, and this one. She realized that she had been reliving, replaying, perhaps with intention, the first scene since the night they arrived, and that this more recent one had already begun an even more brightly lighted performance in the theater of her mind. He was a fine example of a man, so why shouldn't she look? He slept a few yards down the hall from her own bed -- why shouldn't she play with that fact?

She hastened upstairs to wake the boys and to dress.

Zack Jarman was razzing Wes Welles.

"W-w-w-w-welles is a f-f-f-f-fraidy cat. D-d-d-d-death stalks his dreams. D-d-d-d-death!"

Wes Welles, eating a hot-cross-bun, drinking coffee, ignored this. He said to Grace: "This is good coffee, Mrs. Stanley."

"Jolly good beverage, Mrs. Stanley," said Zack Jarman in an approximation of a British accent. "Pip pip. Excellent brew."

"Lieutenant Allen brought it," said Grace, saying the phrase "Lieutenant Allen" for the second time in her life and noticing it.

"Good show, Allen old chap. If the government is going to kill us --" dropping the accent -- "we can steal their coffee. Right, Welles?"

"Jarman," said Wes Welles, "you are not funny."

"Neither is the loss rate," said Jarman. "I mean the l-l-l-l-loss rate. D-d-d-d-down in flames!"

Wes Welles asked: "Do you know what it is? I guess you don't."

"If they told us," Jarman cried rolling his eyes "we'd all volunteer for the infantry."

Doug Junior looked uneasy; Little Phil was puzzled and fascinated. Blake Allen was not interested.

“Flak! Fighters! Aaaargh!” Jarman waved his arms then launched on another tack. “The infantry sleeps in mud. We sleep between clean sheets in Mrs. Stanley’s comfortable brick and stucco home with its noble timbers. We don’t die till later. Right, Welles?” When Welles ignored him he went on: “I heard five per cent, so ninety-five per cent come home to momma. See, Welles,” Jarman rattled on, “the odds don’t get any worse, except on a mission like Schweinfurt. Now that was a horror. But your first mission or your twenty-fifth, the odds don’t change, unless the Krauts get more fighters but they won’t, we’re blasting their factories. Ninety-five per cent’s a pretty good deal if you ask me.”

Blake Allen picked Jarman’s garrison cap from the table and pushed it into his face, where it stuck.

“D-d-d-d-dark!” Jarman cried tilting his head up. “Somebody turn on the l-l-l-l-lights!”

Blake Allen asked Grace if he and his friends from the Field could play football in her side lot on Sunday afternoon. She said they could.

He said to the boys: “You guys up for football?” He rose and said, “Other room, guys. This Jarman’s a Jap spy.”

He led the boys into the kitchen and asked Doug Junior for a sheet of paper, which the boy dug out of his school bag. When Grace came in carrying the empty cups she watched over Blake Allen’s shoulder while he sketched a diagram.

“This,” he said to Doug Junior, “this’ll be, say, Number Twenty-one, odd number. Odd you go right. On a slant from the line of scrimmage, half right, then twist left and I hit you with a pass. Defender’s two paces behind you. Grab the pass, wheel and scat down the field for a touchdown. Got it?”

“Yeah,” said Doug Junior looking full into Blake Allen’s inquiring stare, “Twenty-one, odd, right, twist left.”

“O.K. Twenty-two, even.” He drew a play opposite to the first, with a route slanted half-left and twisting right. He embellished this with a dashed line showing the pass hitting Doug Junior just after the twist.

Turning to Little Phil he said: “I’ll need protection. Anybody comes at me when I’m fixing to pass, you get in his way.”

Little Phil had the look of a confused but brave soldier.

Blake Allen returned the pen to his pocket and shrugged into his leather jacket. He tossed his garrison cap onto his head at an angle. He said to Doug Junior: "The big question is, when do you twist." He virtually took the boy by the eyes, and held him. "Use your judgment. Let the defender keep up with you, then twist away and he'll lag a pace or two behind, then I pass."

"I understand."

"We won't have a chance to practice. Gotta fly the big bird. But when we choose up sides Sunday I'll pick you first. Then you --" to Little Phil. "We'll run a ground game then take to the air. Twenty-one right, Twenty-two left, twist to the center."

He put a hand on Doug's shoulder and gave him the old trusting stare, plus a large toothy grin. Doug held the stare. Blake Allen's eyes were the color of a summer sky. The gold eagle on his garrison cap was a blazing icon of war and patriotism, the cap was bashed up with a "twenty-mission crush," although Blake Allen had yet to fly a single combat mission. He squeezed Little Phil's shoulder.

Turning to Grace he said: "Thanks for the coffee, Mrs. Stanley."

Grace Stanley replied, "Thank you for the coffee, Lieutenant Allen." That was the third time.

But apparently he wasn't finished. Still holding Little Phil's shoulder Blake Allen said: "You know you're not allowed to use your hands on offense, right?"

Little Phil's features took on a guilty look. He didn't speak, just watched Blake for clues.

Blake Allen said: "When we've got the ball we're the offense, the other guys are defense cause they're defending their goal line. They can use their hands blocking but we can't. So you play halfback, back near me. The center snaps the ball to me and I'm hoping to pass to your brother but the defenders are roaring after me, so you stop'm."

Little Phil nodded gravely.

"O.K., how can you do it if you can't grab'm with your hands?" He glanced at Grace as if to ask permission to proceed.

She smiled and Blake Allen said:

"Two things. Say there's a guy charging at me. You throw a cross-body block on him, just throw yourself across him, stop him dead. Now suppose he's some big lumbering hulk ten times as big as you? Gads! Grab your shirt with both hands and flap your elbows and run right

into him.” Blake grabbed his shirt and set his elbows flapping, he squawked like a goose.
 “Slow him down, give me an extra two seconds to find my receiver. Go ahead, try it.”

With a serious, almost fierce expression on his face Little Phil imitated Blake’s action, less the squawking.

“Great!” Blake Allen exclaimed. He smoothed his shirt and checked his aviator’s wings to be sure they were on straight then said: “We’ll slaughter the bums,” addressing both boys.

Little Phil smoothed the wrinkles out of his shirt. He said, “Yeah, we’ll slaughter’m.”

Blake landed a mock punch on each boy’s chest, grinned to their mother and went out the back door.

The boys were ready to leave. Grace kissed each one, then told Little Phil to wait outside for his brother.

To Doug Junior she said: “I understand why you would stare at me.”

Doug Junior went stiff and looked out the door.

“You may ask me any questions you like, and I will try to answer. But you must not stare at me that way, or at any woman.”

“I won’t. Sorry.”

“It’s all right. All men look at women, there is nothing wrong with it. Especially young men, and that is what you will soon be. But to stare at a woman’s body is impolite.”

“O.K. I won’t. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, but remember that when you stare at a woman you embarrass her.”

“O.K., I won’t.”

“You may look!” Grace said laughing and ruffling his butch haircut. “But don’t make a girl self-conscious by gaping. Now go to school and get a hundred.”

She followed him out and stood on the apron of the driveway under the basketball bankboard. She watched her boys as they crossed the east lot and jogged along the path through the old pasture. The wind was chilly but she lingered. When the boys disappeared over a rise she went inside and set about washing the dishes.

Through the window over the sink she could look out to the east lot and imagine Blake Allen passing to Doug Junior. She could see the ball spiraling in a low arc.

Another spiral began spinning in her mind, taking the form of a drama. Each beginning was new and different from the last, but the middle was the same, leading every time to the same climax.

At first she struggled to stop this illicit activity. While she was vacuuming the carpet she stopped to observe it more closely, the “play” -- and if the vacuum cleaner was still running she didn’t know it. Vision, hearing and the primary sense, touching, were fully occupied.

Was she the author of this play or an innocent spectator? Or -- a player, a stage actor -- or -- both author and player -- or -- the woman in the play. Her senses gave the answer.

Chapter 4

Facts and Figures

Blake Allen's first assignment at G2 was to create a chart of heavy-bomber losses over Germany. He mined the raw data for ten numbers: the loss rate by the month through September of the current year and the loss rate year to date, which he derived by taking the average of the nine monthly numbers. His chart would form the basis of a time line superimposing sortie losses on a set of variables to be determined by the 2 staff.

Blake hadn't quite finished this work when dinner time came. He went to the mess hall, ate, drank a cup of bitter coffee, and decided he'd continue working. The Old Man's aide had arranged a ride for him in case he missed the bus to Mrs. Stanley's house.

It was simple math but there was plenty of it, and he didn't fold up his chart and lock it in his safe until seven in the evening. He got his ride and tried to talk with the driver but it didn't work. He wasn't interested in light conversation -- or heavy conversation.

He couldn't be sure he was bound for 8th Air Force or that the figures he had generated would ever apply to him, but it didn't seem likely he'd spend the entire war living in the fine house of a fine woman and playing football and poker.

He entered the house by the kitchen door and stood for a moment looking around. His right hand jiggled coins and keys in his pocket -- including the key to this house. He surveyed a kitchen that was perfectly neat. Three towels hung in folded rectangles on the handle of the oven. He took them in hand one by one; two were damp. He imagined Mrs. Stanley wiping dishes then folding the towels precisely and draping them over the handle. Next he saw her sons drying the dishes while she washed, and he dwelt on this for a moment. His mind was creating these images against a background of probability numbers. He crossed the kitchen and stood by the door in the hall that opened on the cellar stairs. Hearing the voice, among others, of Zack Jarman he decided against joining the game.

He went out and began walking at a fast pace, hoping to work the bugs out of his legs and brain. He'd been confined all day, first in the cockpit of a B17 then at his desk in the 2 Shop. He

looked up to infinity. He found Polaris, confirming his guess that the road here ran east and west. So like “stout Cortez” he had reached up into the unknown to find his way in this little patch of earth. His mind trotted down a familiar path to the cliché that the stars in their magnificence reduce men and women to nothing that really matters. We die as we live, without consequences in the immensity. But Blake Allen had never conceded that his life was meaningless.

Pressing forward, challenging his stale muscles, he felt a surge at his heart, knowing that those muscles and his brain were mortal, but the stars and their realm of darkness thrilled him. A man couldn't live ten seconds in that lightless void.

When he turned back toward the house and stood again at the top of the cellar stairs he was thinking: “Impossible to read or listen to the radio.” Two or three hands of poker would at least pass an hour. But Jarman's chatter turned him back. He did not want to mix his numbers with Jarman's voice. Walking hadn't worked; nothing would work. At the same time he knew that tomorrow would be a day like any other.

He said in his mind: “You can't live like this --” in this pit. If the number were twice as bad he'd still have to climb out.

He thought of his ex, Eva Dybek, the woman he had once believed he would marry, when that belief had shaped the future. Her image rose before his eyes but nothing changed. He could call up her face and body at will, hear her voice, and nothing changed. “Get out of this pit.”

He would go up to his room and try to read Zane Grey. As he started to mount the stairs he heard Mrs. Stanley's voice from the living room, and the voice of a man.

He strode into the living room and saw a naval officer's hat and raincoat on the couch -- the brilliant gold eagle and the crossed silver anchors, the gold leaves of a lieutenant commander on the epaulettes.

His entry stopped the conversation and two ideas crossed in his mind, that her husband had come home and that this guy was taking the husband's place.

They were standing by a map of the South Pacific mounted on an easel; the map was dotted with little paper flags.

Blake thought it couldn't be the husband. “They'd be upstairs.”

Acting as if he owned the place Blake put out his hand and announced his name. The Navy man replied:

“I'm Bill Fleming.”

They shook hands, a firm but noncompetitive handshake, and Blake apologized to Mrs. Stanley for interrupting.

She said: "Mr. Fleming will be sleeping on the couch until Captain Foster can find him a room."

Blake Allen thought she looked nervous. He listened for a shake in her voice.

"I'm afraid I gave Mrs. Stanley a scare," the lieutenant commander said.

"I saw his uniform," she explained, "and thought the worst." And her voice was trembling.

"She thought the Navy had sent me with bad news," Bill Fleming said.

"I'm a little jumpy. You know my husband is on a destroyer in the South Pacific."

Blake nodded. He knew that.

"And Mr. Fleming was just telling me what destroyers do."

"One of their jobs," Bill Fleming said, "is to protect vital ships from attack by Jap submarines." He touched the fingers of both hands together, forming an arc. "The main body," he said, "usually an aircraft carrier, a tanker and maybe one or two other big ships, maybe a battle wagon --"

"Big guns," Blake Allen broke in.

"Sixteen-inch guns, projectiles that can fly sixteen miles and penetrate twenty feet of reinforced concrete. Anyway," Bill Fleming continued, "the main body steams in the center of the formation and the destroyer screen surrounds it, or forms an arc in front of it. The destroyers search ahead and to the sides with sonar -- Sound Navigation and Ranging -- waves of sound that echo back if they hit a solid, a whale, a reef or a submarine. It's not perfect but it does complicate the Japs' problem, and we are winning over there, decimating the Jap submarine fleet."

Glancing at the little marching flags Blake saw that they formed a spear aimed at the Japanese Home Islands.

Mrs. Stanley, also looking at the map and flags, turned to Bill Fleming and asked: "Who do they aim at?"

Blake Allen noticed the two-and-a-half gold stripes on Fleming's sleeve, the dark, dark blue cloth of his Navy "blouse," with its shining brass buttons in two vertical rows.

Bill Fleming said: "You mean -- the Japs?"

“Yes, who do they aim at?”

Blake thought: “The lady is nervous.”

“If they have a choice,” Bill Fleming responded, “I suppose they’d go for the carrier. The battle wagons are heavily armored and one torpedo might not be enough. I’d say the carrier or a fleet oiler. You can imagine the effect if they hit an oiler.”

“No I can’t,” Grace Stanley contradicted. “What ‘effect’?”

Her question or her tone knocked the lieutenant commander off balance. He said with care as if hoping it wouldn’t hurt her feelings: “A fleet oiler carries aviation gasoline, NSFO, Navy Standard Fuel Oil, flammables --”

“The effect then is -- explosion, fire.”

“Yes, Mrs. Stanley.”

“And if they hit an aircraft carrier?”

He answered with the same reluctance: “A carrier is packed with avgas, bombs, rockets.”

“So -- disaster.”

“Possibly,”

Unwilling to let it alone she asked: “Do they ever aim at destroyers?”

“I think if they hit a destroyer it’d be an accident. It got in the way.”

“In the way,” she surmised, “of a torpedo aimed at a ship in the main body.”

She was driving toward the truth whatever it might be.

“Yes,” Bill Fleming said uneasily.

“You seem to be saying the destroyers place themselves between the main body and the submarines.”

“They have to, if they’re going to do their job.”

“I see. The main body is more important,” Mrs. Stanley said.

“In purely military terms, I suppose, yes.”

“What other terms are there?”

“The military problem, the military calculus,” Bill Fleming began --

“Says it must be so,” she finished his sentence.

“The whole system is set up to bring maximum force to bear on the enemy. In the case of a naval task group the carrier, the battle wagons and the fleet oilers represent maximum force. If you’ve got marines, add in the APAs, the troop ships.”

“All of them,” Grace said, “more important than the destroyers.”

“In purely military terms, yes,” Fleming repeated and cast a glance at Blake Allen, maybe a call for help.

Grace Stanley turned to Blake and said: “So there are no other considerations, only military ones. Is that it, Lieutenant Allen?”

And he said: “That’s it.”

He watched as she turned again to the naval officer and said: “I warned you I’m feeling jumpy. Excuse me while I go up and get your bedding.”

The two men looked at each other as if to suggest that somebody should sum it all up, but neither did.

Blake said to Bill Fleming: “Will you join our poker game?”

But the lieutenant commander passed, and Blake went to the basement to kill an hour.

Doug Junior said, “Can I ask Blake to help me with the math?”

She said, “You mean *may* I ask him. The answer is no. Blake is with his friends.”

Doug Junior persisted, “Blake’ll help me.”

Little Phil joined in: “Can I ask him too?”

“No,” said Grace. “I will help you both.”

“Blake knows this stuff,” Doug Junior argued. “He’s a pilot.”

“I know this stuff too,” Grace said.

Later she read “Robin Hood and His Merry Men” in which Robin and Little John fought the sheriff of Nottingham and his ruffians. Little Phil explained that his namesake, Little John, was actually big. They fought a mass battle with quarterstaves. The boys asked her to read it through twice. Robin’s crew laid the villains low and even knocked the sheriff into a pond.

Little Phil made a solemn prediction: “Friar Tuck will pray for the sheriff.”

“He’s not dead,” Grace assured the boy, “just stunned.”

“Well --” Phil hesitated, “didn’t they smote his head asunder?”

This harked back to a story of knights in sword fights. Grace had been unnerved to hear herself reading an account of a good knight severing the head of an evil one.

She explained that a quarterstaff was a heavy stick tipped with iron, and that you smote somebody’s head asunder with a sword.

Doug Junior instructed his little brother: “Friar Tuck won’t pray for him cause he had it coming.”

Little Phil clarified the situation by declaring that Robin and Little John did not have guns. “Daddy has a gun,” he said, and Grace saw an image of the great guns on her husband’s destroyer. She had traveled to San Diego to bid Douglas farewell. Now she saw his ship again — and again — plying a black ocean.

She put the boys to bed, then took blankets down to the living room and dropped them on the couch. The naval officer was reading alone.

He rose and thanked her. She bade him goodnight and went back upstairs.

She couldn’t sleep or even lie still. The terror came rolling back, of seeing a man in naval uniform standing on her porch. Her mouth went dry and she could barely close her hand over the door handle. She opened the door and saw he was smiling -- and she felt a panic confusion. Why should he smile?

He asked: “Are you Mrs. Douglas Stanley?”

Weakening in her knees she said she was.

The officer asked: “Do you have room for one more?”

And then, while her nerves tried to recover -- there came all that talk of screens and sonars and torpedoes; and Blake Allen showing up as if somebody had summoned him.

There could be no harm in just thinking about a man. She whispered: “Blake Allen. Lieutenant Allen. Blake.” To see him and not think about him was not possible. So she didn’t try to stop. To whisper the name “Blake” was to feel a tremor. Next she’d be gazing at that stretched white undershirt and the half-ironical smile on his lips as he ingratiated himself with a can of coffee. But so what? If all this “thinking,” this “play,” couldn’t go anywhere, what was the problem? “It can’t go anywhere so I am free.”

“No!” she exclaimed. “This is not safe. This is giving way.”

Chapter 5

Sound Effects

Doug Junior was outgrowing some of the serials on the radio but his head was still a library of significant noises -- the marching feet of the convicts on “Gangbusters,” the “thundering hoofbeats of the great horse Silver” on the “Lone Ranger,” and the roar of airplane engines on “Wings of Destiny.”

So when a familiar noise came up the laundry chute he knew, he saw, exactly what it signified. It was like a T-bone steak thrown against a plaster wall, meat and bone striking meat and bone, somebody getting smacked in the face by a fist -- and a table being overthrown, beer bottles and glasses breaking on a cement floor, half-dollars and quarters and poker chips flying, and one single human sound, a grunt -- but a grunt of a special kind, a victim’s shock, protest and pain in one syllable.

Doug Junior had missed some of the prelude in the cycling of the furnace but had heard enough to get the main features. At first they were talking about the odds of going down over Germany. Blake Allen was notably silent while Zack Jarman boasted that he wasn’t afraid. An unknown voice said that if he wasn’t worried he must be unconscious.

“I never said I wasn’t worried, I said I wasn’t afraid,” Jarman countered. “What good is fear?”

And Doug Junior thought: “He’s right.”

The next theme Doug Junior could follow was women and sex. Now Jarman was praising a feminine body in explicit terms, not all of which Doug understood. What for example did “poon” mean? Blake Allen was still silent. Doug Junior imagined him gazing at his cards as though he were playing solitaire.

“Hey,” said Jarman to somebody, “take her, she’s yours.”

Wes Welles said, “We are her guests for pity’s sake. Show a little respect.”

Doug Junior started sweating and feeling his own panic heartbeat. He hated Jarman. He was also scared because he realized he had to punish him.

“You think she’s some kind of angel? Did you ever see an angel wiggle an ass like that?”

“You talkin bout my Squeezy?” -- in an unknown voice.

“Hey Man, this babe makes your Squeezy look like a cow.”

“Sounds like you never saw the lady.”

“I never did but you’re forever being smothered between megatitties and so I drew a conclusion -- Mae West in overalls. Now this one, this Lily Landlady, is a babe of a different kind. Good by the cubic inch, Mister Man. She’s so hot she’ll melt your best asset. Lemme put my face between those knockers and --”

There followed a blubbering noise and a sharp “Shut up” from Wes Welles.

But Jarman rattled on: “Calves made out of real muscle. Little square grabbable shoulders. Hair long enough so you can jack her around and --”

“So you saw her calves?” -- from Blake Allen.

“I’m seeing the calves and all the rest of it, including the baby kitten, right now. But look, take her, she’s yours, unless she gives me another come-hither look like she did this morning.”

Unknown: “She gave you a look? I’ll bet.”

“And she’ll give me more than that before I --”

“Jarman, shut up.”

Hearing Blake again sent a thrill of triumph through Doug Junior’s chest.

“Hey Mister Man,” Jarman persisted, “I know top poon when I --”

That was when the sound effects began.

Chapter 6

Aftermath and Prelude

Rushing downhill, Blake Allen slipped in gravel and threw his arms up, saved himself from a hell of a fall, and broke into a run in the downhill dark.

He could see Jarman flying ass over teakettle and hear something like “ghaak.” Maybe he’d broken the guy’s jaw. Next time he saw that crooked little mug it’d be wired up and mumbling “Mmmmmm bbbbb mmmmm.”

“No excuse, sir,” Blake Allen droned in his screwed-up mind as he saw himself standing braced-up in front of a colonel of the Regular Army, a silver-dome authoritarian with diamond eyes, saying: “Lieutenant, you better have a good story or you can throw those wings in the barf bucket.”

He felt the sword hanging by a thread over his military haircut. Work your balls to peanuts in flight school, qualify in the B-17 and then: “Reduced to the lowest enlisted pay grade” and they make you a tail gunner so you get shot full of holes without ever actually piloting the big bird over the Nazi paradise.

The big regret wasn’t that he’d maybe busted Jarman’s flapper but -- “left my best Havana in the ashtray. Hope it didn’t set the house on fire.”

Blake Allen was two dollars in the hole and Jarman was winning big. He kept saying, “Hit me,” and the dealer kept hitting him and he kept racking up nineteens and twenties and twice a twenty-one. Then he started harping on Blake’s statistics job. “You’ll be flying a desk,” he said with disgust.

Blake said, “I already am.”

“Listen, Allen, if I get orders to Eighth Air Force will you come with me?”

“Yeah, Jarman, there’s nobody I’d rather follow into the next world.”

There were six pilots at the table, the three living in Mrs. Stanley’s house and three from neighbors’. Everybody was dying to hear what Blake had learned about loss rates.

Blake Allen said: “I make it six point three per cent.”

“You mean,” said one of the neighbors, “six-point-three planes a month?” This guy was a Briarhopper named Hank and he was the main man spreading the fame of his landlady, who he called Squeezy.

Blake Allen explained, “I wanted the sortie loss rate so I figured the loss rate for each month this year, the rate, not the absolute number, added in the partial figure for October, added up the whole series then divided by ten, as if October was complete, which it’s not, and got the average.”

“So,” Jarman said tentatively, speaking in his real voice, “six-point-three, the obverse is ninety-three-point seven. Meaning -- hey,” reverting to his mocking stutter and clapping Wes Welles on the back, “that ain’t so b-b-b-b-bad, eh W-w-w-w-welles? D-d-d-d-d-death takes a holiday!”

Wes Welles bore this in silence.

Hank said in his Kentucky voice: “I could live with that, yessir. I am one lucky boy. But ya’ll know, I’d sooner stay here with my ole Squeezy.”

“If I had your deal, old chap,” said Jarman in his more-or-less British voice, “I too would have a strong preference for my present accommodations.”

Hank said smiling: “She’s an accommodating lady for sure, Mister.”

Jarman cried: “But! If we’re facing d-d-d-d-d-death, even six per cent, we’re all heroes! -- or will be if we get orders to b-b-b-b-bomb Germany.” He bugged his eyes and wagged his jaw sideways. “M-m-m-me and W-w-w-welles, heroes!”

“This stuff is classified,” said Welles. “We shouldn’t be talking about it.”

“Hell, man,” said Hank, “me and Squeezy talk about it all the time.”

“It’s top secret,” Welles insisted.

“Well, Mister, who cares? See what I mean?” -- Hank talking.

“As a hero I got my rats,” said Jarman. “That there’s redneck for rights. And one is, I can talk all I want about the machine that’s trying to eat my mamma’s baby. The t’other is I got me the kinda rats our neighbor Hank here’s got, the rats and privileges of a hero. This here Hank could be ordered over tomorrow so he gotta have it tonight and I’m sure his big ole Squeezy would agree, eh Hank?”

“Sho would.”

“You face the jagged steel of the fascists, then you got a rat to the caresses of a patriotic hostess. Hank my man, you are entitled to all you can get and I trust it’s plenty. To the hero go the spoils.”

Blake said: “About that six-point-three per cent --”

“Hey Mr. Blake,” Hank broke in, “are you an accountant?”

“I had a statistics course in business school.”

“So statistics is entered on your skill sheet?” Hank asked.

“I guess it is.”

“My skill sheet has W.Z.,” Jarman interposed.

“W.Z.?” Hank echoed. “Work Zone?”

“No sir, womanizer. *Izer* means ‘to make.’ A womanizer makes a woman. He starts with a bashful female with a schoolgirl waist and a supernatural ass, flexible hips, muscular calves, tits like the Titanic and eyes that glow in the dark, and when he’s done his duty with all the aforementioned attributes they have been unified and welded and stupefied, and you got yourself a *woman*, and that’s how womanizers do the izing. It’s on my skill sheet.”

“Well, now you got to find yourself some raw material,” Hank counseled.

“It’s found! It’s right here in this house,” Jarman cried.

Blake Allen said: “Shut up.”

“And I failed to mention,” Jarman added, “that the pussy, or poon if you prefer, must exude the aroma of lilies of the valley. If you detect a different somewhat fishy scent you are working with inferior material. I have, however, ascertained by covert reconnaissance -- in this very house --”

That was the end of Blake Allen’s coherent recollection. Next he was standing over Jarman wiggling on the cement floor, watching the man’s wrinkly little face -- “But damn, my hand, yikes!” Ballooning with pain. And he walked out. It came to him out of a fog, the rifle shot of his right to Jarman’s face, jaw -- head. No wonder his hand felt cracked.

He heard Hank: “Looks like Ole Blake’s got W.Z. on his skill sheet too.”

And he thought: “Now you’ve done it” -- now every man at the table would guess that he was the lover, the protector, the champion (or wanted to be) of his hostess. With one punch he had knocked her into the same category as the woman they called Squeezy.

The wind pressed against his curly black hair -- his eyes watered and his mind raced.

A number kept popping up: 6.3. He wondered if Jarman’s attitude of denial on the loss rate wasn’t half the reason he slugged him. “Jarman, you are an idiot.” — thinking of the number 93.7.

He examined his mind, his heart, wherever fear could lodge, and found there was none in him. A thrill lifted his guts in their cage. Orders! To bomb Germany! Thousands of flak guns -- 88s -- hundreds of fighter planes vectored out from the occupied countries and the Thousand-Year Reich. He felt his brain turn cruel and selfish. He crunched down on the words:

“I’m entitled to take what’s available.” He felt a wild liberation. Jarman was right! The moral law pounded into him since childhood by parents, preachers and teachers was -- gone! You don’t say to a guy, “Hey Buddy, here she comes, Death!” You don’t say that and add: “And no women either. Die, you miserable flyboy, but don’t touch a woman.”

“It’s her decision. The man burns and the woman either throws gasoline on the fire or water.”

He saw Mrs. Stanley stepping into the shower, lifting her leg over the edge of the tub, looking over her shoulder.

So he trudged on, yakking about this housewife with a hubby and two kids and ten years on him. “Not ten. Say, six? Actually pretty fresh.”

He found himself on a flat, curving road flanked by great homes set back on thinly wooded lots. Few of the windows were alight, but enough to send forth silhouettes of stately trees scattered between the road and the houses. Why should a country capable of producing such wealth and such a scene of peace involve itself in the fratricidal slaughter of the European states? If they insisted on chopping each other up, “Go to it.” But why us? Then he thought of England and he knew.

He was aware, acutely, that he was standing under stars, perched on a spinning sphere cloaked in a breathable atmosphere -- stars, earth, breath -- but the philosophy or science shaping this cosmic vision faded in the light issuing from Mrs. Stanley's window. She would reach out a bare arm to turn off the lamp, stare into the darkness thinking of a man. "Her husband, no doubt!" Or possibly --

"Not a chance," he said.

He studied the winter constellations lowering in the sky, the pole star dimly gleaming, the dipper tilted on its side, and he continued on his way. A man crowded for hours in the cockpit of a bomber appreciates a nocturnal stroll. "Even if," he said, "even if the odds over Germany --" He thought of the flak and the interceptors. "If all that rigamarole about being entitled is true -- Take what's available. She is not available!" Approaching the darkened house he searched again for fear in his heart, his guts, his mind.

"I'm in Dayton, Ohio, for Christ's sake. I could spend the whole war right here."

If he did he'd never forgive himself. He resolved to go to the C.O. tomorrow and volunteer for the 8th. He stood in the upstairs hall where doors from the bathroom, the boys' bedroom, the master bedroom and a closet opened into a space illuminated by the little night-light next to her door.

"No," he said, "soon, but not tomorrow."

Blake Allen had led a boring life at GM. His real life began with the war. Why do life and fear go together?

He approached her door and listened, imagining her face in sleep. He saw her resting on her side; he saw the rise in the blanket created by her hip. He saw her as he had first seen her, when he walked through her doorway carrying a pillow case stuffed with bedding. He did not undress her, but saw her now as he had then. She wore a modest button-up black sweater, green-and-black plaid skirt and brown-and-white "saddle oxford" shoes.

She laughed and greeted Blake and his pals as though by coming to live in her house they were playing an absurd joke on the Air Corps. He couldn't remember the color of her hair except that it wasn't blond. The smile. She did not stand in a scene or walk into it, she blazed a feminine light through it.

Later in bed and half asleep he saw the whole punch situation from Jarman's side. "If somebody knocked me down and stood over me daring me to get up and take another one I'd be humiliated for life, or until I got my revenge."

The voice in his mind added: "That's what he'll do. He'll get revenge. He's a coward but cowards find ways."

And probing deeper: "He won't come after me, he's too chicken. He'll do an end run around me."

Chapter 7

Drafted

Grace was thinking about story hour. A fear came breaking into view -- that her boys were being drafted into the enveloping spirit of global carnage. The bedtime sentence they loved best was "He smote his head asunder." Their image of honor and chivalry was a swinging ax decapitating an enemy.

Each at his own level of understanding knew that their pilot-heroes might, as the song said, "go down in flame," but whether they saw this as terrible or glorious, or both, she didn't know. She had an inspiration. A story presented itself complete to her imagination. She said to the boys: "I have a story tonight that is not in the book."

What luck. To suppress her obsession -- her "play" with its irresistible "story" -- she sat down to sketch an outline of the Robin Hood story. This she did, and when she finished she leaned over her desk, held her head in her hands, closed her eyes and saw -- the play in realistic detail.

Robin Hood, Maid Marian and the faithful Little John, walking to their camp deep in the shadows of Sherwood Forest, saw a bundle lying in the trail. It looked like a puppy rolled up in a blanket.

"What's this?" cried Maid Marian.

Said Little John: "Some wicked man has killed a puppy, wrapped its body in a rag and dropped it here."

"No," said Robin bending closer, "it's a baby."

All three crouched down, and Marian lifted the corner of the thin, threadbare blanket. There lay a baby boy no more than a few hours old. It breathed with shallow, rapid breaths.

"The darling child," said Maid Marian picking it up.

Robin said: "Wait. Here's a note." He read aloud: "'I am a helpless babe. Please care for me.'"

Marian opened her cloak and pressed the baby to her warm body. She hurried to the camp and the men followed.

Little John threw pine branches on the fire while Robin Hood went to his hut and returned with his best blanket.

He said to Friar Tuck: "Go to the village as quick as you can."

"Find a wet nurse or a nursing mother," Maid Marian said. "Tell her we have found a little freezing baby whose lips are blue, whose feet are cold. He is surely dying. Quick, Brother Tuck."

"Quick," said Robin.

"Quick," said Little John.

The good monk waddled away on his mission.

"Why did he waddle? What's a waddle?" Little Phil asked.

"Because he's fat," Doug Junior interjected. "Now shut up."

"He may ask questions," Grace admonished Doug Junior. And to Little Phil: "Friar Tuck waddles because he eats too much and never gets any exercise. He is always praying."

"Why are his lips blue?" Phil asked earnestly, as if blue lips must hurt.

Doug Junior said his lips were not blue.

"The baby's are," said Grace. "Blue lips," she told Little Phil, "are a sign the baby is cold."

Phil announced that he was cold and asked whether his lips were blue. Grace drew him closer and re-wrapped his blanket around his shoulders.

An hour passed before Friar Tuck returned. Robin's merry men had surrounded the fire and were praying on their knees that the baby might live.

Friar Tuck and a young woman, a girl, really, passed through an opening in this ring of outlaws praying like monks and approached the fire. Marian feared that the girl could not provide any milk, for she was emaciated, trembling, and her lips too were blue. When Marian offered the baby to her she looked sorrowfully at the little face and fainted.

Robin said: "Give her food."

One of his men fetched warm porridge, bread and mead.

The girl refreshed herself, casting many a glance at the infant, who was now sobbing quietly with the last of its strength. Marian saw in the girl's eyes -- when she accepted the baby and opened her blouse -- remorse and love. The girl gave the child her small but swelling breast. The infant closed its eyes and sucked.

That night Maid Marian went to the girl and said: "We have all the food we need. If you care to live among outlaws in the forest you and your child are welcome to share my hut, and to join our fellowship."

The girl asked: "Can you forgive me?"

"Forgiveness is in God's hands. We understand that you were starving and desperate. Our task is to love one another."

"But do you want me in your company, a girl who did what I have done?"

"If you wish it, you are one of us now. We do want you."

"I wish it," said the girl and kissed Marian's hand.

Grace had taken Little Phil under her arm -- and from his stillness she surmised that he was engrossed in the story. And Doug Junior, who, unlike Phil, probably possessed the key to the girl's identity, was utterly still and attentive. Grace had thrown in the blue lips for Little Phil and the girl's opening her blouse for Doug.

While she tucked Little Phil into bed he began struggling to get out. He dropped to his knees and began mumbling. Grace tried to decipher it -- but there were no words, just Little Phil's imitation of praying.

"Tell me your prayer," Grace said.

"I want the baby to be happy."

"The baby is in the care of kind and generous people."

Little Phil looked at her -- and his expression showed hope, she believed, and perhaps a question too wide to formulate.

"Wait till tomorrow night," said Grace kissing him. "I think the baby will live."

From the other bed Doug Junior informed Little Phil that it was only a story. Grace had noticed that Doug Junior, who was fourteen and almost a man, sometimes acted like a child when bossing his little brother.

Turning at the doorway she said: "Good night, sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite. School in the morning, lads."

With this ritual completed she closed the boys' door and went to her room and turned on her reading lamp. The lamp on the other side of the bed, of course, was dark.

There came a knock on her door -- not like a boy's -- harder. The boys used her bathroom, which was inside the door of her bedroom off a short hall. They had been instructed to knock before entering.

She threw on her silk robe and approached the door and said: "Hello?"

"Mrs. Stanley, it's Zack Jarman. May I ask you something?"

He spoke in a voice she considered normal, neither "British" nor stuttering. She turned on the light behind her and opened the door.

The face she saw was covered on one side by a hand, with blood running between the fingers. The eye visible to Grace was a mere slit.

Zack Jarman said: "May I go into your Frigidaire for some ice?"

She led him down the hall past the door of the room he shared with Blake Allen, wondering if Blake were in the room. Jarman followed her down to the kitchen.

She took a tray of ice from the refrigerator and rammed the lever toward the center. The cubes jumped out. She dropped three or four into the ice crusher fastened to the wall and turned the crank. She spread a towel on the work table and dumped the flakes of ice into it. Jarman pressed it against his cheek.

He sat on a stool while Grace went to the powder room off the main hall. She took a vial of Mercurochrome, a square of gauze and adhesive tape, and returned to the kitchen.

He was looking at her with both eyes. The one had evidently been closed by the pressure he had been holding against his cheek. The eyes were dark with shock or pain.

She bathed his face then took a fresh towel and patted it dry. One side was swollen and the skin cracked. She tilted his head aside and lay a square of gauze over the abrasion after soaking it with the antiseptic.

"Hold that," she said, and Jarman held the gauze in place while Grace taped it down.

Watching as Grace's eyes roved over his face Jarman said:

"I had an accident."

Grace didn't like the way he was looking at her.

Her hand was still on his head, her fingers buried in his hair. She became conscious that she was bending towards him and that her robe lay open at the throat -- but the nightgown under it was quite secure. Still, she felt that the robe, chosen for her husband's sake, was -- feminine -- that she was essentially, unchangeably feminine, in contrast to him. Hostess, nurse, woman.

"Thank you," Jarman said. "I'll just sit here a while."

Leaving the kitchen, she believed he was following her with his eyes, the eyes that had watched her while she was cleaning his wound.

Chapter 8

A New Word

At breakfast Doug Junior watched Blake Allen, who was watching Jarman, who was pretending nobody was watching him. Blake Allen was smiling. Wes Welles gave Jarman a good looking-over too.

In the silence Doug Junior pictured himself slugging Jarman smack in his bulge but that wouldn't be fair. He thought of Sir Galahad, son of Sir Launcelot and Lady Elaine, who would never attack an injured man -- but neither would he allow anyone to speak of his mother's body unpunished. Jarman had already been punished. Doug Junior stood like a stone and stared at Jarman in a paralysis of anger and hate.

He saw his mother as he had never before seen her. All these pilots with their freshly shaven faces and clipped haircuts -- "flying men guarding a nation's borders" -- all were arranged, as it seemed to Doug Junior, in a circle of admiration around his mother.

He had seen her dressing for parties, watched her at her vanity table as she applied lipstick and brushed her hair. He had inhaled her scent -- but he had never seen the effect she had on a room full of men. If she poured coffee they watched as if a voodoo princess were performing a mystic rite. If she got up to bring Little Phil his Wheaties they watched as if by walking across the room she were floating on the air like Peter Pan. And if she laughed -- as she did when Wes Welles asked Jarman if he were saving up nuts in his cheek for the winter -- they laughed with her.

Doug realized that by "they" he meant only two, Welles and Blake Allen. And of these, Welles was less important. With this realization he had reduced the scene to two personalities, his mother and Blake Allen. Now Doug Junior saw a new detail. His mother was looking at Blake's right hand. There was in her eyes a private activity that was unknown to Doug.

He began to see her as a man would see her, as a woman possessing attributes that a son would never notice. He was perhaps guided in this new style of observation by Zack Jarman's vocabulary of mixed derision and worship -- the "school-girl waist," the slender ankles, the

“supernatural ass,” the eyes -- and, though Jarman had not mentioned her voice, Doug Junior heard a new timbre and depth in it.

He didn't know what Jarman meant by “poon,” but the term infiltrated his mind precisely because it was a mystery. If a man, say, Blake Allen, had described his mother as “vlens” -- or with some other unknown, mysterious word -- he would interpret this as an allusion to her identity as a woman. To Doug Junior vlens would signify a force of attraction that eluded reason and denial alike.

Blake Allen esteemed her, was her protector, her knight.

Seeing Blake's swollen hand Doug's thoughts veered in a new direction. Given last night's scene it was a certainty that Zack Jarman would not be on Blake's team for Sunday's football game. Blake of course would be the captain and quarterback, Doug Junior his principal receiver. They'd pull Plays 21 and 22 and Doug would score a touchdown, and Blake Allen would say something like, “Your boy's got real potential” -- to Doug's mother, and she would appreciate that and agree, and maybe grip his shoulder as she did when she was moved by strong feeling.

While the pilots were putting on their leather jackets and garrison caps and thanking his mother for the coffee Doug Junior asked Blake Allen:

“Can you pass with that hand?”

Blake Allen looked down as if to ponder this imperfect instrument. Doug saw that his mother was looking at it too. He saw something in her expression, as if she -- or her “vlens” -- were keenly interested in that purple swelling.

“Sure,” Blake Allen said. “You and me, Dugger, we'll slaughter the bums.”

Turning to Little Phil he held the boy's shoulder and added: “You too, Mister Phil. You protect me so I can pass to your brother, O.K.?”

Little Phil said: “Yeah.”

Blake Allen laughed and bent down. He shook hands with the boy and jumped with pain. He hollered, “My hand!” When Little Phil's face broke with consternation Blake Allen cried:

“Oh the pain, the excruciating pain! I am excruciated and wrecked! Aaaagh!”

Chapter 9

Douglas Stanley

The letter was thicker than usual. Standing by the road she skimmed the first two pages, a report like all the others, which aroused the usual guilt for holding it against him that he couldn't write an interesting letter. From the vortex of war he sent boring, repetitive reports of each day's minutiae. The exec was a competent navigator but an insecure jerk. There were no vegetables. The gun boss was a moron who relied on his chiefs and first-class petty officers. The supply officer -- the chief engineer -- etc. etc. Each page was marked at the bottom with the censor's seal and initials.

She slid the second page aside and noted that the third had no censor's mark, nor did the rest. She began reading at the top of the third page.

"I never told you, Gracie, there's one maneuver I can't understand that drives me nuts. Just a spinning blank, no reference points. I should have joined the army, I'm not smart enough for this steaming in formation. 'Reorient the screen' -- sure! Nothing to it!! Dearest Gracie I'm not the same man and never will be."

Grace started paying attention. She was even a little nervous about where he was going with "I'm not the same man."

"Naturally we were steaming at darkened ship. Black, black. I wish I could describe it because we both know 'black' but the flames lit it up and then the ocean is -- you might say, Oh, there's light now, sure, but the sea is blacker than before, and the exec said 'Stanley, you got the boat. Go!'" So I was boat officer and some of them were on fire, so how do you -- I mean what do you do about that, oil burning on the surface of the ocean and men swimming in it. You can see against the background of the flames their ship going down and what a hiss and some kind of roar. This was after the explosions -- her fantail nearly straight in the air, diving kind of deliberately down. I better start at the beginning.

“So I’ll just tell you that *at the start* we were in a semicircular screen, the destroyers protecting the Main Body -- the carrier, all those planes and maybe a thousand men, maybe two thousand for all I know -- the oiler -- without her we run out of fuel -- just imagine if they hit the oiler with a single torpedo, she’d burn for a week lying at the bottom -- plus the troop ship and the AKA, a cargo vessel. All this is the Main Body and we in the destroyer squadron, DesRon 773, we’re the screen. Find the Jap subs and blow the little Nips to hell with depth charges, ash cans, nice little shock waves in the water -- Sorry, O.K., the beginning.”

A cloud darkened the sun and cooled the air, but Grace did not know it. A woman passed on the road wheeling a baby carriage and waved, but Grace did not see her. The woman stopped -- saw that Grace was frozen, and felt the closing vise of fear -- that her neighbor and friend was reading something terrible. She passed on, looking back, with fear circling into her own heart.

“We were going along as they say in the Navy ‘fat, dumb and happy’ at 9 or 10 knots, almost too fast for the auxiliaries, but if we go slower the Jap subs slip in behind the screen, we’ve only got six destroyers, tin cans they’re called, and we call carriers *can openers* because one ran into a destroyer and -- you get it. The Main Body is too big for a circular screen. Anyway I knew it’d happen while I had the watch, officer of the deck, running the ship in close formation, me, and the Flag starts squawking on the radio, I know the guy, Lee Trainor, terrific guy, Flag secretary, and he says ‘Delayed executive’ and I said to myself please God don’t let him give the order to reorient the screen in darkness. So what does he say? *Reorient the screen*, shift the axis 45 degrees right. I thought why?

“Then with hardly any time to do the maneuvering board problem, I mean a minute, two at most, he says ‘Stand by, execute.’

“I knew from our position as last on the left and the reorientation being *right* I had to come *left* and pull a 270, but that’s all I knew, it was just the initial move, and don’t forget, we’re in an ink bottle. I made the turn, hard left rudder, port engine stop, starboard ahead full, these were the orders I yelled to the helm and lee helm, and by this time the captain and the exec had both arrived on the bridge. I could see the captain’s face wrinkled, exhausted in the red light from the compass, then he bends over the radar -- the rotating strobe and the green dots all over the place, I imagined green dots in his old eyes. And we get a holler up the voice tube from CIC, such-and-such a course and speed to our new station and I think Thank God for CIC because I sure as hell don’t know where I am and the ship is heeling over on her beam ends and throbbing

in the turn -- that's 60,000 horsepower Gracie at full capacity and it could pop our rivets all over the Pacific. I was watching my heading on the gyro repeater and peering into the darkness at the same time, red compass and black ocean. Here and there if I swept my eyes across our course I could see shadows moving, ships. Yes but which ones and where are they going? More to the point, where am I going?

"Then Gracie there was a flash off the port bow, not really so huge, a white flash, but then a truly monstrous explosion, completely silent -- white, green, some yellow mixed in -- then a muffled boom, not so loud and a few seconds later an explosion so loud it almost tore my eardrums, and an energy wave that made my shirt flap against my chest. I'm skinnier than a rail, you should see me.

"I was completely ignorant at the time but now we all think that the ship that was hit had steamed into the path of a Jap torpedo aimed at the carrier. We picked it up on sonar but too late.

"So the 1MC, the bullhorn, barks out 'General quarters, all hands man your battle stations, set Condition Able throughout the ship.' We were already in a modified Able, a high degree of compartmentalization, water-tight doors dogged tight, to contain flooding in case we took a torpedo, not that it mattered to the guy that was hit, his magazines blew. I know half the officers aboard her, or used to. That's when the exec told me, 'You're boat officer.' Second Division had already swung out the davits, they were just waiting for me. I went back along the O1 deck and jumped in and down we went. One guy got his hand smashed between the gunwale and the ship's side. I said, 'Get out' and pointed to a boatswain's mate standing at the lifeline and told him 'Get in' and we were in the water heaving up and down about four feet bashing against the ship and the coxswain says 'Sir' and I said 'Shove off' and off we go.

"The water was so black -- jumping flames 1000, 1200 yards away, wider and wider -- and the exec yelled at me from the wing of the bridge, 'Search and rescue' as if I didn't know, and he yells 'We'll go to windward of the fire.'

"We had a radio in the boat but of course it didn't work so I said to the signalman -- we're on our way by now -- tell the ship 065 magnetic and he started flashing the ship and by God we got a response. So at least we can talk to each other. But we were quartering the waves which I don't like. One way or another I was heading straight for the center of the fire. Bearing northeast, as I said, about 065, roughly.

“We traveled maybe 600, 800 yards and I told the coxswain, ‘Cut the engine,’ which I knew he didn’t like, we’d bob like a cork and no steerageway, and could he start it again? But I wanted to listen. It was a kind of rumbling rippling noise, low pitched, plus the wind ripping the tops off the bigger waves and throwing water in my face, ‘Thanks for that you bastard.’ Swells four or five feet, not too severe, wind 20 knots about, and then thank God, I said, because I heard another small craft, maybe two, bigger than my boat, which was a 26 foot motor whale boat, the only one we had, these others were bigger, Mike boats probably from the AKA -- so I wasn’t alone! So the funny noise was the floating fire, fuel oil burning with this tremendous energy, and then I sort of concentrated on my hearing and Jesus they were screams, barely hear them, and I knew what that meant. And my eyes were huge looking for those shifting shadows, and I looked around and by God I couldn’t see any. The Main Body, the screen, gone, Gracie. Carrier, oiler, tin cans, nowhere.

“I told the signalman, ‘Contact the ship. Tell her we’re searching.’ He says where’s the ship? How the hell do I know? He starts flashing here and there. I was starting to feel like the Lone Ranger out there, thank God for the Mike boats even if I couldn’t see them. But the ship answers up, tells us to take casualties to Mac Truck, that’s the AKA, the big cargo hulk, got a doctor on board, and of course I couldn’t see her so I just headed for the flames.

“I told you Gracie I’ll never be the same as I was, and maybe you wonder what I mean. What I don’t mean is, ‘Something died in me that night.’ No. I mean it all came alive. I never knew what the world is. I found out. We cut the engine when we got closer and I heard the screams coming out of the roar of the flames.

“We started our motor again and then a shock wave passed through the frame of the boat, then 6, 8, 10 more shocks, boom, boom, boom. It was one of our destroyers dropping depth charges. I wondered Christ is it hurting the guys in the water? If they’re too close of course it sort of bursts their vessels and veins. Boom, boom, boom. I thought, ‘Kill the little yellow bastards.’ But don’t kill our guys in the water. Boom, boom. ‘Light off, cox, straight for the middle.’ He says ‘Sir, sir, for Christ’s sake,’ and I said ‘I just mean close, I don’t mean the middle of the fire for God’s sake.’ What would that accomplish? We’re made of wood, we’ve got a gas tank, I mean am I nuts? ‘Aim for the middle of the edge of it. Stop short.’ So off we go again and all I can see is flames and all I can hear is my own engine.

“Somewhere over my right shoulder I thought I saw the ship, just barely, her superstructure reflecting a dim kind of glow from the flames.

“The boatswain in my boat had a life ring tied to a long rope -- we say line, never ‘rope’ -- ready to throw it out. ‘Steer into the wind, cox,’ and he said aye aye sir and came a half right. We were as close as we could get now, searching along the edge of it. I told one of the men to keep his eye on the ship, I don’t want to be run over, and he said ‘Me neither but I can’t see her sir.’

“We were just making steerageway with the fire on our left. I hoped an intelligent man in the water would try to make his way *into the wind* and the boatswain’s mate could toss the life ring.

“Then, O.K., this nearly scared me to death, my heart stopped first and then galloped like the great horse Silver. *There was no wind*. It had stopped. ‘What the hell cox?’ But the boatswain’s mate said ‘Jesus H. Christ we are in the lee of the ship.’ She came from behind us out of nowhere, I could see the light of the fire reflecting off her bow. I yelled to the signalman but he was already flashing like crazy, I don’t think it was any code, just flash flash flash. I said ‘Tell her we’re right under her bow,’ then three blasts of her horn, ‘I am backing water,’ and the boatswain’s mate hollers, ‘Sir, the backwash,’ and I thought what in hell does the man mean? Then I figured it out, he means the backwash from the ship backing both engines full, it could carry us into the fire. My first thought was, what else could go wrong? The signalman hollers, ‘Sir, she’s stopping engines.’ It’s hot, but we aren’t burning, and there’s a man in the water. The boatswain’s mate threw his life ring but the guy’s head hung down, he was dead, we pulled him in anyway. You sort of think his family would like to bury him in their plot but he’ll end up on some island down here is my guess.

“The ship had moved a little to her right and she flashed, ‘Work in my lee.’ I said Roger, I will. So we cruised calmly under her lee and there was less yelling and screaming now, I noticed that. The boatswain’s mate spotted a man swimming and we pulled him in. He screamed when the guys grabbed him, his clothes had been burned off. He’d thrown his life jacket away. We got another one, dead, and two others alive and burned -- salt water in their burns -- and one who wasn’t burned but was all chopped up.

“To cut it short Gracie we pulled in a boat full and I asked the range and bearing to Mac Truck and off we went. After we had offloaded we came back but the fire was much smaller, and

there was no more yelling. The Mike boats collected bodies and the captain sent me to search for debris from the Jap but we didn't find any.

"I didn't tell you the important part. It was their burns and pain, our guys, their eyes, the dead ones and the live. I guess I don't know how to tell it. I guess maybe it can't be told, not by me anyway."

That night after putting her sons to bed Grace walked to Nancy's house where Bill Fleming, the naval officer, now lived. She asked to see him. Nancy mounted the stairs, and Grace heard a knocking.

"He looks like a funeral director," Grace thought, seeing his navy blue trousers (actually black), white shirt and black necktie. The "blouse," with its gold buttons, stripes and stars, was missing.

Grace said: "Would you be kind enough to read a letter from my husband and answer a question?"

They went to the living room and sat at opposite ends of the sofa. Nancy excused herself. Grace gave Bill the letter and watched his expression as he read.

His face revealed nothing but concentration. He was an agreeable-looking man, about Grace's own age, tall, slender and supple like a swimmer or pole vaulter, she thought, with shaggy, overhanging black eyebrows and, when he looked up, as he did twice, black eyes that said: "I understand. You want to be reassured." She surmised, by the time he took to read the letter, that he had read it twice. He refolded the pages and returned them to Grace, again with a glance of patient sympathy.

"What is your question?" he asked.

It seemed to her that they were peers and that this was fortunate, and possibly the reason she had come to him. He was educated, probably a professional man or manager of some kind in civilian life, perhaps with a family at home and a career he was anxious to resume. To him she was a woman much like his wife (Grace presumed), whose destiny was motherhood and family; while to her he was a man occupying a useful place in the peacetime economy and society. A peer, yes, in that both were from the same stratum; but a superior in that his role was to help in

running the world, while hers was to prepare the next generation. Having no very appealing alternative she accepted the arrangement.

She loved literature -- some of it -- enough -- but teaching English in high school -- even if they would let her teach only Shakespeare, George Eliot and Hardy -- was not her idea of a life. "I've got it! Let me teach *The Rainbow!*" She had never judged her present life as a loss, because of her love for her boys. "Is this my idea of a life?" She never asked. Maybe the answer was yes, or had been until Douglas went to sea. "I don't miss him," she thought. "I miss love." She missed what she was coming to believe she had never possessed. "I am drying up. I am arid," she thought. These thoughts had had their effect over recent months. They dated from perhaps six months ago when Douglas had been gone for a year and she was beginning to understand that her hunger was inveterate. It grew stronger and spread in her body.

But if the hunger should pass -- "Then I am a nun without religious consolation." Which was better, to sink into indifference or to sustain the hunger? Keezee would say, "Control your life or live it."

She said to Bill Fleming: "My husband has been in the Pacific sixteen months. He has always assured me that he is safe. Naturally I suspected this was a lie. What can you tell me?"

Bill said without hesitation: "It's nearer the truth than a lie. The majority of our ships will make it through the war. We are systematically destroying the Jap submarine fleet, which is their best hope. We are superior in the air. Our numerical superiority in ships increases by the week. They cannot supply their fleet and army with petroleum because our submarines are sinking their tankers on the routes between the Dutch possessions and the Home Islands. We are winning."

Said Grace: "A man's country may win and he lose."

"Of course. Navy casualties have been very heavy, starting with Pearl Harbor. If you should read in the paper that an entire battalion of marines had been wiped out in a night you would be shocked by the calamity. Here, in this letter, one of our ships among hundreds has been sunk. Not a battalion's worth, perhaps, but something on the order of two hundred and fifty men, is my guess, gone, in less than ten minutes."

Grace took a sharp breath, and Bill nodded as one does who watches another gaining in wisdom.

He said, "When the Navy loses, we lose big. And if the magazines blow, very few will escape alive. Your husband did heroic service in rescuing those men."

"So --" Grace began, "are the odds --" When she faltered he said:

"Hard to calculate in any sense that has meaning for an individual. But taken across the whole Navy in the Pacific War, I'd say pretty good -- unless the Japs come up with a weapon that is both more effective than the two we are eradicating -- submarines and carrier aircraft -- and harder to counter. I don't know what such a weapon would be. In general, Mrs. Stanley, his chances are good."

"In general."

"Yes, but you asked for the odds. Odds are a generality."

"The men on that ship --"

"The one that was sunk? Their odds were generally good too, I see your point. They were not among the lucky. But if your husband were my brother I'd feel more secure than I would if he were a marine rifleman or a B-Seventeen pilot over Germany."

Grace left the house and hearing footsteps behind her she turned while still in the light from the porch.

"I didn't want to say anything inside," Nancy announced breathlessly, "but is everything O.K.? I mean Douglas. Is he O.K.?"

Grace explained and Nancy said:

"Thank God. But -- pulling those burned men into his boat -- how will he ever --"

"Yes," said Grace through numb lips. "How will he." But she knew that some day soon, or some night, while Douglas was reorienting the screen or searching a black burning ocean, she would re-enter the fantasy of surrender.

Through inky darkness -- "I'm in a bottle of ink. Are the boys safe?" She walked even faster.

Except for the lighted windows there were no landmarks. Trees against the sky were scarcely visible. But she could navigate this road blindfolded. There was the Curtis house, the

Boswell house. Black sky and black pavement and occasionally a gray mailbox drifting by at the roadside.

“Pulling those men into his boat -- and Nancy says ‘my God.’ We must hope for the best, but the best would be a benign God and no man would burn in the water. He’ll turn back to God now.”

She didn’t ask where she would turn. “I pretend to love him because I am afraid to live without him. Keezee may be running into chaos but at least she has legs that run. Mine tremble. I am a coward. What if I get pregnant? I could!

“Dostoyevsky writes that if you deny God anything is permissible. But if I give my body to Blake Allen I am not doing what’s permissible but what’s forbidden.

“Nature has placed me in this temple, the body being the temple of the spirit -- *temple* implies the sacred, yet it’s just this raging body that is forcing me into his arms. If he were to enter my body -- if he -- Blake Allen -- if

“But I must not do this. I simply cannot. It’s obvious what I must do. Throw him out, him and his muscles and his golden wings -- and Jarman too. Out! I won’t tolerate fighting in my house. You guys go, now!”

A man stepped in front of her and she screamed.

“Is that you, Mrs. Stanley?”

She didn’t and couldn’t answer.

“Don’t be scared, it’s me, Blake Allen.”

“Were you hiding behind a tree or something?”

“Heck no. I was walking up the road. I thought I heard your voice -- ‘Get out of here’ or ‘Go!’ Is anything wrong?”

“Everything is wrong. Excuse me for screaming.”

“May I be of any help?”

“I doubt it,” she said and walked around him. But she stopped and said: “No more fighting, understand?”

“Yes.”

“I won’t have it,” she said. This sounded so school-marmy that she went off on a crazy tangent: “The president of the United States, reposing special trust and confidence in you -- mistook you for a gentleman!”

“Yeah, I guess he --”

“So stop it.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“And don’t call me ma’am!” A huge gush of laughter escaped her. When the laughter dried up she began walking but Blake called:

“Can I walk you home?”

She thought: “As if we were high school kids! ‘Can I walk you home?’ God how -- absurd.”

Chapter 10

Why I'm Standing Here

Next morning he awoke before the alarm, put on his bathrobe (he had never before known the need for one) and went down the hall to wash and shave. The night light beside her door was out. So his timing was good. Shaved and brisk, ready in all respects (except for any clear idea of what he was doing) he trotted down the stairs. He heard her humming, not a tune but an improvisation that bespoke -- contentment? He knocked on the door frame, she turned, and he still didn't know what to say.

"Good morning -- Mrs. Stanley."

"Good morning, Lieutenant Allen," she replied after an appraising look. "You're up early again."

"Yes, pretty early."

"Coffee isn't ready yet," she announced, and then: "Why not call me Grace?"

"O.K. Call me Blake." Then he plunged: "So -- why am I here? -- Grace. Well -- I'm thinking I might volunteer for the Eighth."

She stood in shock. Or was she thinking: "So what?"

"It's none of my business," said Grace. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Ha! Maybe to see if you'll tell me not to do it."

"You're breaking the golden rule."

"Yeah, 'Never volunteer.' But I already did. If you wear these --" indicating the wings blazing in the sun on his chest -- "you're already a volunteer."

"Therefore don't do it again. When they want you, they'll grab you, won't they?"

"By the neck," he said laughing. "But they'll send me overseas sooner or later, so why not now?"

"Or -- why not later?"

"Well -- things are pretty bad over there, pretty gruesome. And I'm a bomber pilot."

"I know you are."

He liked that. Of course he knew that she knew -- how could she not?

“So the idea,” said Blake, “would be to go where I’m needed.”

“You could let the Air Corps figure out where you’re needed.”

“You think I’d be grandstanding?”

“No, but aren’t you needed here?”

“Anybody can do what I’m doing. An engineer could do it better. Jarman for example. See -- Grace -- there are rumors that they’re equipping the P-Thirty-eight with drop tanks.”

“I don’t understand that,” she said.

“The Thirty-eight is one of our fighters. Hang an extra fuel tank on it and you extend the range. So the heavy bombers in the Eighth may soon have fighter escorts that can go deeper into the raid -- to defend us against the German interceptors.”

“I see.”

“And there’s a new fighter coming,” Blake Allen went on, “the P-Fifty-one -- even better. Escorts all the way in and out. Don’t repeat that. A slip of the lip can sink a ship.”

“Then I should think,” said Grace with deliberation, “that it would be better to go to England later rather than sooner, when the new fighter is ready.”

“It sure would,” he said amiably. “In a few weeks, maybe by spring, bombing Germany will be less like suicide.”

“And yet, even then, it’ll be no picnic, I shouldn’t think.”

“The German eighty-eights are the ants at the picnic.”

She made a puzzled face and he explained:

“Their antiaircraft guns. Who cares how many fighter escorts you’ve got if the Nazis are pinging away at you with a hundred eighty-eights?”

“Wes told me about,” she began, “-- we were talking yesterday -- about the figure you worked out. Six-point-three.”

“Yeah. A little number with sharp teeth.”

“When will the new fighter be ready?” she asked in a steady voice.

“Nobody knows, or they aren’t saying.” After searching her eyes he said: “So you see the pickle I’m in. If I volunteer they’ll scoop me up tomorrow. Off I go into the wild blue yonder. If I do nothing, just keep flying circles around this house --”

“Do you do that?”

“Sometimes.”

“You can pick out this house?”

“Sure,” he said and was proud of it. “Of course eventually I’ll be sent to England, or maybe the Pacific theater, but not for -- maybe -- several months, by which time -- see?”

“Yes. By then you’ll be facing better odds. And now you are asking yourself,” Grace surmised, “if, being the man you are, you have to volunteer -- because to wait here would be to huddle down in safety while others die over Germany.”

“That’s it. We’re on the same freak.”

“Freak?”

“On the same frequency, communicating loud and clear.”

Without acknowledging this tribute she continued: “You are not a man, I should guess, to put safety before duty. That’s what you’re calling a pickle.”

“Right. If I’m such a hero, what can I do but volunteer?”

“You seem to be telling me outright that you want to be a hero.”

“I guess you bring out the honesty in me, such as it is. You know, I like the way you talk. I don’t meet many people as intelligent as you.”

“So you think you’ve found my weakness, Lieutenant Allen.”

“What, that you’re intelligent?”

“That I’m a sucker for flattery.”

“Anyway to get to the point -- you thought we were there, but we aren’t, not yet. There’s something else. I mean the dilemma is more complicated.”

The silence lasted so long that she said:

“Is there anyone you can talk with about this? A parent, brother, sister, wife or girlfriend?”

“You mean besides you? My father. No mother, brother or sister. My sister Alice died last year in a car crash. No wife or girlfriend. She and I are still friends but we decided to put off everything till after the war.”

“Put off what? Meaning, not get married till after the war? Are you saying you are engaged to be married after the war?”

“Hey, holy smoke, slow down. We were engaged once upon a time, but when I qualified in the B-Seventeen we decided, we agreed to consider ourselves free, both of us. It was her idea, I have to say, to be honest.”

“So --” Grace proceeded carefully, “she didn’t want to wear your engagement ring if you were -- possibly -- going to be sent -- maybe to the Eighth?”

“Exactly.”

“I can’t blame her,” Grace admitted.

“God no.”

“If you intend to marry her after the war shouldn’t you be having this conversation with her?”

“If I did I would, but she wouldn’t want to talk about it.”

“How can you be sure? People don’t stop loving one another just because they are separated by the war.”

“So you love your husband? I guess that’s why I’m standing here, to ask if you --”

“The answer is yes,” she said looking him full in the eyes.

This stopped everything for a few seconds. Grace sought to move the conversation and said:

“You feel no need to tell your -- friend -- about this? Are you quite sure?”

He held her gaze but did not respond. This silence too threatened to go on too long, till he said:

“Something else. Maybe you already know.”

“Already know what?”

When he did not respond and his silence was evidently starting to confuse her she repeated:

“Already know what?”

He said: “I saw it coming and I should have gotten out of this house.”

“Do you want to leave this house?” she asked, and Blake wondered if she was thinking something like: “Should I straighten up his room?”

“It’s obvious I should,” he said, “since you love your husband.”

The stress of the entire conversation seemed to lodge in her face. He became aware of the age difference between them. Her eyes, her mouth lost some of their beauty and took on a look of suffering. He felt a soaring sensation of happiness, and all his doubt was gone.

She said: “Blake -- please don’t volunteer.”

Chapter 11

Union Station 6 p.m.

Before receiving Douglas's letter Grace had started writing:

"Sometimes in telling you about the boys -- because I know you are sad to be missing these years -- and they are growing and learning so fast -- in sending you these reports of our terrific kids, I forget that you are not only their father but my lover."

Next she read: "I am dying of hunger for you." It was the truth, so why the darkness in her heart? She knew the answer. Yes, she hungered for Douglas's touch, but the "pure truth" was that when this longing possessed her she did not care who satisfied it.

Then she called to mind his tender affection, his futile efforts to involve her in what was essentially a one-man exercise. She missed his optimism, companionship, humor. He was a very funny guy.

She had sat down intending to answer his letter about the search and rescue mission, but her mind was empty. She drove to Drummond and Sloane's to buy groceries. There she ran into Keezee. Upon seeing her friend she wanted to ask, "What has happened to you?" Keezee's face looked ravaged -- by sickness or shock. Even her voice had lost all quality. Grace pretended not to notice, and Keezee revealed nothing. Back home, having put her groceries away, Grace sat down again at the breakfast table and picked up her pen.

"I love you for your brave effort to rescue the survivors -- but about the catastrophe itself I am mute. I do not know why such things happen. Hell exists. We move in and out of it as travelers in a well-shaded forest move from sun to shadow. We would be fools or cowards to deny it. You should be here with the boys and me. But the great cry is the war! the war! It shapes the future of civilization, if you want to call it that. So when it's over we'll sort out this paltry question of what life is supposed to be for.

"Douglas, if you were home I would know more about myself. All I know now is that I am mother to two boys and that both need me. But Douglas they need you too. I wish you were at home with us."

And, had this been an honest letter, she could have added: "And I don't know if I can endure this hunger."

She sealed the letter and put it on the counter by the telephone. She returned her writing materials to their drawer and went to the kitchen to set out milk and cookies. In her mind she saw a burning ocean.

That evening she told the boys the second story of the foundling and its desperate mother. As the mother gained strength from the rough and wholesome diet provided by Robin's band -- venison from the forest and vegetables from the garden -- so the baby, imbibing plentiful and nourishing milk, grew happy and strong.

Grace regarded the process of nursing as essential to the story and explained it fully. Little Phil asked whether she had nursed him and she said yes. He seemed to be trying to believe this. Doug Junior listened in silence, but it was the silence of fascination.

Having left the boys something to think about she went downstairs and opened *Time*. She was sitting in her husband's big chair in the living room, which was available for her use again now that Bill the naval officer had moved to Nancy's house.

She looked up to see Wes Welles holding out a sheet of paper. It was a single sheet with the letterhead of the US Army Air Forces at the top and a looping signature at the bottom. The space between was so crowded with military jargon that Grace could scarcely make it out, but she saw "8th AAF."

"Please sit down, Wes. What is this?" she asked.

"Those are my orders," Wes said. He looked from the paper in her hand to her eyes. "I leave in three days. Jenny doesn't know."

"Do you have to go? With a wife alone, and a new baby?"

"She's not really alone. Her mother's in the same town."

"Where?"

"Pittsburgh. Yes I have to go. I volunteered for flight school and I've done the bomber training. They told us, 'You men are going to help destroy the most evil regime that ever polluted human history. Other guys are going to rot in offices or take the general's dog for a walk, but you men are going to fight.'"

"And is it -- Will your wife be upset?"

“She’ll be strong and all, but she’ll fall apart when nobody’s looking. She listens to the radio, reads the papers, and goes to the movies to watch the newsreels. She knows the score. Daylight bombing. You know all about that too, I bet.”

“Why do we bomb in daylight? It must be so much more dangerous.”

“Because we were missing targets. We were all over the place, so we went to daylight but it’s daylight for the Germans too.”

Wes seemed to relax a little, for he moved deeper into the wing-back chair. He was sitting on one side of the corner table, and Grace on the other. The lamp, magazines and newspapers were on the table between the two. The other pilots had just begun their card game in the cellar and their voices made a thwarted sound in the floor.

“So Bill’s gone?” Wes asked.

“Yes,” Grace answered, “Bill’s gone.”

“Good guy. I liked him.”

“Everybody liked him,” Grace said.

Wes reached out, and Grace handed back his orders.

“I’ll fly a bomber to England and join the Eighth.”

“What kind of plane?” she asked.

“B-Seventeen.” He laughed and elaborated: “Flying Fortress. The plane everybody said could fight its way through any resistance. So the Germans just stand off, out of the range of our machineguns, and launch rockets at us. And they send close-in fighters too, and of course there are thousands of eighty-eight-millimeter antiaircraft guns. Still, they lose a lot. I’d hate to be a German fighter pilot.”

He stared at her, and she was in some doubt where his eyes were focused, whether on or through her own. Then he snapped out of it and said:

“I shouldn’t have told you about the loss rate.”

“The six-point-three per cent?”

“Yes. I was beat yesterday and it slipped out. But I knew you wouldn’t repeat it.”

“I may or I may not,” said Grace. “I can’t understand why it’s a secret.”

Wes shrugged.

Grace saw his pale blue eyes and his entire face change, not for the better. His lips lay partway open as if his brain were too busy to adjust his body. He seemed too young to be a pilot or a father.

She voiced a sudden inspiration: "If you can't go to Jenny, ask Jenny to come here. Get on the phone right now and send a telegram."

"Can't afford it," he said.

"What? A telegram? I'll pay for it."

"No, thanks, I mean we could afford the train fare but not the hotel."

"You'll stay here, you, Jenny and the baby. I'll help with the train fare and you'll have no other expenses. Jenny and the baby will eat here," Grace rushed on. "We may be having turnips instead of potatoes but nobody will starve. Send the telegram right now so Jenny can get the baby and his things ready. They could be on a train tomorrow."

Grace feared he might weep. Her body was ready to get up and comfort him. Just in time Wes said:

"Maybe she can leave the baby with her mother."

"Good. Get on the phone, Wes. If she catches a train in the morning you'll be together tomorrow night."

"We'd have two nights together."

"Yes."

"But you are pretty crowded."

"We'll move the boys to my room. You and Jenny can sleep in the boys' room. If she comes while you're still at the Field I'll pick her up. If later, you can use my car. Either way you and she will be together tomorrow night." Saying this Grace felt a sob trying to climb her throat.

When Wes went to the breakfast room to send the telegram Grace tried to read her magazine but could not; his voice reached her all too clearly.

"Ordered overseas. Come immediately. We can have two nights. Love, Wes."

Returning, he spoke to her as if amazed: "Do you think it'll work?"

"I think it will, Wes."

"I can handle the train fare, and I'll pay you for Jenny's food."

"No you won't, Wes."

“But I’m worried about crowding you.”

“Please. Phil will sleep with me and maybe you can get a cot from the Field for Doug Junior. Do you think that’s possible?”

“If I can’t, Blake can.”

He said he couldn’t believe he had a chance to see Jenny; and Grace felt his bewildered joy almost as strongly as if it were her own.

“You will see Jenny, Wes, and you will be among the ninety-six out of a hundred who come home from England.”

Grace had spoken this with fervor, but it seemed that it puzzled Wes at first. She thought she could see him doing the arithmetic in his head.

“I’ll make it,” he said. “I’ve never had any doubt of that.”

While the pilots were bantering and drinking their morning coffee the phone rang -- and Wes Welles jumped up.

“The man has been shot out of a cannon,” said Jarman.

Grace smiled at Wes -- who stood with his hand poised over the phone -- and nodded her consent, and he picked it up and said,

“Stanley residence.” Then, “Yes, I am Wes Welles.” Then in a whisper to Grace: “It’s Western Union.”

Said Zack Jarman in a stage whisper to Blake Allen: “It’s Western Union.”

Little Phil asked what that was.

His big brother, sensing something big, told him to shut up.

Grace, who was already on her feet to pour coffee, slid a yellow tablet along the phone counter to Wes and handed him a pencil. He began to write. A moment later he said, “Thank you,” hung up the receiver and announced:

“Union Station, six p.m. Baby too.”

Grace let out a little scream.

Wes seemed surprised, and repeated: “Union Station, six p.m. Baby too!”

Jarman said, “Jeez, you’d think it was the end of the war.”

The bus honked from the road and Grace exclaimed:

“The crib!”

She sent Jarman to hold the bus, took Wes Welles by the hand and led him and Blake Allen to the cellar, where a crib stood in its folded, compact shape, leaning against a wall of the ex-coal bin that served as a storage room. The two pilots carried the crib past the laundry hamper and up two flights of stairs to the boys’ bedroom while Grace and her sons searched through a trunk for bedding.

“I’ll go, I’ll go,” Grace assured Wes, who had started to worry aloud about who would meet his wife at the station.

“If the train’s on time,” Grace added, “she and the baby will be here when you get home.”

She watched Wes and Blake run to the bus, with their dispatch cases flying at their sides, and she forgot that Wes had orders, forgot the 8th Air Force, England and the war.

Later she understood that it was all these that made the moment what it was. By what perverse means, she wondered, had the war itself created this happiness?

Chapter 12

The Math Teacher

Nancy came visiting at three-thirty, as she often did, to wind down from her day's teaching. She received the news of Wes Welles's orders without visible emotion, saying, "I don't know the man."

She was more interested in Keezee. "Any more outrages from our high-flying neighbor?" she asked.

Grace sided with Keezee, declaring that solitude is difficult. She did not mention the specter she had seen at the grocery store.

"Solitude is hard, is it?" Nancy queried. "You mean it might require a teeny bit of self-control?"

"I mean it might be harder in some circumstances than others."

"Oh Lord, it's the *circumstances*, not the individual. It's the pressures, not the conscience. I don't mean to preach, but holy cow."

"Then don't preach," said Grace. "Keezee's my friend."

"Mine too. I love her dearly. That doesn't oblige me to approve of her conduct."

"I didn't say I approve," Grace reminded her, thinking: "But I understand." Aloud she said, "I mean that what's easy for some may be difficult for others, maybe for good reason."

"What reason? What's harder about her 'circumstances' than mine or yours?"

"Nancy, for God's sake, have a heart."

"I'd rather be right than a ball of moral mush. If I gave one little signal, Bill our dapper lieutenant commander in Mr. Roosevelt's Navy would come knocking at my door at midnight. The war has created opportunities even for us ugly ducklings. Pardon my self-confidence."

"So you've got it all planned."

"Not really. Just a harmless fantasy. I've shut the system down."

"So have I," Grace lied. "Or I should say I'm looking for the switch."

"You sound uneasy, my friend."

"I'm a normal animal, is all." Grace said.

Nancy tapped her forehead and said, "It's up here, the switch. Do I consider myself married or do I not? That's all I need to know."

"You are a lucky woman," Grace said, thinking: "You are a limited woman," but immediately adding: "Of course she's right."

Grace Stanley said: "I know you're an opponent of loose talk but I have a military secret. Of course you don't want to hear it, you're not a hypocrite."

"Oh yes I am," Nancy said. "I'm not cleared for Secret and I don't need to know -- those are the criteria -- but since I'm not an Axis spy you can tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Don't be coy, my girl."

"Well," Grace hesitated, "as I said, Wes Welles is going to the Eighth, day after tomorrow."

"Yes."

"His wife and baby are coming tonight."

"Coming here?"

"Right here."

"How perfectly extraordinary. From where?"

"Pittsburgh."

"Oh -- not all that far. But that's not the secret, is it? -- wife and baby deploy from Pittsburgh to Dayton."

"No. Wes told me the loss rate so far this year for the Eighth. Planes lost."

"And."

"And it's not as bad as I expected, from all the rumors."

"So, what is it?" Nancy asked patiently.

"Wes told me that Blake said it was 6.3 percent."

"For the year?"

“He called it the sortie loss rate. I’m not sure what that means but if it’s for the whole year --”

Nancy’s eyes went cold, and she interrupted: “A sortie is one plane flying one mission. He said ‘sortie loss rate’?”

“Yes. For heavy bombers, up to this month.”

Nancy said: “May I have a piece of paper and a pencil?”

Grace rose from the table, went to the counter by the phone and brought back her yellow tablet and a pencil.

In Nancy’s expert hand the pencil flew over the page, leaving an array of stacked figures. Grace watched and waited. During this time Doug Junior and Little Phil came in, gobbled their cookies and went out to throw the football around the east lot.

Nancy pushed the paper across the table.

Grace looked at two vertical columns. The left column was numbered 1 through 25. The right one began with 187 and descended to 176, 165, 154, 144 and so on down to 39. Thus the last horizontal pairing was 25 on the left and 39 on the right. Below this was a problem in division, 39 over 200. Then two more numbers: 19.5 and 80.5.

With a gathering sense of foreboding Grace looked at Nancy’s eyes, and found them calm yet intense.

“Will you explain?” Grace asked.

“It’d be easier with a blackboard, but it’s all there. I assumed a cohort of 200 planes. It doesn’t matter, 200 or 2000. And these guys have to fly 25 missions. That much is no secret. So after Mission Number 1 there are 187 left of the original 200. That’s 200 times .937, which is .063 from 100 or 6.3 percent from 100 percent.”

“I understand.”

“Well then you just grind it out. It’s like compound interest in reverse. After Mission 2 there are -- What did I figure?”

Grace read: “176.”

“Yes. After Mission 3 it’s what?”

Said Grace, “165.”

“And so on,” said Nancy.

“Are you saying --” Grace looked again at the bottom of the double column -- “that after Mission 25 there are 39 planes left out of the original 200?”

“Assuming a loss rate of 6.3 percent, yes. If the rate jumps or drops of course the figures change. For example if we sent a really long-range fighter escort to protect our bombers all the way to the target and back. There’s been talk in the papers about that. But that’s the future. My numbers reflect the past and projections of past rates into the future. As things stand now, if we keep up the bombing, and we don’t get a new fighter with a longer range -- there it is. Of the original cohort, after 25 missions, 80.5 percent are gone.”

Grace’s eyes roved over the figures and to the top of the page where she read: “Union Station, 6 p.m. Baby too.” She said: “But the Air Corps must replace losses, and they are getting more planes and pilots all the time, fighters and bombers.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Nancy. “As long as the survivors in the original cohort keep flying and the loss rate holds up, that’s the math of it for this cohort. Of course this is only a classroom exercise. Reality will always be different.”

Grace read the figure: “80.5.”

“But not by much,” Nancy cautioned. “So you see, Grace, it wouldn’t pay if you -- I mean Keezee’s way is O.K. for Keezee because she’s a whore.”

“She is not, please.”

“But you are you, Grace. You have feelings but also morals. Look at the numbers. You’d have to be stupid to get involved with anybody. Not that you would.”

Chapter 13

Grace and Jenny

The wheels still turning -- the engine screeching and hissing -- the steam billowing as the gold letters "Pennsylvania Railroad" glided along -- the steel wheels slowing in their majestic rotation -- and stopping. A Red Cap reached up and took the hand of a young white woman in a blue coat, carrying a baby wrapped in a white blanket and perched on her shoulder. Grace lifted a hand but the woman had turned away. -- "She's so young!" Grace thought -- When next Grace saw the mother her face was anxious, searching. Grace stepped forward calling "Jenny!"

"Jenny Welles!" Grace called, jumping to see over the heads of the people crowding the platform.

"Yes, yes," said the girl breathlessly, and Grace saw relief spreading over a set of innocent, pleasing features.

"Wes is still at the Field," said Grace taking Jenny's hand. "I'm Grace Stanley. He's staying at my house."

"He's told me about you and how lucky he is to have a place to stay, in such a beautiful house."

Grace said: "We are the lucky ones" -- but having let this slip she thought of a different meaning of luck and saw "80.5" branded with a burning iron on the name of Wes Welles. Here was an image from the movies, facile and cheap. Grace was thinking that Wes Welles had said of his wife: "She knows the score." But could this -- child -- possibly know?

Jenny Welles uncovered the face of her baby and bent down to let Doug Junior and Little Phil greet him. She watched the boys with keen appreciation as they touched, smiled and goo-gooed the baby. The infant smiled with delight and flapped its arms in an out-of-control way.

"He's a happy boy," Jenny Welles said proudly.

They talked about the baby -- Charles; six months; nineteen pounds. They were now descending the broad stairs to the terminal waiting area, which lay below the tracks and platforms. As they walked Little Phil informed Jenny Welles:

“We call this Rumble-Tumble Station.”

Grace explained that this name had been bestowed by the boys' father when the older son was four. When trains passed along the tracks over the waiting room the whole place rumbled.

The train began to chuff and hiss, the sounds following them down the stairs, then as they proceeded deeper into the station a slow rolling thunder over their heads transformed itself into a rhythmic “rumble-tumble” and then to a different pitch and a steady tone -- which lasted a few seconds and was gone, leaving the sound of a rushing wind in its wake.

Little Phil cried “Rumble-Tumble Station” and raced ahead toward a set of double glass doors. Jenny Welles hitched Charles higher and asked for his comment on the rumble -- but he made none. He did smile at being jiggled.

The women, Doug Junior and the Red Cap trooped along, past the cafeteria, the news stand, the USO and Travelers' Aid. Grace was saying that she had prepared a room for Jenny and Wes and the baby, with a crib; that she had made a supper -- that the men would have eaten at the Field but would soon be home. Jenny Welles said thank you a dozen times and Grace thought: “What a lovely, kindhearted girl.”

She glanced aside and saw a face whose colors were striking not for their contrast but for their blended harmony -- a peach-colored complexion, light blond hair, pale eyebrows and light lashes, blue eyes, perfect teeth except for a slight separation between the two front ones, and a gently rounded shape to the face that suggested a body rather more generous than slender.

Grace thought: “Am I making a madonna of this girl?”

While Grace drove them home Jenny asked if she knew where Wes had been ordered.

Keeping her eyes on the road, scrambling mentally for half a second, Grace replied: “England.”

Jenny was silent. And in this silence, it seemed to Grace, she, by this laconic answer, had introduced an ominous note. To Grace, to anyone who “knew the score,” England meant the air assault on Germany. Should she say, “Eighth Air Force”? or: “Your husband has been ordered to fly against thousands of anti-aircraft batteries and hundreds of German fighter planes”? Grace would have given comfort if she could, or truth if she dared.

The Air Corps bus had not yet arrived so Grace took Jenny upstairs and showed her the room and how to move the little fence surrounding the crib mattress up and down. Grace then

left to fetch the diaper pail from the cellar. When she returned the door was closed. She said loudly enough to be heard through the door: "I'll leave it out here."

But Jenny asked her to come in. She was leaning against the headboard of Phil's bed nursing her baby. Her eyes met Grace's in gratitude, it seemed to Grace, and she said:

"You are so kind!"

There was something generous in the girl's smile and in her thanks. To Grace it felt as if Jenny's presence was a gift given without presumption or even consciousness, given freely.

Grace sat beside her on the bed and they talked, inevitably, about babies, and Grace was touched by Jenny's pride and happiness in this quite ordinary, normal yet miraculous infant. The girl asked: "How long has your husband been gone? Wes told me he was in the Navy."

"Sixteen months," said Grace, feeling the weight of it.

"Oh -- do you -- make it through? Is it possible?"

"It seems to be possible and I suppose I make it through, but I don't quite know how."

"Sixteen months, a year and four months," Jenny said reflectively. "If I had to make it through that long -- I don't think I could. I miss him so. I know you miss your husband. We are so in love -- Wes and I."

"Then love will bring you through, won't it?"

"Nothing else could," said Jenny -- and Grace adjusted her assessment of her maturity. Grace remembered again the silence in the car after that one word "England."

"He would never tell her," Grace thought, meaning 80.5. "And Douglas would not tell me."

Jenny shifted the baby Charlie to her shoulder and patted his back. She looked around his head at Grace and said:

"Yes, of course, it will carry us through. I know the score --"

Grace was struck by her use of Wes's exact words --

"-- but we'll make it. We are meant for each other. And if he's hurt, we'll deal with it."

Perhaps feeling a tension in the room Jenny turned her baby to face her and began bouncing him vigorously up and down, making his legs bend in her lap, while she chanted: "Stand up, stand up, stand up dear Charlie stand up." Grace saw his arms and legs squirming

and heard his cries of -- “it must be joy,” she thought. She joined in the chant, and Charlie looked at her in amazement and gave an infant’s toothless pink smile.

Voices from below announced the arrival of the men. Grace and Jenny rushed downstairs and found the boys and the three pilots gathered in the kitchen.

Jenny stopped at the edge of this assemblage, stepped forward with her eyes intently upon her husband, and presented him with the baby.

Wes Welles took the child in his arms, kissed it, laughed at its smile, and gathered Jenny into his free arm.

Grace feared a razzing comment by Zack Jarman but none came. The room went silent. Grace sensed a reverence in the hush. Neither Wes nor Jenny spoke.

Grace thought: “I am falling for this girl but I can’t help it.” She had never before been struck by such a strong, instant affection for another person.

When the silence had lasted too long -- and Grace saw that the couple wanted to be allowed to go -- she introduced Zack Jarman and Blake Allen to Jenny. In so doing she felt an emotion rising within her. She could hardly believe it, but -- she found out what it was -- by letting it go on for a moment. It was pride. She thought: “I have no reason to be proud of this girl.” But that wasn’t it. Her mind flashed out the truth, that she was proud of Blake Allen -- of his physique, his laugh, his big strong teeth (stained by cigars and coffee, as she noticed again), his huge hand into which Jenny’s disappeared when they greeted one another, and the gold wings on his expanding chest -- and of his mellow, easy voice.

She heard in her head, “He’s a specimen, but he’s not mine.” She felt the blood suffusing her face and neck and wondered if anyone noticed. She looked at Blake Allen and found he was looking at her, and he was laughing. She didn’t know why. The whole room was laughing, even Charlie.

That night Grace was awakened by a crying baby, the desperate sounds of calamity, or so it seemed from the hopeless shrieks of the distressed child. She was half out of bed, with her maternal instincts shooting power through her body and mind -- before she remembered whose baby it was. After this dose of adrenaline she lay awake for an hour, thinking of her boys, her husband, her family. She thought too of Keezee, wondering how she solved the problem of loyalty. She tried to understand Nancy and her philosophy of making the smallest possible target for the arrows of fate. She may have slept, but awoke imagining a destroyer plying a dark,

fathomless ocean, and on board this vessel a man from Ohio who had never before seen an ocean or a ship or a naval gun -- a man whose love and loyalty had given form to her life, who had fathered her sons -- who was thousands of miles away yet in bed with her at this moment -- while the baby cried in a nearby room, and her sons slept, one beside her in the bed and the other on a cot.

“But he’s not with me,” she protested. “I don’t feel his presence.”

She wanted him to be beside her, over her.

The pilots had gone and the boys left for school, and now Grace was cleaning up the dishes. She heard the shower come on upstairs. She seemed to see Jenny washing herself after a night of love; and from this vivid image she shifted to a picture of herself doing the same.

The girl walked in. The girl that Grace had thought might be on the heavy side walked into the kitchen wearing a simple pink wrap whose contours suggested a voluptuous, fully developed figure modeled on a small body. She carried the baby on one hip, and her every step flowed smoothly from the one before. The girl’s youth struck Grace as a kind of marvel. Her wet, darkened hair was combed severely back behind her ears. She smiled with unaffected contentment.

They decided on a walk. The weather was sunny and blustery. The leaves still clung to the trees, only a few blowing off and sailing past the bay window in the breakfast room. Grace went to the cellar to get the baby buggy while Jenny went upstairs to prepare Charlie for their outing.

Down in the basement storeroom, moving boxes to gain access to the collapsed buggy, which sat low on its wheels in its folded form, Grace thought: “I hope I’m not envious. I used to be young myself! But she is so lovely -- and lucky.”

Grace inquired into this word *lucky*. “I am lucky myself,” she realized. She allowed a thought to pass unresisted through the censorship of necessity. It was this: that she would not be longing for Douglas’s love if she could allow any other man to approach her. She could not. Therefore her longings and fantasies must be centered on Douglas and on her future as his wife. No other possibility was -- fair -- to Douglas. But the man she wanted was not Douglas.

If she should trick herself with sophistry and lies there would remain one fact: that she had just sealed a letter that was true in every line and false in its entirety.

“So I become a liar and a cheat,” she recited silently, “or remain miserable and half alive. Why could I not be as happy as Jenny? My future is, I sit here and dry up, then after the war I can drive to Cincinnati and shop for linens at Gattle’s and for china and so forth at Shillito’s, and go to plays and musicals ‘to wear away the days’ and that’s my life!”

She could not look into the mist that covered the time after the boys were grown, when she’d be in her forties and facing thirty more years, maybe, of -- Douglas.

The buggy was still collapsed but she wheeled it into the driveway, under the basketball bankboard, and bent to straighten the brackets and stand it upright. It didn’t work right away and she tugged and pulled, in a bent position, and she could feel her head and face filling with blood. Suddenly she saw a gray boat manned by three or four sailors -- and Douglas -- climbing slick black waves towards a red inferno. She heard the screams of the dying. It seemed they reached her on the wind. A sailor yelled “Too close, too hot,” but Douglas said: “We’re in the lee of the ship.” The sailor shouted, “Stop, we gotta stop” but Douglas said, “Make for the middle of the fire.”

Grace said: “I don’t want it to happen. That’s not why I imagine it.”

Descending a hill Grace saw that Jenny was leaning back to control the buggy, and this put her in mind of her own discovery of this method on this very hill. When they reached the bottom Grace offered a choice: go right and descend Big Hill Road more or less immediately; left and walk on level ground for ten minutes before the next downslope.

“Left,” Jenny chose, and they entered a semicircular road lined with big, handsome houses. The oaks lent a russet background to the maples, which were in full color. The sun brightened the leaves while the wind set them rustling and lifting their various facets of red and orange.

“This makes me think,” said Jenny, “I can’t help it -- of Germans -- German mothers.”

Startled, Grace then noticed the distant drone of a heavy bomber. Jenny scanned the sky.

The women kept walking and Grace did not take up this raw theme.

“If I were a German woman,” Jenny said, but instead of finishing her sentence she simply gestured at her baby, asleep in the buggy.

Grace pictured a woman sheltering a baby with her body, but she did not wish to speak of it.

“Of course we are right,” said Jenny, “and they are wrong.” She was looking at the road, not at Grace. “And we must stop them.”

Grace thought: “Meaning, kill them.” Wes Welles would perhaps die to kill Germans.

“We have to,” Jenny repeated defensively.

“Yes, we do,” Grace agreed.

And Jenny added: “They started it.”

“But the mothers and children didn’t,” said Grace.

“I’d protect Charlie with my life,” Jenny vowed, “but I could be crushed too and both of us die.”

“That happened for weeks on end in London,” Grace said.

“I know the whole thing,” Jenny broke in. “But I am saying that even though we must do it -- and we must -- to send Wes over there to actually do it -- that’s the -- Wes is a gentle, kind, cherishing man with love in his heart.”

“I can see that. Yet he’s a strong man, morally strong.”

“He is.”

“Anybody can see that in five minutes. You are a lucky woman.”

“Oh, I am! Don’t I know it!”

“And he’s a lucky man, Jenny.”

“But don’t you worry that when they come back -- you know -- they won’t be the same?”

Grace responded: “I do worry. We must have faith in them.”

Jenny said as if unaware that she was going off on a different track, “He could have any woman he set his sights on. He just happened to look in my direction and now -- we have Charlie.” She bent forward, still walking, and moved the corner of the blanket off Charlie’s cheek. She looked Grace full in the face and smiled luminously.

After several more steps Jenny said: “We lost a baby, I wanted to tell you that, or a pregnancy anyway. I was seven months along and to me it was a baby.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Now we have Charlie. You know how I feel. You have babies too. Will you have another one?”

“Possibly. We haven’t ruled it out.”

“But -- the war.”

“That wouldn’t stop me,” Grace said realizing it was true and somehow momentous. She came alive to the realization that she could have another child.

Jenny picked up on that: “We planned to wait maybe a year. I’m so busy now, nursing and whatnot. But now with these orders he’ll be gone a year maybe, I don’t know how long, but we won’t let the war stop us. No sir!”

Grace was touched by this exclamation. She said: “We have to go on in spite of the war; we don’t cease being human.”

“No, absolutely, but now Wes’ll be over there, you know, bombing. Is that human?”

Perhaps her voice trembled; Grace could not be sure.

Grace said: “The Filipinos, Chinese, French, Poles, the English -- we are with them. Imagine what kind of world it’d be if we let the Germans and the Japs win.”

“Slavery and murder.”

“Right,” Grace confirmed.

“So Wes will be -- dropping bombs -- and our minister said we must at least try to love our enemies.”

“Then let’s love the mothers and children.”

“And kill the rest?”

“Jenny, sweetheart, we have to win the war. Your husband and mine are doing their parts and there is no evil in it for them.”

Grace could see that the girl’s face was rigid, her eyes enlarged, as she pushed the carriage along the level road, and she could not help imagining the bursting of the bombs that the girl’s husband would soon be delivering to the cities of Germany.

“We must win, I see that,” Jenny pronounced implacably, “but it is evil.”

Grace asked: “If my husband’s ship sinks a submarine, is that evil? or would it be evil to let it go?”

“Sink it, of course, sure, but there are no mothers or babies on submarines.”

“Jenny, dearest,” Grace said again, stopping and taking her by the hand, “if we do not stop them, if we stand aside and watch --”

“Yes, I know!”

“We would be --”

“I know, but it’s so cruel!”

“And Wes will be shaken, and maybe he’ll have greater need than ever for your love, but he will not be contaminated. He is a good man, and good men must fight.”

“Sure,” said the girl softly. “You’re right. He will not be contaminated. You’re right, he may be shaken. Who wouldn’t be? But I will love him more than ever.”

“And he will need that love and return it.”

“He’ll have it. He already does. Grace, please, don’t let me upset you.”

They smiled at one another but Grace again saw a German woman bent over a baby, and a building collapsing above her. Then her mind leapt to a new idea and she said:

“But Jenny, suppose we were German women and our husbands were killed while fighting for --”

“I couldn’t bear it!”

“-- for that monster and his ambition to subdue all of Europe and Russia and to murder, maim and enslave --”

“Don’t!” Jenny cried. “If anything could be worse, that would be it. But nothing could be worse than --” She did not finish.

“No,” said Grace. “But we must have faith.”

“I do, Grace, I have faith. I know he’ll come home and so will your husband. I know it.”

She seized the baby and lifted it out of the carriage. The blanket flew, and Grace stooped to retrieve it. When she stood up Jenny was pressing the baby to her breast, kissing and murmuring to him, twisting her body from side to side. Charlie cried in fear and surprise.

“No, no, my Charlie,” Jenny pleaded, “it’s all right, I’m sorry, Charlie, please, I’m sorry.”

Charlie wailed, and Jenny rocked him and asked his forgiveness.

Grace was sitting in her husband's easy chair with her legs drawn up beside her, and the reading lamp at her shoulder was the only light in the room. She reached out her hand and dropped her book without caring where it landed. Beneath her, the undercurrent of baffled voices and laughter told her the pilots were still drinking beer and playing cards. She wished she were down there laughing and carousing, throwing chips and raking in the dollars.

She got up abruptly and slipped on her shoes, and tied them as if her life depended on getting it done in five seconds. She got her coat from the hall closet, found a wool cap on the shelf, and slipped out the front door. The boys were asleep, or ought to be. She stepped into the darkness, dimly lit from above by a thousand diamond points.

"The war is necessary and just," she repeated. "It must go on." The war, the bombing and the dying. Eventually the invasion. Anybody could see that. A thought came out of nowhere. "I hardly know the man!"

Coming to the place, albeit in darkness, where Jenny Welles had terrified the baby by snatching him up and kissing him with such desperation, Grace thought: "Freely-given love" -- whether he bombed Germany or worked as a clerk in a hardware store. Jenny loved with a free and open love.

Grace believed that Douglas gave her all the love he had to give. The trouble was it was so little. But she had an abundance to give, an immensity. She tried to face these facts, to lay down the law: "The only reason it is not possible is that it's not right. Therefore I can't do it. If it means drying up, that's what I must do."

She was not dry. She was physically wet. The yearning in her body spread to her mind, the great justifier, but something too was happening below the level of speaking and thinking, deeper than the mind. Down there she was happy.

When she entered her house later all was quiet. She found her bedroom stuffy and warm, which must mean that one of the boys had gotten cold and closed the window. She opened it then went to the hall closet and got two more blankets. Closing the closet door she heard sobbing from Jenny and Wes's room. She listened a moment, then returned to her bedroom and spread a blanket over each of her sons; then she returned to close her bedroom door.

A rippling, helpless sob reached her ears, followed by a murmur in a deeper range. This cadenza repeated itself -- apologetic sobbing with an accompaniment of soft and persistent murmuring in a masculine register. Grace distinguished a few words, pressed through the

distorting medium of the sobs. Jenny was gasping out an apology for being terrified. The masculine voice, in which Grace could not hear any clear words, joined in. Grace went back to her boys.

All she knew of philosophy and religion told her that neither she nor anybody else was entitled to happiness. That was one lesson. Another was that with Douglas and her boys she had in her possession all the elements of a complete and happy life.

Chapter 14

What She Told Him

A motley crowd assembled in the vacant lot by the Stanley house.

Ten pilots arrived by bus from the Field. A dozen boys and girls from the neighborhood showed up, and there was one old man, Mr. Huffman, and four or five women, including Nancy and Keezee. All three pilots from Grace's house, plus Jenny Welles and her baby, and the two Stanley boys were there too.

Grace was anxious to see whether Jenny had recovered. The answer was apparently yes. The girl stood talking and laughing with Nancy, Keezee and the other women, shifting Charlie casually from one hip to the other, encouraging him in his arm-flapping and grinning antics, laying him on the ground to show how he would crawl to a ball she placed a full step in front of him. When he had captured the ball he tried to stuff it into his mouth. His effort earned him shouts of glee and handclaps from his audience, including Keezee, who seemed to have regained her color and vigor. Dropping the ball, the baby lifted his butt as high as he could and made snorting sounds.

"What a performer!" Nancy cried. Childless herself, she was Charlie's leading fan.

The pilots had thrown their jackets and caps in a heap, and now they kept three footballs sailing back and forth. The boys chased the screaming girls, while Mr. Huffman stumped about on his cane and glared with excitement. Grace heard a distant, throaty droning as a bomber climbed to altitude, a sound so common that she seldom heard it, and nobody paid it any attention.

Presently the kids began gathering around the two "captains." One of these was Blake Allen, and Grace remembered -- and hoped that Blake did -- that he had promised to choose Doug Junior first.

The captains flipped a coin, the other man won, and promptly named Zack Jarman. Blake did not hesitate. He pointed to Doug Junior and said: "Him." Grace glowed inside. Her feeling was so strong and so clearly illegitimate that she chastised herself: "He already has a father."

She was edgy still with the conflict of the night -- a clash of two ideas -- the first being that she had blundered in telling Blake Allen that she loved her husband. Blake would, must, believe that she meant passion, devotion, happiness. And then this: that respect and affection can be expressed in other ways than bodily intimacy.

The opposing captain chose Wes Welles, and Blake Allen chose Little Phil. Next the opponent chose a pilot Grace did not know. Instead of adding male talent to his team Blake called: "What about it, Jenny?"

Jenny looked embarrassed and doubtful, till Grace offered to take Charlie. Jenny peeled off her jacket and dashed to her team, and every man's eye was upon her.

Grace scooped Charlie into her arms and sat on a grassy bank. He seemed content at first. Then he opened his mouth and lunged toward her breast, and made a noble effort of it, but she convinced him that his ball was more interesting. He tried the ball again, dropped it, then flapped his hands and made a noise, and surveyed the scene with the insatiable interest of a new arrival from another world.

She had given Blake the wrong impression. What could he believe but that she loved her husband with a passionate love? But if she changed her answer he would think she was saying: "I'm available."

"Maybe I am!" she thought -- looking at him, surrounded as he was by his team of women, kids and pilots. The sight made her feel like a woman.

"I just changed my answer," she thought when he caught her staring. "Caught! Now he'll --"

He smiled at her for the first time that day, and Grace thought: "If he knew how I feel!" In the football game Jenny and Keezee ran a race, Keezee having broken free and carried the ball nearly to the goal line with Jenny chasing her. This gave everybody a chance to see two different kinds of woman straining for their utmost speed -- the full-figured Keezee, tall, large, just on the safe side of heavy, a woman who made fun of everything and everybody including herself, pursued and caught at the last second by a smaller, younger, well-formed, sleek and swift girl with some attributes of womanhood, including her engorged breasts. It was a display of two images of women's life, each shown to advantage, to a festive crowd on a breezy, sunlit autumn day with no war in sight.

For Grace the other big event of the game was Blake's pass to Doug Junior. The boy darted out at an angle, cut back toward the center and caught the pass before his defender could get in the way. It was the third try, but a triumph for Doug.

After her race with Keezee Jenny left the field panting and took Charlie, and Grace filled Jenny's place on Blake Allen's team. She too had a triumph, when Blake threw her a pass in midfield and, finding herself alone, she ran for a touchdown, running so fast she passed right through the goal line and trampled the squashes in her victory garden, and jumped over a pumpkin.

"My God!" cried Zack Jarman, "she's destroying our food supply. She's a Jap spy."

Blake Allen and Doug Junior walked off the field side by side. Little Phil caught up and, looking up at Blake, took his hand. Blake held his other hand, the injured one, up for inspection and said:

"Still works. Fatter'n hell though." Looking down at Little Phil he asked: "Want a beer?"

They headed for the beer tub, which also contained 7-Up and Coke.

Grace saw Wes and Jenny walking hand in hand toward the food tables. Wes was carrying Charlie. Grace saw him gather Jenny against his side, looking down at her and saying something that made her smile.

Lying awake at an unknown hour Grace dared not stir for fear of waking Little Phil. Her body throbbed and she kept it motionless. She reached a crescendo in which desire itself was a form of satisfaction. Blake's hands passed gently over her breast. His kiss was gentle and warm on her yielding lips. The drama streamed onward, circling back on itself, replaying the same series of scenes, and adding unpredictable variations. The lovers encouraged and consoled one another. Each knew what the other needed.

Grace's illusion ended when she saw the crazy pattern of light running across her wall and up to the ceiling. These were not the slowly-passing rectangles that signaled cars on the road. With its unique jump up the wall and across the ceiling this pattern told her that a car was turning into her driveway. She got up quietly, drew the blanket back over her son's shoulder,

threw her robe over her shoulders and went to the window. An Army jeep stood in the drive, lights burning and engine running. Grace watched.

She heard a door open and shut in the hall, and a minute later saw Wes Welles, wearing a garrison cap and raincoat, move into the headlights carrying a B4 bag. After throwing the bag into the back he climbed in beside the driver. The vehicle backed into the street and drove east.

Grace pressed the little switch that illuminated her electric alarm clock and read the time: 4:30. She went back to bed but not to sleep.

When Zack Jarman and Blake Allen had caught their bus and the two boys had walked over the open fields to school Grace, Jenny and the baby got into Grace's car, a blue '39 Buick two-door, and headed to Union Station. Grace drove past the Buick and Ford dealers' and under the viaduct that carried the railroad tracks, turning left into the parking lot. A Red Cap took Jenny's luggage. The women walked side by side up the broad stairs to the tracks. They waited in a cutting wind that felt more like December than October.

"Can you visit us at Christmas?" Grace asked.

"I should stay with my mother. She's alone."

"I understand. But you'd be welcome."

Jenny said: "I'm not able to speak. I can't speak."

"I'll speak for both of us then," said Grace, taking the younger woman by the shoulders. Jenny's eyes, looking at Grace, were the eyes of hope. "They will come home, both of them."

And this again expressed Grace's thoughts accurately. This too was true, and gave an impression that was false.

When the train moved away Jenny was holding Charlie up to the window. His face, his round but anxious eyes, wore an expression of intense, devouring interest. Jenny's face was bright with tears. She held Charlie's wrist and waved his hand.

Driving home along the twisting roads of Hills and Dales Park Grace surrendered again to the feeling. It was so familiar and strange, so warm, that she forgot to be afraid or ashamed. Then little Charlie broke into the scene, as Jenny waved his hand -- Jenny the loving, the innocent.

Chapter 15

Some Help from Keezee

“Lordy!” Grace cried, “was it so obvious?”

“Calm down,” Keezee advised, “you haven’t been struck by lightning.”

But Grace suddenly thought: “Struck by lightning.” To Keezee she said: “You mean I was gaping at him?”

“Maybe not *gaping* but it did seem to me --”

“Did anybody else notice?”

“How would I know? Well, maybe Nancy.”

“She wants to save me from myself,” Grace said.

“And so do I. Now follow me.”

Keezee led the way along a tiled hall from the kitchen to the front foyer, then across the sunken living room and through the french doors. They stood on a glassed-in porch furnished with a cocktail table, three chairs and a canvas-covered sofa with big pillows.

Keezee said: “This is at your disposal day or night. I’ll leave a blanket on the couch and candles on the table. You needn’t worry about the candles. They can’t be seen from the street.”

Grace turned toward the street and her gaze met a thick growth of evergreens.

Keezee continued: “Nobody will ever know you were here except you and me. If you’re discreet you can live as we were meant to live.”

Grace repeated: “We?”

“Women,” Keezee said. “Free and equal. There’s a war on, you know.”

Grace noted every detail, the blanket, the candles. She said: “Thank you. I won’t be needing this.”

Said Keezee: “That’s the right answer.”

Returning home, Grace set out cookies and milk, then went down to the cellar. She was met by a rancid smell of beer and whiskey. Yet the card table and the chairs and upturned buckets were as

neatly arranged as ever, and the ashtrays had been wiped clean. What was different was a stain on the concrete floor between the card table and the laundry hamper. This was where the smell was strongest.

She pulled an armful of laundry out of the hamper, threw it into the washing machine and set it going. She filled a bucket with warm water, added soap and bleach, and scrubbed the stain with a mop. The place now smelled of ammonia instead of beer. Climbing the stairs she heard a voice from the kitchen -- Doug Junior's:

"You can't talk about that, you brat, I never should have told you."

She missed some of Little Phil's defense but heard this much: "... talking dirty about mother."

"Yeah, now shut up."

"I won't say anything."

"You already did. Shut up!"

"So Blake slugged him?"

"Shut your mouth!"

Grace shut her own mouth which had opened in surprise and sudden comprehension. Her first reaction was anger at Blake Allen. She was reading *Clarissa* in which the heroine's family try to force her into a marriage, and predatory males gather to "protect" her. "I'll kick him out," she said. Jarman and Blake Allen out. But what if Jarman had said something really vile?

"Nobody is going to claim me. I don't need a protector. I'm not scared but -- yes I am." Scared of what? She was afraid of her hunger, of its power over her true self. "Does the war free me or my hunger?" She saw Blake Allen's eyes after he slugged Jarman, large, brown, mocking, playful. "Is it possible to love a man's eyes?" Staring, loving his eyes, she still knew that Keezee's reasoning, if you could call it that, was twisted. "The men are freed by the war, but am I?"

Next: "He's acting like my lover.

Chapter 16

On the Bridge

“Good evening, Lieutenant Allen. This is quite a coincidence,” said Grace perhaps ironically.

“Well -- yeah -- Lieutenant Allen? What’s wrong with Blake?”

“Our meeting like this,” she continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “Extraordinary. There are miles of roads in every direction.”

“Yeah, and lucky.”

“Would you say it was pure luck?”

“Well, ‘pure,’ that’s not a word I use very often.”

“You’ll have to explain that sometime. But in fairness I confess that I took this road tonight because we met here once before.”

“I kinda remember that. And I was sorta wandering blindly around here myself because I thought -- you know --”

“But it would worry me if I thought you were watching to see when I left the house.”

“Absolutely not. I got bored with poker and decided I’d go out into the cool night breezes and twinkling starlight and what not.”

“And -- I have to speak to you,” Grace declared changing her tone.

“Then let’s take a stroll, O.K.?”

“Not just yet.”

“Oh -- well -- fire away.”

“I’ve figured out what happened at the poker game the other night.”

“Yeah, I lost six bucks?”

“You hit Jarman.”

“Hmmm, well, he’s a jerk.”

“And you take pleasure in hitting a man because he’s a jerk?”

“There’s a certain satisfaction in it but no, I don’t go around sort of punishing weenies.”

“And Jarman is a weenie?”

“That’s why I shouldn’t’ve socked him, I see where you’re going. I’m bigger and stronger and tougher. I shouldn’t be a bully. I blew my top, but I had a petty good reason.”

“The reason being something he said about me,” she persisted, trying to make her point gently.

Blake Allen said: “Was I supposed to sit there and listen to him?”

“I am grateful, I truly am, but I don’t need a champion. I will defend my own reputation if the need ever arises.”

“I can’t imagine why it should.”

“Nor can I,” she said, “but do you see my point?”

“Sure. You don’t want people to think I’m -- acting like -- ”

“Like you’re staking a claim on me.”

“God no.”

“Like you own me.” she said driving it home.

“I don’t own you but I do like you, is that O.K.?”

“Quite O.K., Lieutenant. I like you too.”

“Wow!” he uttered ambiguously, maybe even mockingly.

She plowed on: “Did you discuss this -- punch -- with my older son?”

“Doug Junior? No.”

“Did you tell him that Jarman had talked dirty about me?”

“No.”

“And yet he knows about it.”

“He didn’t hear it from me.”

“Can you explain how he learned about it?”

“No. Jarman and three other guys were there, one was a guy named Hank who lives with this lady, I mean in the lady’s house, on the next street behind yours, and two others I don’t know. I don’t see Jarman blabbing about this. If somebody clobbered me I wouldn’t spread it around too much.”

“But I don’t think many people have clobbered you,” said Grace.

“One or two,” he admitted, “when I had a bad night.”

She said: “Shall we take a walk?”

Grace started down the first hill and Blake Allen fell in beside her. She wanted to see him, but after her talk with Keezee she feared her eyes would reveal too much. So maybe the darkness was for the better.

At the first level stretch, where the road forked, she led him right, and they soon began their descent of Big Hill Road, passing through a looming woods. The drop steepened as they went along -- not speaking -- and Grace wondered what besides sex was going through his head. When they came to Stonebridge Road they went left, Grace still leading and Blake keeping abreast of her -- till she paused in the middle of the bridge. The night sky was visible as an arch of blue, made pale by a new moon whose light was just strong enough to soften the contrast between stars and sky.

Grace leaned her fanny against the parapet, crossing her arms. Her heart was struggling against the pressure of her arms. The stream murmured below. Blake stood before her upright, with his hands at his sides -- he did not slouch or shift his weight to one leg. Grace was struck by the compact strength of his stance, and by his size, and his patience.

He said: "I wish I could see you better."

She smiled, perhaps enough for him to see, and he said:

"Grace, I can't take my eyes off you."

She was thinking: "Just keep your hands off me." Thinking: "He called me Grace." She uncrossed her arms and let them hang at her sides. This movement had an effect on her that she did not expect.

He came closer, and she did not change her attitude. She stood leaning against the parapet; she could not back up, but she could move aside. She waited motionless.

"We were a good combo on the football field," Blake said, "the way you snagged that pass and ran for a touchdown."

"It was a perfect pass. I couldn't have missed it."

"Lots of girls would have missed it," he allowed.

"Women," said Grace.

"Yes women. Would it spoil everything if I kissed you?"

Her tongue got away from her and she said, "You could try it and find out."

He did try it, and the effects on her mind and body were stronger than any she had ever known. She had always understood that she must walk in fear of her hunger. But in concentrating on this danger within herself she neglected something else -- the power of a man. It startled, it nearly stunned her when he pressed warm, wet lips against hers -- the wetness all but astounded her -- in an atmosphere of a hybrid odor of tobacco, beer and an essence of

masculinity. Her fantasies had been almost sterile. The man in the fantasies was something perfect, certainly odorless. The smell of Blake Allen and his hardness, the tight pressure of his iron arms around her, and the intimacy of his kiss overwhelmed her. Yielding to his next kiss she felt its consequences throughout her body. Yielding, she wanted to yield more, to accept and to give more. In her heart, her chest, and lower than both of these, she felt a spreading, melting gladness.

“Stop!” she whispered just in time.

“No. How can we stop?”

“I’m not ready. You have to stop.”

He was still embracing her, and the consciousness that he was drawing her against his chest with strong, muscular arms would have made her defenseless, and she might have acquiesced, but for one fact.

“I’m not safe,” she said, speaking more coherently now. “Please let me go. I want you to kiss me again but I can’t.”

“I guess you mean -- ”

“You know what I mean. I have to think, and I can’t think when you kiss me.”

“What do you mean, think?”

“Blake, please don’t be rude.”

“We’d be safe,” he argued. “I’ve got something with me.”

“Not good enough.”

“Well don’t you have something at home, a device, that you could --”

“Certainly I do, but I’m -- let me go.”

“O.K., go.”

“Thank you. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Well then we can -- what can we do? Talk?”

“I said I love my husband, and I do.”

“All right, I understand but -- no I don’t. What are you saying? You love him but want me to kiss you.”

“More. But I am trying --”

“Trying to push me away.”

“Exactly.”

Grace did not believe she was entitled to excuse herself by announcing that Douglas was inadequate in all important ways, or many. That would be cruel and unfair. "I want this man's arms around me." This shot through her mind. Do not disparage Douglas but give yourself to Blake.

She told him to go home by a separate route and he, having received his marching orders, said: "I'll never call you ma'am!"

Laughing she reached out impulsively and kissed him.

He cried: "Ma'am! You can't trust me!" He turned and was gone, up Stonebridge Road almost at a racing pace. The open rolling fields lay under the weak moonlight on his right, with a car drifting by a quarter mile away.

He was shocked by her response to his kiss -- not just thrilled but amazed. She was so warm, so pleasing. He kept going, looking for the crossroad where she had said he must go left and climb the hill. In a moment he recognized the terrain and began to climb.

Now that he knew she would give herself he had a superstitious fear of failure. He wanted to be fit for a marathon when they met in bed or in the grass or the reeds by the creek -- or wherever! "Who cares where?" If he didn't throw her over the falls the first time -- and she wanted more --

He had heard that for some women once was only the beginning, but that kind of drama lay beyond his experience. So far as he knew, his ex-fiancee Eva never came but was always satisfied. How could that be? He was a perfect ignoramus who couldn't control himself. He groaned with fear and apprehension. And he lived again Grace's tender, yielding -- ready -- responses in his arms and under his lips.

His mind took a big leap. If they had met before the war -- if there were no war -- if they were the same age and she had no kids --

"Even if I don't love her," he thought, "I have this kind of -- obsession -- she's all over my mind, she's never gone -- this kind of sacred --"

The next instant he said: "Don't be thinking *sacred*. She's a woman, not an angel. Take her!"

If, by a mental effort, he was able to put the woman-obsession aside the world came rushing in.

A man under military discipline who is feeling sorry for himself wants a woman to want him, whether she gives her gifts or not -- before the government feeds him to the big machine. He was man enough to volunteer for flight school, to train for heavy bombers, to pin on his wings and beat up his virgin garrison cap -- in short to play the part of a smiling nitwit -- and now the machine is dripping oil from its mechanical jaws, lubricating its steel teeth for a smooth clashing action, and he is the moron standing there in the deafening racket and the clanging and banging of the god damned thing -- which is getting ready to chew up Mrs. Allen's happy-go-lucky son. "Me!"

This was life-directing knowledge. "But I'm still alive!" He conceded that she was something sacred but she was also a woman. "I'll do all right," he said. "I'll blow my first chance but in the second round I'll keep control and give her what she wants."

Halfway up Big Hill Road Grace Stanley figured it out. Like most of her revelations it came without exertion or analysis.

"That's it, of course. He opened the clothes chute." And she saw her elder son hiding in the upstairs closet, bent over the chute listening to the card game in the basement.

This was disturbing. "If I can't trust him to stay in bed when he knows I think he's reading --" then she could never admit Blake Allen to her bedroom no matter what the hour. "Are you crazy? Let him in your bedroom?" Keezee's offer was still open, but to place herself in somebody else's power, even her steady friend's, did not seem prudent. Then she said as if it explained everything: "He's in my house!"

To be certain of reaching the fork before Blake she walked as fast as she could, leaning into the hill. She had sent Blake the long way around so she was confident. "Whew!" she breathed. "This is a workout."

She seemed to see candles burning on Keezee's porch, and a blanket spread on the couch. She saw herself and Blake taking shelter from a rain shower, drying their naked bodies with towels. "Where'd the towels come from?" she said and laughed. "And to let him into your

bedroom would be sheer madness.” She asked: “Am I that desperate?” Was she willing to bear the consequences of discovery? No. Was there any safe way? No. Therefore it ceased to be a moral question. No matter how disloyal, dishonest, mendacious and cheap she was, she must not do it, simply because she would be caught. But the hunger had a voice too. The hunger had the only kind of gift that mattered, walk, talk, run, scream, leap -- everything except the ability to reason, but so what? It had the power to nullify and mock reason. She saw herself writhing naked in tall grass, lifting her arms in torment.

Chapter 17

A Bold Proposal

“Dear Gracie --

“Don’t think I’m crazy with the heat but this new idea — wow. I haven’t got time to explain but I may not get another chance to write for a while. Here it is. Let’s get married again, a completely new marriage.

“The sea is pretty rough and I can hardly write, as I guess you can tell from this scrawl, but wham, there it is again, we just jumped into a trough, I don’t know how the ship holds itself together, the bow dropping maybe thirty feet onto a solid floor of water.

“You understand better than I do. In all these years I have *never* made you happy in love. Maybe you thought I didn’t know or care but I do because I know that love is a form of religion for you. And you have been so generous and understanding, you kind-hearted woman! You’ve never really complained but actually you couldn’t quite hide your disappointment. I know what you want -- should I say need -- and I have never been able to give it to you. If I were better at my own religion I would have confronted this a long time ago. I get started and can’t stop and then it’s too late.

“Gracie, marry me. The only fair thing is to say, I love you, please marry me. Let’s wipe the slate clean and pledge ourselves to a brand new marriage with a new wedding and fresh vows. I have been a poor substitute for a lover if not a husband, I put the bread on the table, O.K., I do that part pretty well, but my dear one, I will learn self-control and I won’t be selfish.

“Sometimes out here I actually have a free minute to think, and I see it all. I love you. Will you marry me? -- Douglas”

“Sweetheart, it’s O.K., everything is going to be all right.” It was the voice of Keezee, mellow and supplicating. “He isn’t dead is he? You said he --”

“No, no, he’s fine,” Grace gasped in the midst of convulsive sobs.

She found herself in the embrace of this loving friend. Keezee's voice was near. The woman embracing her in soft, tender arms, whose scent was somehow familiar, was present in Grace's mind despite the sobs of desperate energy that shook her body and unhinged her emotions.

She tried to speak. "He said we should start over. He asked me to marry him."

"But you are already married. And he's a good husband, or trying to be."

"Yes, trying!" Grace cried through her sobs. "And he says he has failed me."

"Well -- maybe you have failed one another."

"No, I'm the one. You saw me looking at him."

"At Blake Allen?" Keezee said: "Grace, calm down. You've been alone for over a year and it never was all that terrific with Douglas anyway, you said so yourself, but marriage is --"

"Is what? Say it." Grace was wiping her eyes and stroking her aching throat.

Keezee said, "It's always a compromise."

"I don't want a compromise."

"O.K. but what's perfect? You're dying for happiness but who's happy?" Keezee asked reasonably. "Today your heart is breaking either for Douglas or Blake Allen, and you claim you won't compromise, but just suppose there was no war and Douglas had never gone to sea, he'd be working downtown at his business, you'd have more money which is the Vaseline of happiness but I'll bet you'd come to me sobbing that you were missing out on life. You've called it a stupid middle-class existence."

"Yes," said Grace taking in a deep breath. "That's what I mean by compromise."

"So instead you are getting a dose of romance and just look at how --"

"Don't call it that. It's not romance," thinking of a heaving ocean and an irresistible current bearing her faster than she could imagine.

"Call it what you like, it's certainly not boring. You aren't pregnant, are you?"

"How could I be pregnant!"

"I only know one way. Anyway if it's not that, all roads are open."

"Not so," said Grace categorically. "The doors are shut."

"Why? If you love Douglas, accept his proposal. If you love Blake Allen you can at least hope that someday you two will --"

“Don’t you see,” Grace said almost pleading, “that Douglas wants me to marry him. He wants to be fair, to give me a chance to leave him if I insist.”

“Well, that’s kind of -- noble -- isn’t it?”

“Yes. It is generous and kind!”

“And you keep saying you love him -- in some abstract way.”

“Damn you, Keezee, why can’t you see?”

“I do see. You’ve fallen for the Dashing Warrior and you are starved for love --”

“Or just sex” Grace interrupted bitterly.

“-- so you feel guilt and crazy self-destructive happiness. It’s an old story.”

“To you. To me it’s --”

“Look, you’re a married woman who is trying like a demon to love her husband and keep away from the man who could be the love of your life.”

“Douglas is the love of my life, he’s my husband.”

“Your barren conventional bourgeois life.”

“No, no, you don’t understand.”

“My dear girl it’s you who don’t understand. He’s trapping you with goodness.”

“He is not deliberately trapping me but I am trapped.” By this time Grace had recovered and could challenge Keezee with a defiant stare. She said: “I married Douglas of my own free will.”

Keezee responded with an exasperated face and Grace pressed on:

“I tell myself I am not a liar and a slut.”

“And do you whisper to yourself that I am both?”

“Not at all. I respect your freedom and I envy you.”

“But every letter I write is a lie and every night, or at least whenever possible, I am a slut.”

Grace sat silent, seeing an argument she could not win.

Keezee didn’t let it go. “A woman who does what I do, because she wants life, is your idea of whatever it is you must never be. To be certain of never being me you will sacrifice anything. To be truthful, according to your idea of truth, you will live a lie, by which I mean live in holy matrimony with Douglas. To be a good wife, which is apparently what you believe you

must be, regardless of all else, you will lie down and give your body to a man you do not love, whose touch makes your skin crawl.”

“It does not! What we have is not the best I can imagine but -- If I say I won’t compromise it means I go to Blake if he wants me -- which I have no reason to think he does -- but that would be --”

“Wait. You’ve already got a good man who is trying to learn how to be a good husband. And the other guy, your hero, what do you really know about him except his gorgeous muscles and curly jet black hair and sparkling cynical eyes?”

“Only that,” Grace conceded.

With truth in the air she carried out her plan to chastise Doug Junior for eavesdropping, presenting it as a question of honor. He promised never to do it again but she saw that he considered her scolding unjust. She felt the sting of his disapproval.

That night, as she lay awake and trembling with a strange energy -- like a dream but more like a waking dread -- agitating her and keeping her awake -- going at the speed of fear and gaining intensity, gaining horror -- starting with --

She discovers she is pregnant, and takes a fierce satisfaction in being the mother-to-be of a child of Blake Allen -- then, as if pulling her husband out of an obscure corner she sees Douglas’s face as he reads her letter of confession -- then she sees that it would be much better if he died, painlessly of course, not like the men swimming in the burning sea, dies before he has to endure the knowledge that his wife will bear the child of another man.

“I’d rather die myself.” But this can’t be. If she dies the child dies. Cruel, ghastly. So -- suppose Douglas dies. Then her boys will deduce the truth and hate little Master Bastard and drive him away and ruin his life.

Thus will the proud Grace Stanley, wife of a successful businessman, resident of Hopewell Drive in a respectable suburb south of Dayton, Ohio, home of NCR, Mead paper, Ohmer Register and five divisions of General Motors, a place where goods and services are produced in abundance by regular people living regular lives -- thus will Grace Stanley betray her husband, her sons and herself.

The daydream ended and she realized she didn't want Douglas to die, that his death would be unendurable. And some obscure department of her mind revealed to the rest that she did not want Blake Allen to marry her; but she did want him to take her.

Chapter 18

Hit Hard

Blake Allen had a letter. The handwriting sent out a nervous disturbance that reached all his brain receptors at once. Staring at her bold strokes he might have fallen in love all over again -- might -- but did not. The No required an effort, his new happiness resisting the allure of his former misery.

It was a short note: "Dearest One, please telephone to Fulton 4313 in Ypsilanti. Eva."

Eva -- "his" Eva -- had learned to read and write textbook English in school in Poland, but the meager practice she had in speaking the language had been guided by a Polish teacher who learned it from another Pole. When she came to America she had spoken mostly Polish with her family and their circle in Detroit. Holding the envelope Blake Allen could almost hear her overly perfect pronunciation of words that she strung into sentences not always grammatically correct. But -- English was her only weakness. And if she wanted him to call her now, six months after they separated forever, it was not because she was weakening. If she wanted to "be together" she'd be hard to stop.

He got off the bus in Oakwood two miles short of Mrs. Stanley's house. He went into the Far Hills Pharmacy ("D.D. House, prop.") and converted a five-dollar bill into coins. He closed himself in the phone booth and took the note from his shirt pocket. "Fulton 4313, Ypsilanti." He inserted a nickel and dialed "O." He gave the number to the operator, who asked him to hold while she called for the routing. She then told him to deposit one dollar and ten cents.

The voice that greeted him was the voice he knew best. "Eva Dybek. Are you there?"

"Eva, it's Blake."

Then: "Oh Blake" -- spoken in the gravely musical tones she used when she wanted to be reconciled after a fight, when she took the initiative in the healing, often when he was still enclosed in his anger. She was faster at forgiveness than he, as well as quicker to anger, and she could never understand why a quarrel should continue after she decided to end it. "Oh Blake," spoken in that tender voice, was her way of asserting that no disagreement should be permitted to

overpower love. When she spoke these two syllables she always paused as if she knew he would respond with forbearance and charity equal to her own.

He asked: "What are you doing in Ypsilanti?"

"I work at Willow Run. We make bombers."

"Right. 'It's being done at Willow Run.' You're in the factory? I can't quite picture --"

"I was in factory two weeks to learn planing mill but they give me job in Personnel.

Maybe I will stay here when war is over."

"In peacetime they'll be making cars in that factory," said Blake.

"Cars, airplanes, Personnel is Personnel. -- But maybe they take all soldiers back and send women to kitchen and children's room, yes?"

Blake had a little difficulty imagining her in either place.

He was beginning to sweat. He turned the toggle switch over his head but the fan did not come on. He opened the screeching folding door half way.

Eva said, "Dear Babest," the first phrase in a love poem.

He was not merely Babe, he was Babe's superlative, "Babest." He recalled the day he had explained superlatives, and her delight in inventing "Babest."

She spoke now with an inflection of certitude, knowing he would catch the whole freight of memories loaded on that word.

"I know what you feel," Eva said gently. "It is O.K. The control of you by anger."

"Nothing is controlling me," he said.

"Blake, I do not want to be alone all years of this war, and I must tell something to you."

"What?"

"Later, Dear One. I was afraid," she said. "I want to explain my fear."

"There is never any need to explain fear."

And she asked, "Are you afraid now?"

"I'm realistic."

"Means fear and hope mixed together?"

"Something like that."

"Then we must be together. I see now my mistake. I had not courage. I ask that you say yes to one request."

"What is it?"

“I want to come visit you soon. Two nights. I have money and I may take days off. Please, Blake.”

The cruel answer would be no. The weak answer would be yes. Those were the only possibilities.

He said, “No, Eva.” He heard her take a breath.

She said, “Blake My Only, don’t make me do this by the phone.”

“Do what?”

“Talk of subject of our break. Please try to see --”

“We talked it over a dozen times. You insisted on it. You drove me away.”

“Drove?”

“Pushed. You sent me away.”

“Blake, I know that. I loved you then but now is hundred times more. I lie awake asking how I did it. We were happy and in love. You loved me. Did you not?”

“Yes.”

“And that love must exist now, but I have injured you without a heart in me, that you can’t feel it, all you can feel is the pain that I refused you.”

“I don’t feel any pain.”

“But I know what you said. Every word is loud in my memory and tortures me, and everything is true. But love doesn’t die, Blake. Please say I may come. I have enough for two nights in hotel. Please. I want you so badly, and I am so ashamed.”

“Why,” he began, trying to put coolness in his voice, “after six months --”

“I can’t go on with it. I cannot stop my love’s progress. I made selfish, foolish decision and I ask you to please forgive, dear Babest.”

“I already forgave you. You persuaded me -- I guess -- so you don’t have to spend your money to come here and ask me to forgive you.”

“Blake, please, is not necessary to be cruel.”

The operator broke in asking for a dollar for three more minutes. Blake dropped four quarters in the slot, staring at the number 25 and listening to four gongs.

“If we were together again,” Blake said, “I mean if we got engaged again --”

“Or married?”

“ -- you’d be alone for months, maybe years, and that’s what you said you couldn’t stand. The Germans are still strong, the Japs haven’t felt the sting yet, and I might go down. You said you couldn’t live with that -- that’s the terror you couldn’t stand. Because you -- ha -- loved me too much.”

“‘Stand’ means what?”

“Endure. Live with it for a long time.”

“Oh Blake sure I will stand it. What I cannot stand is to be without you for my lover.”

“And if I go down,” he continued relentlessly, “then you’ve wasted all those years waiting for somebody who’ll never come back, dead or in a Nazi prison camp which amounts to the same thing. The waste was what you refused to -- you wouldn’t risk it. You claimed you loved me and I have to believe that in some unique way of your own you did, but -- wasn’t that your whole point?”

“I can’t understand you, but I don’t blame you talking your anger.”

“What was your point?”

“The separation. I explained that, but there is more, Blake.”

“I’d rather not hear it.”

“Blake, agony and fear of reading about the bombers going down. I was not strong enough.”

“You are strong, Eva. That wasn’t the problem.”

“You are saying then I didn’t love you, and that is not fair.”

“That’s the way it looked to me. Talk about fair. Now I have to wonder -- I don’t know what.”

“Tell me.”

“I think --”

The suspicion flashed in his head that she was pregnant and wanted two nights in bed to make him believe he was the father.

Blake said: “I loved you, Eva. We planned a future. We talked about ‘after the war’ no end.”

“Yes dear Blake.”

“Now you say you weren’t strong enough, but you’re the strongest person I ever knew, certainly stronger than I am.”

“I was weak and selfish and I didn’t know how deep was my love.”

“I agree on the selfish part.”

“I thought my mind could be more strong than my heart.”

“So you gave me the boot.”

“What means ‘boot’?”

“You kicked me out.”

“If you say it that way, yes.”

“You say love doesn’t die but yours did.”

“No. I did not live until I loved you, Blake.”

“But you let six months pass before you realized ‘the depth of your love.’”

“Blake, that voice is not my Babest. -- I spent weeks trying to reason myself not to call you.”

“Right. Love isn’t always reasonable.”

“I love you so deep is not reasonable, that is my discovery.”

Blake went silent. She must have thought the line was dead because she said:

“Are you there?”

“Let me think,” he said.

“Don’t think, Babest. If you want me, say yes. Two nights.”

The suspicion was losing force. She was incapable of such a deception. Selfish, sometimes openly so, she was always honest. Her saying “If you want me” ran through his mind and touched his feelings.

“You think if we make love,” said Blake, “everything will be O.K.”

“Just to see you, Dear One. I only think that if I see you, you see me, and if I can prove my love, you will see that I acted from fear, and you will forgive because of our love.”

Blake was still silent and Eva said:

“Not knowing that you are my own true love and that I cannot stand life without you.”

“I think you don’t mean that literally.”

“That I don’t want to try. Trying would ruin me -- to say ‘I must live without him.’ No, no.”

He remained silent and he could imagine her soft, lustrous blue eyes as she waited for his consent.

Expressing a broken thought she suddenly said: "Unless you have other."

He did not speak.

Eva said: "Then of course I respect your freedom, and pay cost of my fear."

"You were the one who said we were both free."

"I remember."

After an unendurable silence he said: "Don't come."

Had he been hastening from one woman to the other, out of fear, he would have been stumbling along just as he was doing now, rushing along the gravel shoulder of Route 48 into the glare of oncoming headlights, unable half the time to see his footing, holding a hand up to block the glare.

"God I have hurt her, she loves me, I don't love her, why can't I love her? I hope she doesn't come. She's certainly capable of it. No, I'm sure now. It's Grace."

He knew more about himself than he had ten minutes ago; it seemed he knew all that was necessary. This was his knowledge: that he would soon be flying against Germany and that he wanted Grace Stanley.

Approaching her home he saw an Air Corps staff car in the driveway. This sent a lightning bolt of terror into his heart. Being a roomer he did not have to knock. He stood outside the kitchen door listening to the voices of men unknown to him. Then he put his hand to the latch.

When he entered they all went silent -- the two boys, Zack Jarman and his new roommate, named Nick Petropolis, and Grace, who stared at him as if she'd never seen him before -- and a major and a captain he did not know. The major seemed to be staring at Blake with special interest -- and Blake thought: "He's brought my orders."

Zack Jarman said, "Major, captain, this is Lieutenant Allen."

They shook hands. The major said he had come to inform them that their friend Wesley Welles had gone down over Germany.

Blake said instantly: "That can't be true. He hasn't had time to get there."

“His orders were changed,” the major said. “Instead of going south and flying a plane to England he was sent directly from here.”

Blake saw the major’s mustache, his chin, his sharp truthful eyes.

“His plane,” said the major, “was seen going down in two pieces.”

Blake saw two pieces spiraling.

“There were no parachutes,” said the captain.

Blake saw parachutes blossom, but did not believe in them.

“They are listed by Eighth Air Force as missing,” said the major.

Blake saw that Doug Junior and Little Phil knew what “missing” really meant. Looking at Grace, he saw that she was hit hard, and he wanted to embrace her. Of course he couldn’t do that.

Chapter 19

The Unthreatened

The lurching and swaying of the train -- the car seeming to thrust its wheels from side to side in search of the tracks -- disfigured Grace's handwriting, as her sentences disfigured her conscience.

"Dear Douglas --"

How flat and unfeeling. Yet she could not write "Dearest" or "My Beloved." And to write "I love you" was likewise beyond her power. If he should die without the answer he seemed to be begging for she would carry the scar on her soul forever.

"Dear Douglas -- It is good of you to take so much fault on yourself but I think you are too hard, both on our marriage and your role in it. To me the marriage has always seemed to be based on the kind of love that endures -- not wild passion -- but then I have always believed that *passion* is not the same as love. And we, my dear Doug, were passionate enough when our love was young. Now it has moved onto the firmer basis of harmony, family and shared history."

After apologizing for her handwriting she explained: "I am taking the train to Pittsburgh to see a friend whose husband was one of my roomers until a short time ago. He has been shot down over Germany and is presumed dead, although listed as missing. Nancy is living in our house and looking after the boys till I come home in three or four days.

"Doug Junior especially was broken up by the news. Little Phil took it with a grave, manly bearing. You would be proud of both boys. They liked the man -- Wes Welles -- a good, gentle man with a lovely wife who has a child at the breast. Her name is Jenny. I feel very close to her.

"You may ask, did I know him well? Not really, but he was a man one instinctively respects and likes, and Jenny is a sweet loving mother and I know she loved Wes with all her heart. And I love her. I cannot bear to think of her fear and grief -- because so long as they list him missing she will hope. Hope and despair will tear her up faster than certainty ever could, I think."

She wrote faster.

"We will start our marriage afresh if that's what you wish. You may propose again and I will accept. You know that. We are a family, Douglas, and we must not break it up. Rather than

blame one another let us acknowledge that love is all we need. We have that, and we have our boys. Need I add that we have each other? There is nothing to justify your feelings of guilt or inadequacy -- if those are your feelings -- or your apparent belief that our years together have been a waste."

She felt a twinge of revelation in that last word. The years could have been different. Raising the boys had so filled her with loving happiness that she had scarcely noticed the absence of real love for a man.

Still believing the letter would fall short of his need she wrote: "We love each other, Douglas. Hold to that, as I do."

This was so transparently false that she doubted it would persuade him. The absence of a plain "I love you" was the most conspicuous thing in the letter. She sealed and addressed it and stared out the window.

Some fields were still green with rowen but most, particularly the corn, had been harvested. Here and there cattle were grazing the aftermath. The scene was sere and bleak, with bullet- or bomb-shaped hay stacks rising out of the sheared ground. Some of the fields still exhibited long rows of corn reared in bunches cinched at the waist; these had once been the norm but were rarer each passing year as machines took command of the harvest. Many of the barns, on their painted sides, exhorted the men to chew Mail Pouch tobacco; and along the highway that ran with the tracks Grace read a series of red signs: "Substitutes / can do more harm / than city fellers / on the farm. -- Burma Shave."

She was traveling through the level, fertile center of Ohio, leaving Columbus behind and curving northeast toward Cochocton, then east to near Steubenville, with a crossing of the Ohio River into West Virginia lying ahead -- thence into Pennsylvania, then Pittsburgh.

The room was clean and not depressing. In fact she heard herself asserting that it was "not depressing at all."

"I have to fight that," she said. This was not her home but it was perfectly satisfactory for two or three nights and anyway -- "Is that my home?" -- meaning: was she fully entitled to

call her house her home? Maybe she belonged in a hotel in a strange city as much as she belonged anywhere.

She stood in the center of the room looking at the bed, the table and chair -- the generic water colors of generic flowers -- the open door to the bathroom -- and she felt the need for courage. Unthreatened by any enemy, with sufficient money in her purse, sheltered from the sleety rain striking the window panes -- she felt the need and repeated the words "Courage and will, courage and will."

She lay in a warm bath thinking, as a woman does who cannot fully control her thoughts, that hundreds of others had lain in this same tub and many were unclean or diseased. Her skin now pressed against the same surface. She rationalized. This surface was enameled precisely because enamel is easily cleaned. It had looked clean and was clean to the touch before she turned on the water. And so: Relax. Don't be squeamish. She lay with closed eyes for half an hour, adding hot water every few minutes and waving her knees to stir the heat. She realized later that during this interval she had not been conscious of her feeling for Blake Allen -- thinking of the boys, of Wes and Jenny, and of her train ride through country untouched by the war -- but when she rose out of the water and began wiping herself with a thick, luxurious towel, it came back strong, the newness and necessity of her love. She felt the sensuality of the waving of her knees now, as she had not when in the water. She looked in the mirror and thought that Blake would surely praise the woman she was admiring.

While lying in water she had realized that her letter was false twice over -- to Douglas as a lie, to herself as degrading. Lies degrade the liar; she had always believed that, even though she had no occasion to preach. Once in high school she had cheated on a Latin exam. Otherwise her record was almost clean. She observed that her motive was pure, to spare Douglas anxiety and pain. "I really have no choice," she said. When she said she would marry him again she spoke the bitter truth.

She was now so deep in thought that the image of the naked beauty stood before her unseen. "But what if Blake -- is afraid. He heard what the major said, two pieces, no parachutes. Blake is -- Blake is flesh and blood." Blake's need could be her justification. "If he is terrified behind his facade, if I see his fear, if I -- if he needs me, yes!"

She found that she was standing on a damp bath mat and that her feet were wet and cold, her body bent forward as if for warmth.

She dressed in wool socks, a black skirt and dark green sweater. She took her beret and raincoat and went down the hall to the elevator, where she dropped the letter into the mail chute, and watched it slide down within the glass. She took the elevator to the lobby, ate a light supper and caught a cab to Jenny Welles's address. The rain was thinning out but cold.

On seeing that the doorbell had been taped over Grace hesitated. Could this mean "no visitors"? She had noticed a lighted window. She heard the taxi pull away behind her. She looked at the numbers nailed to the wall at eye level and checked them against those she had written on a card in her purse. A car passed behind her with tires hissing on the pavement. She asked herself whether it wouldn't be better to let the sufferer alone.

A woman was reaching out from the dark rectangle of the doorway. Grace had neither knocked nor made any other sound. The woman took her hand saying: "I was sitting by the window. Come in. You must be Grace."

"I am."

"Come in."

The woman helped Grace take off her coat and took the coat and hat to a room aside. In the dim light of the hall she said:

"I'm Betty Owens, Jenny's mother. We got your telegram. You must stay here. Where are your bags?"

Grace explained and Betty Owens listened without comment then led the way down a hall to the kitchen where a single light burned over the stove. She had paused and pointed to a closed door off the hall. Grace thought of this as the entrance to Jenny's chamber of grief.

Betty Owens poured boiling water into two cups and gave one to Grace. A tea bag floated in the steaming water. The two women sat at a table in the breakfast alcove.

Betty Owens said: "Bless you for coming. She has told me you are a wonderful person."

"I am not wonderful, but she is kind to believe I am. Or does she think I am the luckiest woman alive? I am very lucky in my boys and my -- circumstances. I have met Blake Allen. He wants me. There's Baby Charlie, such a plaintive cry. Jenny is leveled. She is hurt. I wonder if she

has accepted the truth? Or is it the truth? No parachutes -- the odds, 80.5. If they send Blake to the Eighth Air Force --

“Why doesn’t she tell Jenny that I’m here? She looks pretty old but I can’t see how she could be more than fifty-five, if Jenny is about twenty-five. Is she alone? Jenny has never mentioned her father. Look at her eyes, how they protrude, yet she is an attractive woman. Why else would Jenny say ‘My mother lives in Pittsburgh’ instead of ‘my folks’? Or he died, an accident or cancer. Everything is subject to the loss rate.

“Start our marriage over again, make it beautiful. I want love and beauty. If I could pray I would do it now -- Don’t send him! Two pieces. Here we sit drinking tea and she’s asking me about my family, naturally, but it’s rather *unnatural* that she has not said a word to explain why -- Let me see Jenny! Could she be -- crazy? All of sudden somebody tells you your husband has gone down and you must deny it in order to go on living. Deny the truth. Or -- He’s safe somewhere on the ground, some German farmers have surrounded him and taken him to the army. He’s in a prison camp. He will survive by the strength of his soul and the health of his body. They will not torture him because they cannot hope to extract any valuable information, they know it already, they are doomed! Good. Damn them all.

“Her eyes seem so tired and yet they shine. She’s been up with Jenny and the baby for three days, cleaning, cooking, changing the baby, handling well-meaning callers who maybe should leave them alone. She’ll say ‘I’ll tell Jenny you stopped by.’ She will protect her from the need to make conversation, to thank people for coming when she has no thanks to give.

“Blake will roam over my body with his eyes -- he will say I am beautiful. That is fortunate if true but what counts is courage and will. I can get by without beauty but I need courage and will. Blake is a strong athletic man and they want to kill him. He will see my body and he will not be disappointed. Blake wants me and may believe he loves me. ‘Grace, I can’t take my eyes off you.’ That is not necessarily love. Giving myself to Blake in the act of taking and submission I would run a danger. Would it be a misfortune if I fell in love? I sense in myself, body and mind, heart, this slow-acting seizure.

“This woman seems to be wholesome, somebody I can imagine raising Jenny to be the good person she is. I can’t imagine Mrs. Owens committing adultery or even thinking of it. I know her by knowing Jenny. Jenny is made of the best, she loves unreservedly, Wes and Baby Charlie.

“Why not a single word about her? She did say in the beginning ‘Jenny has been very delicate.’ Why do I fear for her mind -- when it wouldn’t destroy me if Douglas died. That is my shame. What is this secrecy? She knows I came a long way yet she says nothing. I should feel shame but I don’t. Keeps asking about my children and husband. She says he’s lucky to be in the Navy. One ship sunk, two hundred men perish and that’s lucky.

“What do I see in those eyes? She seems to go alert every few minutes and look around fearfully, apprehensively. She looks into every corner. ‘Yes of course, Mrs. Owens, I’ll come back tomorrow.’ ‘Things may be better then.’

“What’s that cry? Do they have a dog? Surely it wasn’t -- ‘Mrs. Owens, please, isn’t there something I can do? Can’t I --”

Jenny led Grace to the couch and sat close beside her.

Leaning toward Grace Jenny whispered: “I’ve lost my voice. Howling. It happened again after you left and now I can’t speak at all.”

Grace looked into those glittering, eager eyes and didn’t know what to say. She put her arms around Jenny and held her, listening to her breathing and feeling the slight motion of her body. Still holding her Grace said softly, quietly -- they were so close --

“Jenny I am with you.”

“Yes,” in a whisper.

They separated and looked at one another with love and something deeper born of Jenny’s suffering, and then Jenny slowly lifted her hand and touched Grace’s cheek and whispered:

“He could still be alive,” looking into Grace’s eyes as if to instill confidence.

Grace said, “Yes, we must have hope.”

“Hitler made a big mistake,” Jenny said.

Thinking she couldn’t have heard what she heard, Grace felt a dilation of panic in her chest. She didn’t know what to expect.

Jenny said: “They’ll all die. Much good it’ll do me but it’s got to happen.”

Grace said, “Yes, yes,” trying to follow Jenny’s thread.

Jenny explained: "I mean the Germans."

"Oh I see."

"Do you know that song?" Jenny asked. "'They started something, and we're going to end it, right in their own back yard'."

"I've heard it," said Grace hoping that Jenny wouldn't go much farther on this track.

Mrs. Owens came in carrying Charlie well wrapped in a blanket. She said: "Charlie and I are going for our walk. Why don't you girls go out for lunch?"

Jenny asked Grace: "Are you hungry?"

In fact she was very hungry. She had thought it best to call before she came, but there had been no answer until well after noon. Now she admitted she was hungry and offered to take Jenny to lunch.

"I'll get my coat," Jenny whispered.

Grace had never taken hers off. She had not been in the house above five minutes. They all went out together. Mrs. Owens put Charlie in his carriage, and Jenny adjusted the blanket around his chin and straightened his little knit cap. Her hand lingered on his cheek, as it had on Grace's, and she stared at him with eyes Grace could not see because of the bend of her head. Grace saw dark curls escaping under the band of her cap.

Jenny straightened and whispered, bending toward Grace and looking into her eyes, "He needs me, I can't give up."

"He does need you. He is a lucky baby." Grace regretted this immediately. She had meant to say the boy had a fine mother and was lucky on that account.

"He's not lucky," Jenny said, and nothing more.

Mrs. Owens set off pushing the carriage in one direction and Jenny led Grace in the other. Grace asked if she should call a taxi but Jenny kept on walking as if she were alone.

They walked for fifteen minutes in silence, except for the wind buffeting them. They came to a corner with a traffic light. Across the street was a diner fixed up to look like the dining car on a train, with blue metal panels accentuated by chrome strips, and windows wider than high. The two women went inside and took the only empty booth. The place was packed and noisy, and Grace could not hear Jenny's whispers. The girl was obviously speaking more or less continuously and looking around as if the crowd were a beast that bore watching. Grace strained to understand but was not even sure what Jenny was talking about.

They ordered hamburgers but the waitress said the meat was gone. “The first shift ate it all,” she declared. “They eat in shifts. The first always cleans us out. No meat at all tomorrow. Wednesday’s meatless.” She offered egg sandwiches with one egg each.

Grace ordered one. Jenny was paying no attention, so Grace ordered for her.

Grace surmised that the crowd were office workers from some nearby factory. She knew there was no point in inquiring about this of Jenny. Then she decided to do it, to direct Jenny’s thoughts to something mundane.

She put her question and Jenny said “war workers” -- which Grace caught by reading her lips. Having surveyed the crowd a second time, noting how boisterous and cheerful they were, she returned her gaze to Jenny and saw that her mouth was open wide. She was lifting her hands and curling her fingers next to her ears. Her eyes were growing large, staring at Grace with a wild glare, and she started making a long sound which Grace did not actually hear, because there was nothing in it to distinguish. It was mere gasping.

Pressing her hands against her cheeks Jenny distorted her mouth. She beat her back against the wooden seat.

Grace got up quickly and slid onto the seat beside Jenny, took her in her arms and rocked her and spoke to her. Jenny pulled free and fell back far enough to keep Grace in focus, still staring at her. Grace recognized the word “No” and then all she could hear was a rushing sound as if a scream had been stripped to the breath propelling it. She pressed Jenny’s face against her shoulder and rocked, and spoke in a whisper in her ear, and grasped the hand with which Jenny had begun to scratch herself on the cheek.

Sliding to the end of the seat Grace gently tugged at Jenny, saying, “Let’s go, we’ll go home now.” Jenny at first sat inert, still staring at Grace, then she followed. As they stood in the crowded aisle Grace put her arm around Jenny’s shoulders and drew her close -- and the people opened a path. There was noise elsewhere but not near the path, and Grace bore Jenny through the crowd and out the door. The wind shook them; a gust unsteadied them; they paused to get their footing and moved awkwardly together toward the corner. Jenny was sobbing. Grace held her close as they waited for the light to change. Hearing the voiceless, gasping sobs of her friend Grace started crying too. She saw the light change from a red to a green smear. They made their miserable progress along the sidewalk toward Jenny’s home.

Grace's whole body seemed to absorb the trembling hesitations and stops of her friend's grief. She listened, as if detached, to the consoling sounds of her own voice -- as if she were listening to a kindly but ineffectual stranger. When Jenny whispered and turned her tortured face toward her, Grace leaned closer. Unaware of the wind's force as it swept over the two, yet conscious of each small hushing whisper -- even the ones she could not understand at all -- Grace would press Jenny closer and respond in some way, with some incoherent words. Jenny's suffering had invaded Grace's spirit. Her attempts at comfort and consolation had no effect. Jenny searched Grace's eyes as if in hope, as if ready to be persuaded that there was good somewhere in the world.

When they reached the house they heard the crying of the baby.

Mrs. Owens met them, holding the unhappy Charlie. Jenny opened her coat and sat on the couch. Mrs. Owens lowered the precious bundle into its mother's arms. Jenny unbuttoned her blouse and gave Charlie her breast. His cries ceased. A tear ran down when he closed his eyes. His fingers found a resting place on the breast and he sucked contentedly. Mrs. Owens wiped Jenny's tears with her handkerchief, and Jenny closed her eyes.

Smiling, opening her eyes, looking up, she beckoned Grace near and said, "He's my little champ."

Anxious to be with her boys, conscious of a vague unrest whose origin she could not locate, Grace packed hurriedly and did not even glance at herself in the mirror as she left the room. She stood waiting for the elevator, staring at the brass plate -- "U.S. Mail" -- seeming to see her letter sliding down. This freed a shallow wave of distress, likewise unknown in its cause -- then she saw a shell-like, rounded ship's hull rolling in a burning black heaving ocean, and a man swimming with leaden strokes in a circle of flame. She realized -- as if her logical mind had proven a theorem -- that he could choose drowning if his fear of burning was too strong. The man was not her husband. This was articulated clearly: "He is not Douglas."

She rode in a cab with three others, each going to a different place, and finally arrived at Jenny Welles's house. The cabbie had agreed to wait ten minutes and then take her to the station.

Looking at Jenny, and baby Charlie sleeping on her shoulder, Grace did not see the swimming man, but she was still the woman who had seen him. She and Jenny sat on the couch again so that Grace could hear. When she leaned close she sensed the clean milky odor of the baby, redolent of an era in her own life.

Jenny's eyes, enlarged by pain, netted with tiny, red, struggling veins, fixed upon Grace's as if in terror.

Without prelude Jenny said in a throbbing whisper, "I am bad. I deserve it."

"Jenny -- please -- what do you mean?"

"I wanted him to die. I was crazy but that's no excuse. I kept watching him falling, he was so afraid, he reached out for something to grab onto -- I watched -- oh God -- "

Grace embraced her with desperation in her heart, denying she could have wanted Wes to die. Three faces drew closer, almost in contact, breathing the same heated air, the sleeping baby, and Grace and Jenny in an agony of intimate communion.

Grace could not understand all of Jenny's whispered lament. What came through was that she had "seen" Wes falling through the sky time and again, heard his scream, seen him reaching out -- and seen the plane spiraling.

Trying to gather her thoughts Grace said: "Jenny, dear, this is natural, it is your love and sympathy. Of course you visualized what you feared the most, the worst possible thing that could happen to you and Wes, the man you loved with your whole being. Your love was crying out for protection."

"No!" Jenny breathed. "You don't understand. I saw it all before it happened, weeks ago."

"I do understand."

"Almost from the start I kept seeing a crash, an explosion, a wing breaking off, Wes screaming. I knew he was going to die."

Remembering what she had heard through the door to her boys' room Grace said: "That doesn't mean that you desired what you feared."

"I did, I did!"

"Jenny, don't accuse yourself so mercilessly."

"When he said, 'flight school,' I didn't oppose him. I wanted to be the wife of a hero. You are too good to believe it but it's so. Evil, ungrateful, such a wicked, Godless woman! Me!

I tell you I kept seeing all of it and it fascinated me, I saw the gold star in the window. God I am cruel. Sometimes I wanted to see it, I didn't try to stop it, it was so thrilling."

Holding Jenny at arm's length, squeezing her shoulders, Grace tried to catch the eyes that now evaded hers.

Grace said: "Your love, your fear, fear and devotion --"

"Yes God I love him."

"Of course you do. Those imaginings were the voice of fear. Don't you see, you had come to realize that he was the center of your life and Charlie's, that you --"

"Especially after Charlie came."

Grace paused before asking: "Do you mean to say that you had these visions after Charlie was born?"

"Before and after," Jenny said. "Mostly after."

"I know what it was. I had some of the strangest, most --"

"Strange? Evil! I am selfish and evil!"

"Jenny, dear," said Grace searching Jenny's eyes and seeing nothing but horror. "Listen to me. After my first baby I was a stranger to myself and to my husband for weeks. I didn't know what hit me."

"You were not wicked. You didn't want him to die."

"Neither did you. You feared his death as I fear my husband's, but I don't want it and neither do you. It is inconceivable to me that you could want Wes to die. If he has actually died --"

"If. You said we still could hope. I can hope, you said it."

"Yes, hope is better than despair."

"Hope," said Jenny, "is what people do when they are hopeless. Hope is for the lost, the ruined."

"Jenny, you may not have certainty for a long time. Until then you must hope. If after the war you learn the worst, you will be better able to bear it than you are now."

"I never will be."

"Hope is a choice. It may be the best one." Grace was trying to reconcile honesty with empathy and couldn't quite manage it. She said: "Believe that he is alive until you know for certain that he is not."

“He’s dead. They call it missing. Finally I’m a hero’s wife.” After pausing, but not very long, Jenny said: “You’ll miss your train.”

“I’m not going,” said Grace. “I’ll pay the cabbie and get my bag.”

“No. You have your boys and they are more important than me, and anyway what can you do for me?”

“I’ll stay, I’ll sleep on this couch. We’ll take Charlie on a walk.”

“No, Grace. Go to your boys.”

She wanted to address her letter “Dear Valiant Sufferer.” But --

Instead she wrote: “Dear dear Jenny --

“You were right, I miss my boys terribly and besides, I can’t impose any longer on the friend who is staying in my house watching over them. You met her at the football game -- Nancy, the teacher. And maybe I can speak to you more clearly in a letter. And Jenny, we will meet again. I will come to you, or you and Charlie will come back to Dayton for a visit soon. This is not the end. We are friends now, you are important and dear to me, and I hope you feel the same.

“Forgive me for having spoken so freely -- for presuming to advise you on hope and despair. I am not fit to advise you. But on the subject of those terrifying imaginings I have some experience of my own. I have never seen a love so tender and pure as yours for Wes. I am convinced he returned your love completely. I blundered and said your baby was lucky. I should have said, What greater blessing can a child have than parents who love one another without reservation, with selfless, freely given devotion?

“I will always look up to you in admiration for the strength and beauty of your love for Wes and Charlie. Such love is priceless.”

Chapter 20

“Try to Imagine the Consequences”

She was reaching out to take his hand. Hers was warm and firm.

The darkness was almost perfect but she led him unerringly around the stone parapet and down a steep, brushy slope. “Careful,” she said just above a whisper. They went down to the level of the stream, where the brush and grass had evidently been flattened by the last freshet. The stems were bent against them but the walking was easier down here and for a few paces they were able to proceed side by side. Turning, he could see the bridge against the sky, a dark shape suggesting itself in the darkness. The sound of the stream was now louder, the water tumbling over boulders that Blake Allen could not see except in his imagination.

“A few more steps,” she said and guided him away from the edge of the stream. She said, “Here,” and stopped.

Letting go his hand she crouched down and said “Stand back a little,” which he did, carefully, because the earth dropped away at the edge. She was doing some kind of work down there.

She took his hand again and drew him gently down, and he found himself kneeling beside her on a blanket.

“There are two blankets,” she said. “We can have one above us and one below. We won’t be cold.”

Cold was the farthest thing from his mind. Her voice told him that she was, for the present, a woman different from the one he thought he knew. This was the time to kiss her but he hesitated -- blocked by a force he was afraid to call fear. “Kiss her. Go on!” He believed she assumed he was a rakehell pilot who took advantage of every opportunity that a glamorous uniform and a wartime scarcity of men afforded. She couldn’t guess the truth, that he was incapable of controlling his body in the crisis.

Equally incapable of resisting her, he leaned forward and found her lips. They met his with an accuracy that thrilled him, and their kiss alone might have driven all restraint from his mind. She had prepared this place and given this kiss of her warm, yielding lips. So she must be feeling the same desire as he. Incredible! He did not know what women wanted and had

never found out during his engagement to Eva. This woman was not Eva! Eva needed intimacy and physical tokens of love. In return she gave him, when they lay down, the means of a physical satisfaction. She apparently assumed that that was the end of which her body was the proper means. She wanted marriage and willingly offered what she thought he needed as her part of the bargain.

But Grace Stanley was not doing him a favor. Hers was the kiss of a woman whose hunger merged with his own. Kissing her, Blake Allen felt a terrible need to satisfy her need. In the midst of a kiss that could have driven him wild he found a motive for sanity. He found her need, and he resolved to fill it. That she should let it be seen -- that she should believe he was the one to help her -- these quick, flashing, reckless ideas stirred him and taught him his masculine role of deliverer. He must deliver her from this desperate incompleteness.

He knew how it could be done. At least he knew that much. He restrained his own desires, denied his own need, and gave her the kiss and caress that her responses told him she wanted. This must not be done too quickly or mechanically, but with rhythm and tender consideration. He thought there must be an art to it but he could only follow an instinct of generous touch. To him this meant love. In her arms, with the touch of her naked body beneath his, with her joyous motion and passionate whisperings, he discovered that he loved her.

When he understood that he was doing well, that she had spread her legs and was urging him forward, when he heard her whisper "Please" -- then he thrust in, thinking to surprise her with a sudden shocking penetration. It was a mistake. The person surprised was himself.

He could hardly believe it but the signs of the end were already upon him. Who would want to stop this? Not he. It moved from the rear forward, a deeply gratifying progress, and when it was halfway along he surrendered. Instead of trying to stop it he pressed forward in the current of its power. So it was that two dozen throbs (he counted) made his defeat the most glorious of his entire life -- and he rested panting on her breast.

After a while she made a lifting motion and he rolled off.

He apologized. She told him it was O.K. This deepened his chagrin and he apologized again.

She said, "Blake, it's O.K."

But it was not O.K.

A car went by. He watched its lights flicker through the woods. Then a gentle rain began to fall, then a heavier downfall, soaking them and their blankets. They rolled up the blankets and dressed, wet clothes to cover wet bodies. Blake asked what they should do with the blankets.

Grace said: "Leave them. I'll get them tomorrow."

They walked hand in hand up Big Hill Road, dodging into the woods when the lights of a car gave warning ahead. When they had reached the top of the second hill they were warm with exertion but soaked with cold rainwater. Blake noted with surprise that she took a turn away from her house. Soon they entered a street he did not recognize, with houses widely spaced on the left but only a woods on the right. She led him into a driveway -- not her own. He did not ask and she did not explain.

Two or three windows on the second floor were lighted, none at ground level. They crossed the front of the house as the rain continued pelting down, but with diminished force, so they were walking upright, like two lovers out for an evening stroll. Grace led him to a room or porch projecting from the main structure into a grove of majestic old trees whose trunks rose black into a gray sky. The treetops were dimly illuminated by light thrown from a high dormer. He followed her along a narrow path. She stopped at the door and groped up and down both edges of the frame, and he saw the door swing open. They went inside.

Grace crouched beside a low table, and Blake heard a match scrape across sandpaper, and saw the flame stand up and give its light to a tall candle. Grace stood erect and said quietly:

"We can dry off here."

They were in a heated room furnished like a porch with two wicker chairs and a canvas-covered couch. There were tall windows in three walls and a set of French doors in the fourth, leading to a large darkened space, perhaps the living room. In the candlelight Blake saw two blankets and two towels neatly folded on the couch.

Grace began to undress, and Blake watched -- "stupidly," as he remembered later -- before he removed his jacket, then the rest.

He thought: "Will the rain hurt this leather jacket?" He remembered his mother telling him it would. Not this jacket, but another. He slipped into a wordless vision of his mother

serving dinner, his sister and father and himself at the table. Not a beautiful woman, he knew, but -- his valiant, suffering, lonely mother.

Grace was drying her hair, and bent to dry her body. He still held his towel -- he watched her, seeing a marvel. He had an impulse to dry her body for her, but he held back.

She spread their clothing over a pair of old iron radiators, which dated the house to the 1920s, he thought. For a second he tried to place those radiators -- where had he seen such things in his boyhood?

Grace had wrapped herself in a blanket but Blake did not follow her example. He approached her, struck by the alert beauty of her face in the candlelight, as she raised her eyes to him. He parted the blankets edges, revealing her body.

"I just wanted," Grace began, "I mean all I intended was that we should dry off and get warm."

To him this meant: "I am not making a demand on you."

But she did not remove his hands from the edges of the blanket. He guided her toward the couch.

She slipped out of the blanket and spread it on the couch. She lay down. Blake lay beside her and covered them.

"Do we need that?" Grace asked.

He agreed they did not, and he flipped the top half of the blanket aside.

Grace said: "I thought we should dry off because -- if Jarman saw you -- wet -- coming home late -- he might wonder."

Blake advised: "Don't dry the blankets in your basement."

"I will not," she said. After reflecting a moment she added: "I can dry them by the furnace in the daytime and --"

"Yes. Before we come back from the Field."

She added: "And before the boys come home from school."

They were silent for a while. He kept their bodies in contact all along their lengths, till she said:

"We must be very careful. Try to imagine the consequences."

"I'll be careful. I will never talk about this to anybody, ever."

"Jarman could be dangerous," said Grace.

Blake did not sense any fear in her voice. He said: "I don't like the way he looks at you."

"Neither do I. But we cannot let my fear ruin this."

"We'll be careful," said Blake.

She kissed him. Her mouth was soft, not quite open. Her taste had changed. It was now more like earth. He thought of rain on leaves.

He said, "I love you for your beauty and courage."

"You can't love me so soon," Grace said, "it's not possible, if love means what I think it means."

"I already love you, Grace."

She seemed to think that over before saying: "I have never been this happy."

He thought: "But she said she loved her husband." He debated whether to speak of this and decided it could poison the air. "I want to make you happy," he said, not knowing exactly what he meant.

But she seemed to know. She said: "I am already happy. You don't have to prove anything, just lie here beside me."

"Separately?" he asked.

"Separately. But we are together now."

He felt her breasts, her belly and her thighs against him, and drew her even closer.

"Not close enough!" she whispered. "Closer, closer!"

He squeezed her and they laughed.

The taste of her kiss was no longer pure but the effect was stronger. She was gentle and yielding but there was no disguising what she wanted. He was more confident now, and perhaps a little more considerate. His greater care and -- perhaps, love -- seemed to reach deeper into her psyche, her responses seemed to exhibit a deeper happiness. And he felt the same, for she had not been disturbed by his failure.

He did not speak, having no words to express his sensation and his feelings, but she said his name several times, each time with a keener emotion that was close to ecstasy, but may have been joy, or both.

He found no conflict between care and love. His care, with its touch of art, was not insincere because his desire to make her happy was selfless. Loving her, he hoped to please her. He could please her by patience and care. He wanted her to precede him, and now it seemed

possible. She was more demonstrative and vocal than he had expected, and this aroused him -- the sounds she made and the phrases that came out half-formed, and the way she arched her back and twisted.

It seemed to him that her body was controlling her mind, her personality, and that he was controlling her body. She was not the same person, her personality was in abeyance, and he could, with the slightest motion, stretch her on the rack, but it was the rack of bliss, not torture. Somewhere in her shuddering body, behind her gasping voice, the woman Grace was no longer herself but a stranger, half wild and half deranged. This ecstatic stranger was going through a dance of exquisite agony, which Blake's subtle motion lengthened, from which he took all pain and sorrow, a dance of wild bliss.

Time did not stand still, rather it stretched out, and Blake was amazed. Thinking of the woman within the throes, he was smitten with a tender sympathy for her, intensifying his love -- and it was perhaps the love that betrayed him. The signs were there -- they must have been -- the warning dilation -- but he was too intensely in love to notice. It came on suddenly and he could not stop it. At the height of her ecstasy his body discharged energy in a series of hot jets that lifted her to a higher plane of oblivion.

She descended slowly, still pressing him against her breast and still calling his name, softly and -- as he thought -- with love. They lay side by side, breathing.

His clothes were moist but warm. His socks were almost hot. He dressed slowly, watching Grace. He didn't need to know and therefore didn't ask "Whose house is this?" When they were both ready she bent to blow out the candle -- but let it burn, and came to him and took both his hands in hers.

She said, "Go right at the end of the driveway, then take the first left. Take the next left and you'll be headed toward my house. I'll cut across the fields and be there before you. Don't hurry. Give me a head start." She paused and seemed to be thinking, then looked at her watch and asked: "Will they still be playing cards?"

"Not likely. We fly early tomorrow."

"Will you be all right?"

“You mean --?”

“Will you get enough sleep?”

“Sure, I’ll be fine.”

“What will you say if you see Jarman?”

“You mean tonight?” He sensed her concern.

“Yes. He may still be up, I suppose. He may be wondering where you are.”

“More likely he’s in bed reading a skin book. I’ll say I took a walk and stood under a tree to wait out the rain.”

She pondered this, with doubt in her eyes.

He could see her clearly and searched her face for the wild stranger. He said, “This is too risky.”

She said, “No,” and again, “No,” then asked: “Would you be in trouble?”

“If we’re caught? I don’t think so. They might ship me out but they’ll do that soon enough anyway.”

“Will you volunteer for England?”

“No.”

She embraced him and held him, and let him hold her, for a long time. She kissed him with a lover’s tenderness. She left, and Blake Allen sat staring at the candle.

Chapter 21

The Man of the House

Doug Junior caught a phrase here and there, no more. They must have moved the card table; or maybe his mother had moved it to its regular place where she folded and stacked the laundry.

Jarman's voice: " -- missed you last night -- wetter'n hell--"

Blake Allen: " -- two or three hands then I gotta--"

Somebody: "Deal the damn cards."

"Gentlemen," Jarman was saying, " -- strolls by night -- rains cats and dogs but he's gotta have his --"

Nick Petropolis, the new roomer, broke in: "Jarman, for Christ's sake, deal."

"Yeah."

"Yeah," said two others.

And Blake Allen added: "Yeah, Jarman."

"Or you'll slug me?"

"I won't slug you and I apologize, I lost my temper."

"Apologize! Jesus H. Christ, he's apologizing."

" -- sorry, stupid, crazy --"

" -- accept your humble -- How gallant, how Hollywood. Breaks my jaw, then 'I apologize.'"

" -- didn't break your--"

"But you tried."

"Jesus, man -- impulse -- smacked you -- I'm sorry."

" -- share the goods? This comrade in arms on my left, for example, he's willing to share the glorious Squeezy, right buddy?"

A man replied: "Go to hell."

" -- pittay," said Jarman in his British accent, "teddibble pittay. You being an officer and a gentleman I thought -- you'd share Mistress Squeezy -- and Blake here -- share the landlady."

All that came up the chute then was furnace noise, for three or four minutes until Jarman went persistently on with:

“ -- so how is she?”

The Keezee man, named Hank, said, “I told you she’s--”

Somebody said, “The next street over, the house with the--”

Doug Junior was getting hotter, as if his brain were too full of blood.

Hank: “ -- I got my hands full. You guys be sure and fight the war for me, OK?”

“ Hey -- same deal, eh Blake? We got us two famous ladies right here in the neighborhood.”

“Jarman, be careful.”

“What! Gonna clobber me again, break my jaw? Squeak squeak, I fraida Big Blake!”

“ -- don’t make me do something-- ”

“ -- gee willikers, he’s gonna b-b-b-bust my j-j-j-jaw.”

“Can we play some poker?” from an unknown.

“Tell me what she’s like, OK? I mean -- hot, steamy, torrid--” It was Jarman. “ -- drags those titties over your face?”

There was a silence, and Doug Junior pictured them all waiting for an explosion.

Jarman said: “ -- why not walk in the moonlight and see if--”

“Jarman, please,” said Blake Allen, “accept my apology.” This in a tone that Doug Junior had never heard from Blake.

Jarman’s voice: “ -- a lady on her good behavior.”

“ -- never touched her,” said Blake.

“Really! Never!”

“Jarman, please, don’t do this.”

Doug Junior was thinking: “Smash him. Slug him. Knock his teeth out.”

Blake Allen said the awful word again, “Please.”

Lying in bed with his legs trembling Doug Junior summoned up the night when he rescued Signe Ann Steele. Signe Ann Steel was not a fast girl -- not a prude either. The big question in school was whether you respected the girl. In this story she was already naked when he reached her. He never undressed her even in his mind.

He was on a dock beside Indian Lake when he heard her call for help. He dived into the moon-skimmed lake and swam a long way out. He came upon her just as she slipped beneath the glittering waves. He did a surface dive -- amazed that by projecting his legs straight up he could drive his body straight down, one, two body-lengths. He groped in blackness and touched nothing. It was cold down here. Rising for air, heaving in deep breaths, he could see nothing but the shifting surface and night sky, no lights, no shore.

Signe Ann walked the halls at school in a green-and-black plaid skirt, with white bobby sox rolled down to reveal well-muscled, suntanned calves. She wore a severe black sweater fitted to her figure, displaying the astounding progress of her body. This was the girl who called him Senator, half, perhaps, in mockery, since he had been elected class president. This was the girl who had looked over her shoulder laughing when she caught him staring at her going away. It seemed she understood everything that baffled him and laughed at everything that daunted him.

If she had said, "There is something you're supposed to do with me, but I doubt you can do it," he would have thought: "I doubt it too."

Plunging down on his second dive he probed even deeper in the colder strata. He found her wrist and grasped it, and shifted from a downward path to upward, pulling her with him and supporting her when they reached the air, listening with triumph to her breathing and taking joy from the way she shook the soaking strands of hair from her eyes.

He tilted her backward so that her legs rose on either side of his body. He and Signe Ann were now face to face and close. He swam in the open space of her legs while she gripped him by the shoulders and looked steadily into his eyes.

The flow of water over her breasts created rounded swells; her breath warmed his face and her hands communicated trust. Her legs touching him on either side made an undulating pressure as his rhythmic kick propelled them to safety.

When they gained the dock she wrapped herself in a towel and they sat side by side. She rested her head on his shoulder.

Signe Ann Steele was in his mind all the time. When the guys at school discoursed on girls and sex, and made jokes to cover their ignorance, he never joked about Signe Ann. He was magnetized by her vleys. He would never harm her but some day -- not yet -- he would seize her. He knew what men and women do, and he could almost imagine himself doing it.

Too old to cry, too young to fight, he stood outside his mother's door with the little night-light gleaming yellow down there like a snake or a lizard. His father's parting words at Rumble-Tumble Station rang in his brain: "You're the man of the house now, Doug."

What does a man do?

"Even if I had the guts to slug him I'd only make it worse. Blake clobbered him and look at how he --"

He fought an impulse to knock on the door. He could see her sitting up in bed reading, wearing her peach-colored "bed jacket" -- that's what she called it -- this beloved --

That was a word he did not use even mentally, but strangely, he thought of Little Phil and of his love for her, expressed in tears when he was sick or scared, or an adoring gaze. Doug Junior's love found permissible expression in Little Phil's; he was one with his brother on this, not I but "we" love her.

He did not knock. Supposing he went in, what would he say? That Jarman called her a "famous lady," meaning what? That they called her friend "Squeezy"? That Blake Allen was pleading with Jarman to act like a man of honor?

Back in his bed he tried to revive the rescue of Signe Ann Steele, but it didn't work. Even if he had really rescued her, even if she were actually naked (impossible) she'd never consent to being laid on her back and would never spread her legs.

But he believed self-hatred and contempt were wrong. He was not stupid or contemptible. There were those who taught shame, especially churchmen, and that was why he didn't go to church except when his father forced him. Life was different now that Dad was gone. He didn't have to listen to lectures on his faults every Sunday.

"Blake is a man, a pilot, a football player. He'll defend her."

A minute later, coming full awake in a sweat, he exclaimed: "Coward! Chicken!"

Chapter 22

The Only Way

Kneeling in the indented place by the stream Grace lifted the blankets to her face, sensing their rough texture and earthy smell. They were wet and heavy, they chilled her hands.

She paused to look around her. The longer she stayed down here the higher the chance that somebody would drive by and recognize her car -- actually Douglas's car. But she lingered, to see the impress of their bodies in the grass.

Carrying the blankets down the cellar stairs she was forced to look to the side, around the burden she held in her arms, to make certain of her footing.

She dragged the card table, which the men had moved to a spot between the furnace and the laundry hamper, out of the way, then strung a length of clothes line and hung the blankets to dry.

Again she looked at her surroundings. A space that had in some sense defined her as a woman had been taken over by men. There was the card table and packs of cards, the mahogany box of stacked poker chips in red, white and blue, the ash trays that somebody had emptied and wiped out -- and the air still carrying traces of beer, cigarettes and cigars.

This space was the locus of half her life. Upstairs and outside were different and she a different person, less isolated. In this room -- with the washing machine, laundry tubs, ironing board and work benches (one for each boy), and no sign of Douglas, here she lost herself in housework. Yet the power that sustained this life was Douglas's money. What she contributed was labor and submission.

Keezee was always saying that marriage was compromise, but Grace wondered if she didn't mean submission but was too proud to say it. The name Keezee brought up a vision of the porch and of the towels they had thrown aside. Grace had been careful to re-fold Keezee's blankets and place them where she had found them, but the towels were discarded -- evidence. So she could expect a call or even a visit from Keezee. Subtly, indirectly but inexorably Keezee would probe for a report. She had once told Grace that she had given up on religion when she discovered that the true path to heaven was sex with the right man. "You can't have a live spirit

unless you've got a body," was Keezee's main thesis. She didn't come that day but shortly after lunch on the next Grace answered the doorbell and there she stood.

By this time Grace knew what she must do. She had already said in her mind: "There is only one way." The way was not submission only but submission was in it.

Keezee said with disgust, "You're surrendering in the wrong way to the wrong man. Obviously you've been to see Nancy, and she talked you into this."

"You seem to be saying I can't think for myself," Grace said.

"Think! What's thinking got to do with it?"

"A time comes," Grace said, "something happens, I believe it's called *thinking*, when you stand aside and see what you're doing to others, like your family."

"My god Grace, after what you just told me -- I mean! -- you're sitting on top of Bliss Mountain, you finally have got real life in your veins and -- "

"I never said anything about 'Bliss Mountain' or life shooting into my veins."

"Hey, I saw this man throwing the football and you catching it and galloping through the garden like a frightened deer and I knew this was the beginning of --"

"More likely the end," said Grace.

"Ha! I can read your eyes, Mrs., when you talk about him -- and then the gloom when you announce that under an adventurous exterior you're a sex Puritan. What's happened to your real self, the part that experiences -- shall we say mad happiness? If I had a man like that --"

"There are no other men *like that*," Grace said by way of enlightening her friend.

"Oh! Certainly not! There's only one in the universe and he's it."

"In fact he's just another man, of whom there are too many. And when I think of the trouble --"

"Don't give me that 'just another man.' This gent showed you a new world. We are all entitled to live there but few of us do. Look at the ladies in this dynamic manufacturing town with its GM and NCR and Mead paper and Dayton Rubber and see how the well-preserved matrons dress in their funny hats, white gloves and pastel suits when they go out for a roaring

time while the men slave at the office or play golf at Dayton Country Club or the Drumlin Club -- and of course Drumlin is the elite, the DCC types are eating their hearts out."

"And the ladies go shopping in Cincinnati," Grace contributed with some enthusiasm, "what a thrill!"

"Yea Sister. Or they will when the war's over."

"The war," said Grace, "has interrupted the meaninglessness of their lives. I may sound like somebody who's discovered the meaning of life, when in fact I've just been knocked on the head with a boulder."

"Sure you've been missing something but I doubt it's Douglas."

"I do miss him. How would you know?"

"Two little words. 'Trap' and 'desert.' They tell the story."

"If I said those words I must have been exaggerating."

"And were you exaggerating while that candle was burning? Do you know how much is left? I took one look and said, 'Lucky girl!'"

"You are too hasty."

"And you are too humble."

"I am being rational. You wouldn't understand."

"Why-ever would you insist on being rational?"

"Maybe because --" Grace hesitated, looking at Keezee and wondering what was driving her -- friendship or self-interest. "Maybe," Grace said, "if I seem what you call humble or timid or -- it's because -- O.K. I admit it was marvelous. -- Do you know that poem of John Donne where he says --"

"I think I won't ever see a poem lovely as a tree."

"-- speaking of his mistress he says 'my America, my new-found land.'"

"I'm a poet myself," Keezee claimed. "Mystical bliss, delirium, blazing darkness. You'll never get there by listening to a sermon from Nancy."

"I told you, I have not talked to her. Anyway what makes you think I've had some divine, celestial, screaming, ecstatic -- And since when does that give me the right to betray a husband who loves me and is a good father to our boys?"

"Stop a minute," Keezee said.

Grace waited. Keezee's Irish was showing in her face as if from physical exertion.

Keezee said: "You did it -- right?"

"Did what?"

"Let this man make love to you."

"That's a dumb question at this point."

"Right. But why?"

"Another dumb question."

"Not so dumb when I'm asking somebody who claims to be rational. Did you have a rational reason?"

"Yes. I was dying for him. I see what you're driving at," Grace said. "You want me to admit I'm an animal. All right, I am! Now what?"

"Now we're getting somewhere," said Keezee.

And it seemed to Grace that her friend's face was getting redder, and that her own was burning.

Keezee went on: "When I saw that man playing football I said, 'If she doesn't want him --' You know the rest."

"Take him!" Grace cried. "He's yours."

"Right, while you stagger off to your own private desert. He showed you an oasis, you drank the water and now you say you'd rather drink sand."

Grace said almost to herself: "Keezee, shut up."

Chapter 23

One Chaste Kiss

She held the little V-mail close to the candle, to see it, not to burn it. Douglas must have written it when she was in Pittsburgh and had sent it at the first opportunity. Somewhere in the Pacific Theater of War it had been reduced to microfilm, then a Navy plane would have flown it to the US, where it was blown up to reading size and sent through the mail to her home, all in a fifth the time required for a normal letter. The V-mail shook as she read it, as if for the first time, and her soul trembled, as if for the first time. She read as if her mind demanded suffering, as if her mind was cracked.

Slowly and soundlessly the door opened. The door had windows from top to bottom and Grace saw the reflection of the candle slide one way and the other. Blake was walking toward her. She rose and was half aware that she was stretching towards him. Then she found herself within the circle of his arms. She was kissing and being kissed, and she was nobody's wife or mother, but only this man's woman.

"I apologized," Blake said, "but it did no good."

"No, he'll never accept your apology."

Blake looked at her with uncertainty in his eyes but continued: "I told him I had never touched you, but he didn't believe me."

"But how can he be so certain?"

"He must have -- well, when I hit him I --"

"That proves nothing."

"It planted the suspicion. It was a stupid, reckless, careless --"

"Yes, for sure, but don't say any more."

"I was playing hero. It was pure -- showing off."

"Please, Blake, no more. We both wish you had restrained your heroic impulse, let's leave it at that."

"You're too forgiving."

"Because I need forgiveness. So -- how much does he know?"

"All I can guess is that he heard me come in late the night it rained."

“Our night by the bridge.”

“And here in this room. Look,” he said, “your friend gave us a new candle.”

Looking at the candle she almost smiled.

Blake said: “Maybe he got suspicious when I moved into Wes’s room, the one over the garage.”

“But that’s a better room, and private,” Grace reasoned. “Anybody would prefer that room. Anyway you flipped a coin, you told me. Surely he couldn’t think we planned on making love in your room.”

“All I can tell you is that he seems pretty certain.”

“And this conversation took place in front of an audience of pilots from the Field?” she said in a fit of gloom.

“Yes. I had to grovel and lie. So that’s what I did.”

“Thank you, Blake.”

“I’m sorry, I’m very sorry.”

They sat in silence, Blake holding both her hands, looking with a grave, worried gaze into her eyes.

Grace said: “You were right to stop him if he was saying -- certain things about me. I don’t care what the price is.”

“Grace, Sweetheart, of course you care. Your whole life here, your boys --”

“There’s something you don’t know, Blake. But you already think we have to part, I can see it in your face.”

“Yes I do, and I hate it. But if we go on, we wreck your life.”

“If we part, my life is a desert.”

“What do you mean, there’s something I don’t know?”

She handed him the V-mail and watched his expression change from inquiry to gravity as he read it.

“Dear Grace my so-called wife.

“I got a V-mail from a ‘friend’ and it said ‘Your wife is having a dandy war, Mr. Stanley. Much better than yours I’m sure. Thought you’d be happy to hear it since you love her so much. -- Your only true friend, Lieutenant X, USAAF.’ If this means what I think it means,” the letter continued, “Grace my wife my wife my wife you can go to Hell. If it’s a lie, you better explain.”

Blake handed the V-Mail back, and Grace folded it, and held it in her hand, saying,

“This is a man who has a living sense of hell, systematic, calculated, inflicted suffering, and he is ready to throw me into the lake of fire, in which he believes. I hate these old, decaying images of evil. -- I’m no theologian. Are you?”

“You mean, do I stew about all that? No, I guess I’m pretty superficial. Right now there are two obsessions in my head, Germany and you.”

Following the “lake of fire” idea Grace said: “He sees me as inflicting suffering on him and the boys, as if I were a monster.”

“Deliberately?”

“That, or out of criminal carelessness, and maybe he’s right. He is right.”

“No he’s not.”

“He is justified,” Grace said calmly. “We have our boys, and you see -- he thinks -- But do you see, every word we say betrays us.”

“Sorry, but I don’t.”

“Don’t you see that we are on the brink?”

“You could lie to your husband, and I could bribe Jarman. Is that the brink?”

“That would be our hell.”

“I’ll do it,” Blake said, “if you decide. You have so much more to lose.”

“You think he’d take a bribe, money?”

“Your husband?”

“God no! Are you out of your mind?”

“Jarman then. I doubt it but I’m willing to try. Do you have any money? I don’t.”

“Have you ever done anything like that?” Grace asked, as if weighing a decision.

“No.”

“That’s poison and ruin,” Grace said. “We’d be doing for the first time something that --”

“We are already doing something for the first time.”

“That would be worse, don’t you think?” she asked earnestly, hoping for an affirmative answer, thinking that what they had done already was not really so bad -- she almost said it: “Our making love was more good than bad.” Speaking with resonance, gravity in her voice she said:

“To lie and bribe would be moral suicide. You wouldn’t be the same man ever again. But if we -- if I confess --”

“And I leave?”

“Yes.”

They pondered this till Blake Allen said:

“If we lie and bribe we deny the -- if I said the ‘beauty’ of it would you laugh?”

“If you said ‘beauty’ I’d love you even more,” she confessed.

“If we do those things we’d be acting like criminals,” Blake said as if this settled the matter.

“Do you love me, then?”

“I’ve told you. Have you forgotten?”

“I want to hear it again.”

“I love you. You are lovely, desirable and noble.”

“Oh Blake! Noble? Here we sit contemplating something degraded and filthy.”

“But we won’t do it.”

Grace said as if looking on a bygone time: “We were both so lonely.”

“Is that all?”

“No, dear Blake, I love you, but I’m trying to -- I don’t know what.”

“I don’t either, but it was more than loneliness, I hope. I for one wasn’t lonely, I just wanted you and that took up all the space in my mind. I wanted you so much, and I thought possibly you wanted me, so I touched and kissed you, and I was a different man and a better one, because I love you. I don’t want to deny it now.”

“But you could leave me?”

“For your sake, yes.”

“We are not acknowledging the most important thing, Blake.”

“That leaving would be -- hard.”

“That, yes, but also: we had no right. We don’t have a right to happiness or to one another. If I have no right to happiness neither does my husband. I must be a real -- I don’t know what. But that’s what I seem to be discovering. How terrible, but the truth.”

“You have to confess and I have to leave. Is that what you’re saying?”

After a pause to breathe she said: "That's what we must do. I confess and beg forgiveness, and you leave." She spoke as if passing sentence on some other wayward person. She drew back from saying, "An adulteress bawls because she can't claim happiness. How stupid, how revolting."

"Do you want forgiveness?" Blake asked.

"I want you."

"Well then," he began, hesitating, "which is it?"

"We have no choice," Grace said.

And he interpreted: "Because of your boys."

Grace rose from the couch -- afraid she'd cry or faint. She found herself facing him, as he took a step nearer. She reached for the coat she had draped over the back of the couch. She twisted into the coat, and, looking at Blake Allen, who returned her gaze as if he -- she saw that he couldn't believe what they had decided. She kept insisting in her mind that it was inevitable and right but, especially, inevitable. She started to button her coat but gave it up. Blake had never taken his flight jacket off. Grace stared at the dark brown leather and the gold-engraved wings. In the opening at his throat she saw his neck tie and khaki shirt, and her imagination offered her the sight of his chest and arms clad only in a white T-shirt.

Blake moved closer still. Grace thought: "I will kiss him -- one chaste kiss, goodbye."

She unzipped his jacket while he opened her coat. Only two buttons were fastened. She put her hands inside his jacket and the sensation was as if he had filled her arms with his body. She drew him into contact but she felt too heavily clothed. She withdrew, and at the same moment he pressed the lapels of her coat back and pulled them down to her waist. Her arms were now constrained. She could free them by trying to draw them upward but she did not. She met his eyes with a look meant to say: "I am a bound slave," and he returned her gaze in a very different spirit.

She leaned forward with self-awareness and presented her mouth. He kissed her, then seized her with frightening force and she yielded, parting her lips and accepting a kiss whose passion and heat made her dizzy. He had arched her body and pinned her arms more firmly

against her sides. Being otherwise helpless she became the aggressor in their kisses. She tasted tobacco on his tongue but it did not upset her; it was part of the marvel. She felt an abrasive scrape of his cheek on hers when she turned her head. Her feet rose from the floor and she allowed this to happen.

Her desire drove her kisses deeper as she yielded to him. But she wanted free. She did not want to escape but -- free, free -- She was wild too. She struggled in his imprisoning embrace and begged to be released. Her request had no effect except to strengthen his grip on her body.

She whispered close to his ear: "Give me a minute. Turn away."

He released her, her feet touched the floor, he turned his back. She could hear his rapid breathing. She struggled free of her coat, searched the pockets and found what she was looking for, and crouched down and accomplished her purpose.

Gone from her mind was the mental struggle of an hour ago, in her bathroom, when she had tried to deflect the question: Do I take this with me? Do I leave it here? Do I put it in now? While these collided in her head she glanced at her image in the mirror. She recognized herself -- thinking of -- consequences. On leaving the bathroom she took the little packet with her.

In the hallway she paused by her night-light, which was itself a kind of lie -- and listened at her sons' door. Then she paused again at the door of Nick Petropolis and Jarman's room. Blake Allen's door was closed.

Going quietly down the stairs she thought: "Nude Descending a Staircase."

She took her coat from the hall closet, secreted the little case in a pocket, and left the house by the kitchen door.

Having finished her task she rose, straightened her slip and skirt, and faced Blake Allen. With a slow, resolute motion she kissed him, once, and it was indeed a chaste kiss, but decisive. She felt her body rising again in his arms, then slowly lowering under his power. She marveled at the sensation. Her intellect knew she must have felt it in childhood. Her heart believed she had never felt it till now. He lay her on the couch and knelt and began unfastening her blouse. She lay still, her head turned toward him, her eyes watching. He did not speak. His face expressed grave concentration.

She caught a comic picture of this heroic pilot jumping on one foot and pulling off a sock. She tried to imagine how he'd get free of his shorts. She laughed, he looked startled, and

she grabbed his hair, short as it was, and pulled him within kissing distance, kissed his lips and said: "You gorilla. You brute!" This didn't stop him. She sat up to let him take off her blouse. He still looked very serious, but when he had removed the blouse he smiled in approval, then he went to work on the brassiere, complaining that the fastener was too complicated. She reached back and skillfully released it. He drew the straps down her arms to her wrists. He threw the bra over his shoulder, watching her as a naughty boy watches to see if his stunt draws applause -- then proceeded to her shoes, slip, skirt and panties. She lifted her pelvis to help with his final steps. She removed her woolen knee socks.

Then she lay back, watching him, listening to his exclamations on her beauty. She could not agree but didn't contradict him. She lay exposed, conscious of his eyes roaming over her body.

When he was half undressed she challenged him: "Can you take off your socks and maintain your dignity? Can you jump out of your shorts?"

"I'm fast," he said and threw his shorts across the room.

Grace laughed and pulled him on top of her. "Do not apologize whatever happens," she admonished him. "I am happy already and could not be happier."

The first part of this was true but the second was false.

The same mishap that had befallen him by the stream was repeated, as she knew it must be, from his eagerness, which she could see in his eyes even in the candlelight, as if it were a kind of fear -- and from the trembling of his hands as he caressed her face. His fear of another failure aroused the tenderest pity and love in her breast. She grasped those loving hands and kissed them, and told him all was well. She whispered: "Come into me now" and guided him. She said: "Slowly. Not so deep yet. Slowly, Blake dearest." She could no longer see his face, which was buried in her neck, but she heard his desperate breathing, and pitied his attempt to slow his rhythm. She had not as yet moved. "Deeper, dearest, but slower," she said as quietly as possible with her lips against his ear.

Blake said: "If I look at your face I'm done for."

"Dearest, everything is fine. Don't worry." But she knew the case was hopeless.

He gasped: "I've got to go deeper."

“Go, Sweetheart,” she said stroking his back on both sides from shoulders to buttocks. He was going mad, so now she encouraged him and commenced motions that she knew would carry him to a sudden, searing release.

She pleaded: “Let me see your face.”

He rose on his arms and looked down on her. He cried: “You are so beautiful.” His face changed as his spasms began, showing an expression that could have been acute pain or even horror, which was bliss and rhapsody. His throbbings pressed their repetitious splendor against the walls that she drew tighter, and she rejoiced in his cries. She exclaimed in sympathy, then moaned in time with his moaning.

When he had rolled off, and when his breathing had calmed, she got up to fetch a blanket. Returning, she saw him from behind, while he lay on his side facing the back of the couch, where she had lain. She let her gaze roam over his whole candle-lit length, and she thought that he was power and beauty in one man. His body still heaved a little as he breathed. His mouth and eyes were open, as she saw when she placed the blanket; and she noticed that even as he lay on one side his belly did not sag. He had a body of muscle and stone, flexible and strong.

She praised him and he responded by apologizing and asking if she were frustrated.

She thought, without malice: “You didn’t take me far enough for that.” What she said was: “No, dearest, I’m fine. I loved it. I was thrilled when you entered me and it was glorious. You are so beautiful and --” She broke off, and said after searching for words: “I am in love with you. You are my joy and happiness.”

She crawled over him and lay down facing him with her back against the upright part of the couch. Blake threw his leg over her. She had hoped for that. She drew the blanket up to cover their shoulders. Her only disappointment -- at this moment -- was that his face was in shadow.

He said: “You must want -- what I didn’t give you.”

She almost said “I do” but she cut that off. She almost said: “We’ll have other chances,” but she cut that off too, thinking: “Our last night.” He was caressing her hair and face, gazing at her with what looked like adoration, and she thought that this love was so precious that a physical disappointment counted as nothing. Here she lay beside this glorious, gentle, trusting man, whose physique was so magnificent and whose face so strong in its -- she thought in surprise, “Its courage” -- that she could not, dare not, demand the one thing that was missing.

And if, she reasoned, he must leave her, then it was probably better that way. She thought that two or three days would pass before Captain Foster, the billeting officer, found another room for him, and then -- darkness. Her mind ran ahead. Kick Jarman out, confess to Douglas, await the consequences. Live in darkness and deprivation. Make a religion of it like a nun. "Learn to live on what I do not have." Redefine loss as life. Redefine life as the courage to sustain loss.

Grace had been a popular girl in high school and college and knew she could get along without the approval of public opinion. But the boys were perhaps another thing. It was too late.

Then, wavering, Blake asked: "Should I beg Jarman?"

She considered this calmly and said No. She would hold to her pride, even when there was nothing to be proud of except the pride itself. Looking at Blake's shadowed face, holding the hand that caressed her, she swelled with love, she drank his love.

"Love alone will not hold me, uphold me, through the worst," she told herself. "It is I who must hold myself up, after Blake is gone." This "I" was a woman who had gained the love of Blake Allen. That was something. remember that.

He seemed to be trying to change their position. He had begun stroking and molding her breasts, and she wondered --

He pressed her upper shoulder but she had nowhere to go. She waited patiently, then he reached across her waist, placed his hand firmly on her back and moved her towards him. Still uncertain of his intention, she was uncertain also of what she herself wanted. If he tried again and failed it would be a cruel blow to him -- so she awaited his next move with a keen concern, but in those few seconds hope gained over concern, confidence, perhaps, over fear. Changes began to occur in her body. Whatever her mind might be thinking, her limbs experienced a languor and weakness but with a rush of preparation in her loins.

When he again pressed on her shoulder she yielded, rolling slowly on to her back and involuntarily moaning. She whispered, "Oh Blake" in humble gratitude, and his hand passed tenderly over her breasts, touching the nipples lightly, changing the shape of each breast as if he wanted his caress to be both light and deep. She was not sure at first whether the grazing of her nipples had not been accidental. He leaned toward her and now it was his mouth and tongue -- and she lay in perfect bliss, singing a song of breathless happiness, cradling his head in her arm and turning to take his kiss.

She managed to speak: "You know -- I don't need this." It was a lie and she trusted him to understand.

He had nothing to say. He was speaking a different language.

She intended to stir herself to action, for him, but she lay motionless, while the flood of internal energy coursed from her breasts down -- down, and her body -- in its own language -- begged for his. Reaching down to learn whether the moment was opportune, she discovered her answer. She urged him over. He took his place between her parted legs. She guided him and almost immediately she cried "Deep!" and he obliged. His manhood was as thrilling in its completeness as it had been before, but this time he was in control. She could detect in his measured rhythm and his careful variations of depth that his mind was present, and bent on giving her what she had missed before. The charm of his former wildness was absent, replaced by this strange generosity, intended by him to take her to some new place. He seemed to carry her along a winding, ascending road passing through mountain wilds, a path from which the fortunate travelers could see and smell the pines in the dark forests on either side. It was such a journey as this that she now began. She consented to be carried, and her companion proved generous, strong and capable -- until the road, still climbing, began to twist more sharply. The surrounding forests and rocks and cliffs threatened to choke off the road and leave the travelers stranded in the wilderness, dark and trackless, where they might be seized -- where almost certainly they would be possessed by a merciless madness.

The moment came when Grace was superbly conscious of his body's presence in her own, and of the slightest change in his style. She was keen to harmonize her movements with his. She was learning. Each new stroke and each variation showed what kind of man he was, and what kind of woman he believed she was. And he was always right. She concentrated her loving attention on this dancelike progress, and marveled at the way he controlled and enriched her -- enriched by controlling -- and her love was gaining, ascending. She was approaching adoration.

But her mind stepped in and said, "Is this the warning?" -- because she detected a tremor -- something she half recognized, that she remembered from the first time they had made love on this couch. It was not physical -- it seemed more like a new awareness in her mind. It was the precursor of a different life, a warning that the self she knew was not her only self. The body being carried, the heart that consented, these two together formed a personality known as Grace,

but she found that this was changing. There was an element of the passive; her intellect observed this with surprise. But his brilliance moving within her chambered self was awakening an active, demanding energy. The energy infusing her body was his but also hers. Even as she accepted his intrusion and loved him for it she was being transformed into a wild, hungry, devouring -- other. She was herself and she was him. She would make the one be the same as the other.

This man's power over her, originating in her consent, was calling forth her new self, the stranger, a native in the wilderness. Blake's manhood and his ballet of strength had already aroused the inner stranger, and she felt the first stages of that awakening while still conscious of Blake's pressure and size. They were off the road, there was neither road nor direction, only wilderness. Then in a throbbing blindness she lost any sense of Blake's character or his love, and she was in the throes of a wild force that was neither hers nor his. This was like the wind among the stars. It sent forth a tremor through the whole region where she surrounded him. Its violence was not what she would have expected had she been thinking, but she was not thinking. Her last perception before the crescendo was that his manhood was expanding within her. After that, there was no more control or intention. She was caught naked in a storm of wind, rain and lightning. The jagged bolts reached deep into her pelvic world and shook it with insane energy. She was in bliss, and she cried out her helplessness; she endured it, stroke after stroke and cry after cry.

When next an articulated thought found its way into her mind it was: "How long it's lasting!" At this stage, late, unaware of time, she nevertheless felt that time was not her enemy but her ally. The bolts were thrusts of energy shaking her world and measuring time.

As the storm subsided she began to marvel. She felt as one who has been re-created in spirit. That such an intensity of sensation was possible made a world in a different category and showed her her place in it. She lay back -- staring -- gasping -- reaching up to take his face between her hands.

Grace left the house first. Blake blew out the candle and waited in the dark.

Blake thought: "Now I'm supposed to find another place. Now she's going to write a letter. I might as well -- Why don't I --"

Grace cut across the field behind her house and entered through the kitchen door. She climbed the stairs, saw the night-light still burning by her door, and went into her room, closing the door quietly behind her. The reading lamp illuminated the edge of her bed and her books on the night-table. A stray thought: "Shall I read for a few minutes?"

In the midst of undressing she lost all awareness of her surroundings. She covered her face and said: "I can't!" The voice demanding "You must" was silenced in the convulsions of her sobs.

Chapter 24

“When I See a Certain Flyboy”

When Grace emerged from the shower she found the surface of the mirror covered by a film of condensing steam. The image she saw was more like an idea than a picture; and the parts that drew her attention were just the ones that would attract the eyes of a man.

She wiped the other mirror, the small one that formed the door of the medicine cabinet, and combed her hair, which then lay back in dark streaks that clung to the sides of her head. Her hair touched her shoulders. By the time she finished brushing her teeth the tall mirror had cleared and the streaks in her hair appeared softer. Her image was less suggestive and more accurate. She imagined that Blake approached her from behind, took her breasts in his hands and kissed her temples and whispered that he loved her. She lifted her breasts as he might do. This unlucky move reminded her of the pathetic shifts that she sometimes resorted to; it placed her in a past condition that was a preview of what lay before her.

In her bedroom -- also Douglas's -- there was a window she regarded with something like affection, except that she was not convinced that a person can feel affection for a window. It was small and placed high on the wall so she could stand before it without being seen from the street in her slip. There were two oaks and a maple in view, all of them mature and great. She could imagine the three standing as sentinels when her front yard had been a cow pasture. They gave shade and shelter to the cattle, in Grace's imagination. By looking at these trees in their sere autumn colors she hoped to reconnect with realities beyond her love. They must surely still exist. Any number of people of her acquaintance were not in love; they had no one upon whom to pour their intimate attentions, nor any one to caress and complete them. She reasoned that the end was implicit in the beginning, that last night was and could only be an erratic episode in a life marked by regularity and obedience; or (she could admit) by love tamed by obligation. It would still be love -- of a kind.

“I must be careful,” she cautioned herself -- not to devalue the old because the new showed colors and forms to which she had been blind.

“But how --” she began -- how could she accept two dimensions as a complete reality after experiencing three? She searched for a way to express her sense of transformation. She

had walked into a world previously unknown. Did this world transform her or was it her own transformation that introduced her into a new world? She had believed her former life was complete, a life lived in the real world. She had learned that life and the world were vast and varied. “Colors” or “forms” or “dimensions” were words, like “joy” and “fear,” that helped her understand what was happening to her. But she could not understand. She could feel the exhilaration of her “heart” -- yet another word -- and the ecstasy of her body -- and she had followed the mystical path through the body to a bliss of the spirit. She sensed all this but she did not understand.

Keezee had said, “When I see a certain flyboy --” something happens.

“Is my love the same as hers?” Grace asked this question because Keezee’s attachments, passions and errors had always seemed transient and reckless. “Now I am reckless too -- or exalted!”

She turned off the night-light and stood listening outside the boys’ door. She also listened by the door to Jarman and Nick Petropolis’s room. Then, looking through the open door of Blake’s room she saw a bare mattress, with two blankets folded and stacked at the foot of the bed. She knew Blake had brought a third blanket from the Field; it was not there. She saw what this implied.

She went slowly down the stairs -- a clothed woman, conventional and chastened, descending a staircase -- and saw, just beside the front door, a B4 bag and a pillow case stuffed with bedding.

She heard a page turning -- a newspaper. She froze. Then another page. She pushed the swinging door in the dining room that opened on the breakfast room.

Blake looked up with the expression of a man recalled from the trivial to the terrible. He stood, letting the paper fall to the table. She embraced and kissed him.

“I couldn’t do it but thank god you can,” Grace said. She had arched her back and was looking into his earnest brown eyes.

“Barely,” he said.

They kissed and Grace said:

“I love you, Blake. When you hold me I believe nothing can go wrong.”

“It can, though.”

“Are you really leaving?”

He said: "I don't want to wreck your life."

Grace thought: "Then stay," but did not speak.

They sat in facing chairs, holding hands, speaking quietly, with increasing urgency.

"I've made a decision about Jarman," said Grace.

"I want to tell you what I think," he interrupted.

"All right, you go first."

Blake Allen said with quiet certitude: "Don't kick him out. He could make one hell of a lot of trouble."

"Undoubtedly."

"He drops one sentence in the officers' mess and there goes your reputation. You'll always be the woman who slept with pilots while her husband was off fighting the war against the Japs. Your kids'll hear you ridiculed in school. Your neighbors will look at you differently. You'll be the best entertainment in town. And when your husband comes home he'll listen, not to you, but to everybody else." Blake Allen stopped and seemed to penetrate into her eyes as he said: "Some of the guys at the Field will --"

"They'll see me as fair game," she said calmly.

"What we call a target of opportunity," said Blake. "As soon as I go -- wherever they send me, others will -- maybe -- come calling."

"I'll be an Air Corps strumpet."

"I think as long as I'm in town you'll be all right. If I get orders people will start sniffing around your skirts."

"I can handle that," said Grace, "but the boys --"

"Listen, Grace, you could find out what it's like to be friendless. Or maybe -- unless you don't care --"

"How could I not care?"

"Your friend over the way doesn't seem to."

"You mean Keezee?"

"Is that her house?"

"Yes."

"They call her Squeezy. Maybe she doesn't have much to lose, but you do. And you've told me -- well, last night --"

They went silent; their eyes had plenty to express. At length Grace said:

“When Jarman puts on his British accent and stutters I can’t help thinking of Wes and I almost hate him. His eyes make me feel dirty.”

Blake tightened his grip on her hands and his gaze grew more intense.

She asked: “How long will he stay at the Field? Is there any way of knowing?”

“He’s a test pilot and an engineer. He could be there for the duration.”

“Wonderful.”

“But they are building barracks as fast as they can. We’ll all be living at the Field in a matter of months.”

“Months. You might as well say years.”

“So --” said Blake, “you’ve decided to kick him out?”

“Quite the contrary. It would be foolish to antagonize him. I’m going to let him stay.”

“Good. He could destroy you.”

“If that’s true,” Grace ventured, “if I think that way, shouldn’t I just tell him ‘Get out and do your worst, but get out’? If I’ve got any courage, any --”

“Grace, Sweetheart, this calls for brains. Save the courage, you might need it.”

“I’m sure I will. But I wonder if I can stand his presence in the house after you leave.”

“Well -- Nick Petropolis is a good man, and you can get somebody to take my room. Maybe Jarman’ll sort of fade away.”

“So you think it’s a simple decision.”

“Not easy but simple. -- Grace, you said you loved your husband.” He seemed to be waiting, and she said:

“Go on.”

“Tell me, how important --”

“Are you?” Grace asked.

“Yes.”

“How can I know?” she responded painfully. “I love you, I’ll be wretched without you. But I look to the end of the war and try to imagine us together, and I find it hard to do. I am so far ahead of you and have made such deep commitments, ones you haven’t yet made, maybe because the war got in your way. I am older than you --”

He waved that aside impatiently.

“ -- and I have two boys, and I can't simply crush my husband. I believe that in his own way he loves me.”

“In his own way.”

“In the only way he can. I sound so superior. But I cannot ask him to be somebody else. That's not to say I'm any better. It seems I'm a good deal worse. But with you I have found out what life is, or at least --”

“At least what an affair is.”

“Cruel, but O.K., a wartime affair. My dearest dearest Blake, I was half closed off from life, and I opened to you.”

Blake lifted his eyes toward the ceiling with a warning, and Grace heard footfalls on the carpeted stairs.

He said silently, “I love you, Grace.”

When Jarman and Nick Petropolis entered the kitchen Grace ran upstairs to wake her sons.

Half singing and half chanting she kissed one then the other with: “Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to school you go, a rook-dook-dook-da-da-dook-dook-dook. Hi ho!”

There was of course no bacon but she fried eggs for the boys with flakes of precious cheese added, and set out coffee and hot-cross buns for the pilots. Soon the men and boys were talking football, Ohio State as compared to Michigan. Grace poured a second cup of coffee for each man, then went back to the kitchen to get apples for her sons. The apples had been picked at Groby's fruit farm on Route 48 less than two miles away. Taking two from a bowl next to the sink Grace paused to listen to a shift in the conversation in the next room. Nick Petropolis was asking if another roomer was moving in. He had seen the bag and bedding at the front door.

Blake's voice: “Those are mine. I'm leaving.”

“Got orders?” Nick asked. He spoke in a mellow voice that seemed to issue from a chamber deep in his ample belly. He was older than the other two, older even than Grace. The men called him Pop. He was about forty.

Blake was declaring that he wanted to find a place nearer the Field.

She braced herself for a comment from Jarman but none came.

Doug Junior complained, “Aww, Blake, don't leave.”

Little Phil asked Blake if he was going to bomb Germany.

Grace started for the breakfast room but a sudden sob burst from her throat. She stood still, trying to control her features. There were no tears but her eyes were burning. It was tricky, but she put both apples in one hand, then pressed the heel of her free hand against each eye in turn. This relieved the burning and showed that her eyes were still dry. She found that she was listening to Jarman's voice.

"-- nothing lined up? Gonna sleep under a table in the mess hall?"

Blake Allen said he'd find something.

"But you'll come back for the football game Sunday, right?"

Doug Junior broke in: "Yeah, Blake, come!"

"You think he could stay away, my man?" said Jarman. "Not him."

The tone was hard to read. But she visualized Jarman's "hatchet face," as she thought of it, with its thick brows and sunken cheeks where the whiskers sometimes took shelter from his morning shave, of his small black eyes shining deep in their caves. Her anger started boiling again, thinking of his audacity and presumption -- knocking on her bedroom door!

She swayed a little; she was panting; but she was in no danger of crying, not now. "If I hate him I am degraded." An excellent precept, but it didn't disperse the heat and smoke.

"-- a regular visitor, you can count on it, Doug. You'll be seeing plenty of ole Blake, eh Blake, eh Loo-loo-lootenant?"

Grace thought of this as a perfect opportunity for Blake Allen to punch him again. Too bad it couldn't happen.

Some impulse which had no voice told her, in effect, Stop, but she was already on her way. Her legs did the work, she went along.

Entering the breakfast room she saw Blake Allen bent toward Jarman as if giving him a respectful hearing. She was conscious of putting an apple on the table before each boy, then, turning to Jarman, who was still seated, and looming over him she said: "Get out! Do your worst, just get out!"

He affected disbelief, as if nobody had ever spoken a discourteous word to him. He asked what she might mean.

"Leave! Don't come back. Go!"

Astoundingly Jarman started to argue. He had no place to go. She said, "Go to no place then!" He said his gear was still upstairs. She said, "Pack it." He said the bus was due any

minute. She said, "Be quick." About this time she was aware that Nick Petropolis was suppressing a smile.

The bus sounded its horn and Nick pushed his chair back and said, "By your leave, Mrs. Stanley."

She drew back to make a passage for his considerable bulk. Blake rose and pulled his jacket on. Jarman still sat in his chair.

Grace cried, "Are you paralyzed?"

When he got up to leave she watched his back.

Leaving the room Blake Allen turned with a rueful smile, and she laughed three or four hoots of genuine amazed hilarity. She said to her boys, "I'm not afraid of him. Wait, I am, but I'm glad! Glad, boys! Now get going."

They looked at their mother as if she might explode, packed up their gear and kissed her goodbye. She took a huge breath and laughed again.

The reliving of her outburst began the moment she found herself alone. How did it happen? Was Blake really proud of her? Was she proud of herself?

"Are you paralyzed?" A great line! And his face showed the measure of her success. "Jarman, you look positively stupid!" Another terrific line; too bad she didn't speak it. Or -- was she the stupid one?

She wanted to go outside and run. She thought: "I'll walk the boys to school" but this drew an instant veto from the Censor. The hidden but vocal Personage said, "You are a hypocrite," willing to present herself to her sons as a good mother, a good woman, whereas --

She pictured herself gaily walking to school holding a boy's hand on either side, swinging their arms and leading a chorus of "Hi-ho."

"I am not only cheating Douglas, I am deceiving the boys." There was only one answer. She must write an honest letter.

So after cleaning the kitchen and making up the boys' and her own beds she sat at her writing desk and took out a sheet of paper. This white expanse seemed to leer at her. She found that honesty is no easier to express in ink than deceit. She rattled off a dozen lies in her mind.

But a “true sentence” -- as Mr. Hemingway would have it -- would be an icebreaker. If she wrote something specific -- “I gave him my body” it would be needlessly cruel. Something abstract -- “I have been unfaithful” would be euphemistic and ambiguous. Cut him with the truth or fool him with a lie. For his own good, of course. But she had to respond to the V-mail that consigned her to hell, to eternal torture, shivering cold and blistering flames.

“Why not attack him for wishing me in hell?”

“Because he is right and you are wrong.”

That was simple enough.

She reflected that for days, for weeks and months, her sexual hunger had been her life. Now here she sat, in the same body, as one who had no sex at all. A surgical operation couldn't have done it better. She knew what the agent was, it was fear. During her short career as a slut she had forgotten one little thing, that her life was built around Douglas. She was best defined as his wife. He was best defined as the father of her boys. The boys were best defined as his sons. She needed them more than they needed her. And it was doubtful that Douglas needed anybody, but he certainly wanted the boys. Whether he wanted her -- under present circumstances -- She dwelt on this and found that she couldn't imagine that he would. In this web she was the only one whose tie led -- to Douglas or nowhere.

“You are thinking only of yourself,” said the Censor. And her own true voice replied: “I am.”

She uncapped her pen, then closed it again. What had stopped her was: “I love Blake.” This taken by itself was surely good. But Blake would never save her. Blake was impossible. Knowing that honesty would not save her either, but determined to write honestly, even at the cost of inflicting pain on a good, boring man, she wrote:

“Douglas -- In your absence I have forgotten your virtues. I have made up a caricature of you and lived, recently anyway, as if that were your true self. You have not deserved this, because the caricature is not in any important sense accurate. My first offense against you was the slow unconscious creation of this false identity. I do not claim that it freed me to lie with another man -- it did not. But when I lay with that man I was deceiving myself that it was the caricature I was betraying and not you. The caricature does not exist except in my dishonest mind. You do exist and it was you I betrayed.”

Realizing that this embedded a lie -- because she believed that the caricature was essentially true -- she seized the paper and balled it up and threw it on the floor where she couldn't miss it. She intended to burn it.

She started over: "Dear Douglas -- You proposed that we start a new marriage. I do not want to start a new marriage because I am in love with another man. It is unlikely I will ever see him again. There is no need for you to make me pledge to give him up. I have already done that.

"I have wrecked our home and sundered us from each other. I do not expect forgiveness but I ask it, not for my own sake but in the best interest of the boys. Please consider it. It would be better that way for them and perhaps for you as well.

"Do not worry about me and do not try to make up excuses for my conduct. I have lain with him and want him but will never have him. I feel obliged to tell you this, not to extenuate my offense but to put firm ground under your feet as you make your decision.

"There is no excuse for what I have done and even less for lying about it. You have been a good husband and father, and I have failed and betrayed you. I am sorry. My contrition is worthless but there it is. I am grateful to you for everything, but, as you can see, my gratitude is also worthless. -- Grace (how do you like that name?)"

Reading this over she saw how clever it was. She assumed her husband would try to find excuses for her. She proclaimed love for the new man without clearly renouncing the old. These subtleties had flowed from her pen as fast as she could write. She was a genius at infidelity on the first try. What a career lay ahead if Douglas insisted on keeping her.

She folded the letter and slipped it into an envelope but did not seal it. "I'll give it an hour," she said. "I think it's honest." It did not beg, blubber or lie. It did not ask to be "set free" because she already was free. Wherever she went, she would go on her own initiative. If neither man would have her she'd live as her own woman. If one or the other sought her she would think, evaluate and decide. She was in agony but free. She could let her love for Blake -- increase. If the agony increased as well, and she knew it would, she would accept it as the price of freedom. She couldn't strangle her love, but she couldn't fly to the moon either. She was free within her humanity, and her love was an element of that. She searched for a mistake in this reasoning and found none. Blake's lover, the boys' mother, free woman.

If Douglas begged her to stay and she agreed to do so she'd be putting herself in a cage, for the boys. She'd be confined in her husband's power for the rest of her life. She would be trading freedom for virtue. She contemplated this bargain with cold fear at her heart.

Having kicked Jarman out, written her confession and affirmed her love for Blake Allen, she felt like a gladiator entering the arena, never more alive than when facing -- that which cannot be evaded.

Chapter 25

Two Lovers

“Mrs. Stanley, this is Captain Foster. Remember me? The billeting officer.”

“Of course, Captain,” thinking: “No concessions.”

“Mrs. Stanley, I understand you have asked Lieutenant Jarman to leave your house.”

“Not asked. Told.”

“You made him skeedattle.”

“Precisely. His things are still here and I want them removed.”

“Yes yes. But you see I’ve got thirty new officers arriving day after tomorrow and I --”

“Take Jarman and give me two new officers, and you’re ahead by one.”

“Sure but right now I’ve got nowhere to put him, and I was wondering --”

“What have you done with Blake Allen? He was looking for a place nearer the Field.”

“He’ll be sleeping on a cot in a storage building until I can --”

“Heated?”

“More or less.”

“Put Jarman there.”

“Well -- Allen volunteered but Jarman is sort of demanding a normal billet.”

“A comfortable house with good coffee.”

“Well --”

“Yes, Captain, well.”

“But I mean, Mrs. Stanley, has Lieutenant Jarman committed any infraction, any conduct of a nature to bring discredit on the armed forces?”

“Conduct of a nature. Wow, Captain.”

“Or injurious to the good order and discipline of the Army Air Forces?”

“Nothing of that sort. I just don’t like him.”

“Anything in particular?”

She thought: “V-mail, snide remarks, stuttering, knocking on my door.” She said, “I have taken a *particular* dislike to him. Say it’s me, not him. Say I’m an unreasonable woman.”

“So you make no accusations against him? Because I might be able to arrange for him to be transferred to, say, Iceland. Ha ha ha.”

“I make no accusations at all, Captain. I just want you to get his things out of my house. Today.”

“Mrs. Stanley, seeing that we’re old neighbors, almost; I live on Canterbury --”

“I’d call us neighbors then. Excellent.”

“But put yourself in my place. Thirty men on the way, one freezing in a warehouse and, if you’ll forgive me, emptying his bladder in a bucket, another forcibly ejected by his hostess, and I’ve got exactly four places lined up as of now. I can’t just throw the new guys in a box.”

“Next, Captain, you’ll appeal to my patriotism. Would you like to pitch a tent in my yard?”

“It doesn’t have to come to that, but patriotism, yes, a potent word in these desperate times. If you could give me two or three days I’ll get Jarman out of there. O.K.? But you know if somebody calls for a reference maybe you could just say casually that Jarman’s serving his country and so forth, in the event anybody asks.”

“I will say, ‘There is no reason on earth why you, Mrs. Somebody, should not welcome him to your home. You’ll find that he’s clean and neat and entertaining. He does a marvelous imitation of a British accent.’ Would that do?”

“You bet. Now -- two or three days?”

“What difference can that make if you’ve got to find rooms for twenty-seven officers?”

“Twenty-eight by my count. It’ll be one less thorn in my brain, is all.”

“O.K.,” Grace said.

“O.K.?” the captain asked with relief.

“Yes, Captain.”

She hung up and pictured Blake Allen shivering on an Army cot in a warehouse. She said aloud: “Poor little fella!” and wished she could snuggle him.

She went upstairs to her writing desk, read her letter, and still could find no fault in it. “The fault is in me, not this letter.” She sealed it, went outside and crossed the road to her mailbox and put it in, then lifted the flag for the mailman.

A car went by rather too fast and she thought that by stepping into its path she could bring all this to an end. Then she said, "Please, no melodrama."

At story time she added a chapter to the history of the foundling, now thriving in Robin Hood's camp in Sherwood Forest.

When she had finished, Little Phil alarmed her with a question: "Why did his mother leave him in the woods?" Here they were, several nights into the narrative, with Grace feeling complacent about diverting the boys' attention from war and violence to kindness -- yet Little Phil must have been brooding all the while on this question. She thought she had explained it at the start. Now she saw deep concern and confusion in her younger son's troubled eyes. At the same time she admitted that half the fascination of this story of "kindness" rested on its origins in suffering and danger.

"His mother was starving --" realizing that to the boy "starving" meant a little hungry -- "and could give him no milk. So she put him on a trail where Robin Hood's men or Maid Marian would surely find him, and they did! They went to the village and got a woman who could nurse him, and now he is strong and healthy, and reunited with his loving mother."

"Does he love his mother?"

"Yes, darling, babies love their mothers," thinking: "Does he see that the mother did not love her baby enough?"

Should she confront this? Why had she assumed the nuances would be lost on her son? She hesitated. She could say: "The mother was too weak to help the baby but now she's better. Now she is nursing him with good healthy milk. He could have died but Maid Marian and Little John saved him." She thought: "If I say this I just make it more complicated." She went silent, awaiting the next question.

Little Phil evaded her eyes -- in even graver confusion. At length he said: "I'm glad they saved him."

Grace said, "So am I. And they fed the mother too and cared for her, and now she can nurse her baby."

"From her tits," Doug Junior explained helpfully.

“Her breasts,” Grace said. “*Tits* is a bad word.”

“Why?” asked Little Phil.

“I don’t know why. -- It’s disrespectful.”

Doug Junior asked: “What’s a ‘famous lady’?”

The question, coming out of nowhere, threw her off balance. Speaking carefully, feeling a whirl of fear in her insides, Grace said: “A lady is a woman of good breeding who is educated and kind to others. A famous lady is one who is known for her goodness, like Clara Barton, a nurse, or Mrs. Roosevelt, who does good deeds and tries to promote happiness.”

“Is Aunt Keezee a famous lady?” Doug Junior asked. He too was visibly upset, and the look in his eyes, the deep line between his brows, struck an inarticulate warning into Grace’s heart.

“Aunt Keezee,” she replied carefully, thinking: “Has Jarman been poisoning his mind?” -- “Aunt Keezee is a good-hearted woman but she is not famous. She’s not in the newspapers or on the radio. I would not call her a famous lady.”

Doug Junior gave a half-hearted nod of his head, neither satisfied nor enlightened.

Grace considered asking where he got the term. Clearly somebody had used it in his hearing and applied it to Keezee. She decided not to probe. It could only agitate the boy’s mind -- and she thought danger lay that way. Nor did she risk raising Jarman’s credibility by telling the boys not to speak with him. They had already witnessed her fury this morning. Now she regretted that, and everything else.

Having completed her bedtime ritual -- “Good night, sleep tight, don’t let the bedbugs bite, see you in the morning bright” -- she went downstairs intending to read the *Herald* but found she couldn’t sit still. She paced from the living- to the dining room and back with the boys’ questions buzzing in her ears like trapped flies.

When the doorbell rang she exclaimed: “Let it be Captain Foster!” but she opened the door to a surprise. First the suitcase. Standing under the porch light with a suitcase by her side -- instead of the portly and unmilitary Captain Foster -- was a striking, young, beautiful! -- star-like -- woman -- smiling as if she had come to give Grace a million dollars.

Grace was speechless for a second and the apparition spoke first:

“Good evening. Are you Mrs. Stanley?” -- in a sweet but strongly accented voice.

She stood trim and neat in a camels-hair coat, possibly an old one but fitted to suggest the figure inside, and she had a brightness about her eyes and her smile that seemed to express an inner optimism and confidence. She wore a green beret over abundant, flowing blonde hair, and the blonde color complemented a complexion with just enough color in it to suggest vigorous health. What the suitcase might portend Grace had no idea.

Grace declared she was indeed Mrs. Stanley.

The visitor said, “I am Eva Dybek. I was told at air base that I could find fiancé here.”

“Who is your fiancé?” -- thinking: “Not Jarman, she’s too good for him. Not Nick Petropolis, she’s too young. Surely not --”

“I hope to find Blake Allen,” spoken in melodious tones that perhaps signified an eastern European background.

A big empty space took position in Grace’s insides. “He’s not here,” she said.

“Will he return?”

“No. He left this morning.”

The face beneath the porch light went stiff as the woman said: “Did he receive orders?”

“No. He wanted to find another place to stay and I’m told he’s in temporary quarters at the Field.”

There ensued a pause which was awkward for Grace but evidently not for the visitor. Grace saw that she was waiting to be invited in. She swung the door full open and issued the invitation, but Eva Dybek hesitated, saying:

“I let go taxi. May I use telephone to call another?”

“Yes, come in. Would you like a cup of tea?”

“I would so much. I need it.”

The accent and the syntax charmed Grace. The woman was altogether charming and lovely, and Grace’s emotions went to war among themselves.

When they reached the hall Eva Dybek set her suitcase down and began to unbutton her coat. Grace took the coat to the dining room, and, returning, beheld a tall, broad-shouldered woman attired in a royal blue sweater-dress with ribbed cuffs and scalloped hem, and a green stone hanging from a chain around her neck. And she recalled the green beret that she had just placed on the table -- then looked into Eva’s eyes and smiled -- they smiled at one another.

Grace said: "So, then, you are a lucky one, to be engaged to Blake Allen."

"I am Miss Lucky," Eva admitted,

Admiring the dress, Grace thought it couldn't be of American make, maybe French.

"Good," Grace said, "your dress doesn't have those horrible big shoulders that are all the rage now."

"No indeed," Eva Dybek agreed. "Men's shoulders on woman? Like soldiers? How silly."

Eva's dress clung to her figure and flared below the hips; the curve of her hips was accentuated by the small waist.

Grace asked her name again and repeated her own, and the undercurrent was: "What a relief if he lied to me!" She hated the thought, she was already suffering from bitter surmises, but: "Yes! A relief!" If Blake were a liar he would shrink in her memory from an upheaval to a mere episode in her life (if not in Douglas's). The boiling within her -- the heat in her -- heart --

They passed the open door to the cellar stairs and heard a roar of laughter and a shout of "Damn! Damn! You're screwin me." And Grace explained that the pilots were playing cards down there.

"It is generous thing you are doing, Mrs. Stanley," said Eva Dybek.

"Hardly. They bring life and variety to my house, and my sons are thrilled. And please call me Grace."

"Yes Grace. Pilots are thrilling not only to boys."

This along with her tortured concept of "relief" bounced around in Grace's brain: that pilots are thrilling, and the thrill was over.

While Grace brewed tea they talked with an openness that is common to people who have just met and do not expect ever to meet again. Grace found herself deeply interested in every fact that Eva Dybek disclosed -- that her parents, her sister and she had left Poland in 1938 so that her father, a banker, could study engineering in Detroit. He was preparing himself for a career that would be useful to the Allied war effort. Eva had cousins in Detroit.

She credited her father with a shrewd analysis of the Germans' intentions -- starting well before the annexation of Austria. The concessions granted to Hitler by the British and French at Munich had sealed his decision. "Mother, girls, we must leave Poland."

While Eva Dybek delivered this narrative Grace studied her, thinking: 1938, five years, she had said she was then a recent graduate, “Therefore she is twenty-seven or twenty-eight, close to Blake’s age.”

Grace felt it was important that she convey one fact about herself too, that she was married to a man serving in the war against the Japanese.

Eva’s features had been serious, almost grave, when she spoke of her family’s departure from Poland. On hearing Grace’s “fact” she said: “Gone! For how long?”

“It’s now sixteen months,” said Grace, thinking: “God, she cares more than I do.”

“You miss him exceedingly,” said Eva. “You are lonely without him.”

“Yes -- I’ll show you our map of the South Pacific with all the little flags where his ship has sailed.” She was proud of Douglas’s decision to join the Navy and she had not opposed it.

Eva began, “In my family --”

But she stopped, hearing the men coming up the stairs.

In retrospect Grace identified that exclamation “Gone!” as the moment when their conversation changed its character. After that, when the pilots’ noise had subsided and then ceased, instead of calling for a taxi they poured a second cup of tea. They moved to the living room and Grace showed Eva the map with its score of miniature flags scattered across the archipelagoes of the vast ocean. It was when they stood by the map that Grace invited Eva to spend the night, and Eva accepted. Grace noted her eagerness and it aroused a strange pity in her. She was thinking that Eva would be happier here than in a hotel -- unless she planned to make special use of the hotel. They mounted the stairs to Blake’s old room, where Eva set her suitcase down and opened it while Grace went to the hall closet for fresh bedding. They made the bed together, then Grace closed the door and they sat in the only two chairs in the little room.

Looking about her, Eva Dybek said: “Such cozy room. I love that ceilings slant to peak -- and book cases -- are they your books or husband’s?”

“Mine,” said Grace. “My husband does not read for pleasure. He is very intelligent, but he uses his mind in other ways.”

Eva asked about Douglas, and Grace sketched his career as a businessman, wondering what impression this would make. After a pause, when Eva stood scanning the titles in the bookcase, Grace said:

“You know, this was Blake’s room.”

This brought a lit-up smile to Eva’s face.

Then without premeditation Grace said: “I love him too.” The declaration shocked her but she let it stand, and Eva showed no surprise. Grace regarded her calmly.

“I suspected,” Eva said. “Many women have loved my Blake. When you told me about football game and throwing the ball to you, and you scored goal, that was my clue. He cannot be resisted.”

“I did resist, but not for long.”

“And then -- collapse! Am I right?”

“Not exactly *collapse*,” Grace laughed, “but my molecules scrambled themselves and came together in a different pattern and I realized I loved him. -- You said ‘my Blake.’ Is he still yours?”

“We shall see” -- with a lift of her face.

“So we are rivals,” said Grace still speaking lightly.

“But you are married, and I am free.”

“True,” Grace acknowledged. “I am not free.”

“There is my advantage,” said Eva complacently. “In time you must let your molecules rearrange themselves in previous pattern.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Of course. By the time your husband returns it will be accomplished. Am I too optimistic?”

“I am a sturdy housewife and mother. I have no other identity.”

“But not so old, I think. A sturdy mother, let us hope so. Destruction will find your feet on any other path.”

“I tell myself exactly that.”

“You tell truly.”

“When you said ‘We shall see,’ were you implying that you and Blake have run into difficulties?”

“Let me think whether I should answer that. I first must know if we are truly adversaries, if I must take up posture of defense against you.”

“Don’t,” said Grace. “Let’s be friends. I like you, and my love is a memory that will fade because it must.”

“I believe that love does not die.”

“But my situation is different. You, as you said, are free; I am married and tomorrow morning you will meet my sons. They will be fascinated by your accent. I am forced to view my love for Blake as a little sickness, like a case of the flu.”

“Forced?”

“Exactly,” Grace confirmed. “If I were free I’d be a fierce rival.”

“Fierce and formidable? But I also have age advantage. Think of it.”

“You are very kind to observe that.”

“Oh! I have inflicted hurt on you. Forgive me. I think perhaps I do see rival in you.”

“Eva, please, let’s be friends.”

“Why should you want me as friend if you love my Blake?”

“Simple. You save me from a terrible -- from the agony of --”

Grace fell silent and Eva said:

“How do I save you? If we love same man we must one of us defeat other or else Blake refuses us both, and both live in cold darkness.”

“Until we get over him.”

“I shall never.”

“But I will. I must. When Blake left this house he knew, we both knew, it was the best and only thing for him to do.”

“This is subtle way of telling me that he returned love so strongly that he had to flee from house.”

“No. He left to save me the pain.” She thought: “Is that true?” But she kept on, saying: “Maybe he saw the possibility that he might care for me someday, but if so, he must have seen that if he loved me as I love him we’d both be forced to deny what you just said.”

“What did I say? Which wise proverb?”

“That love does not die.”

“I see. Because you are mother and wife.”

Grace explored -- went deep into -- the large, sympathetic blue eyes of Eva Dybek. To Grace those living eyes showed a capacity for love and charity and fierce possessiveness. She congratulated Blake Allen on being, or having once been, engaged to such a woman.

“If he were mine to give,” said Grace, “I would happily give him to you.” She might have added that she sensed in Eva a woman whose love would reward a husband bountifully.

“You are generous, Grace. I do not believe I have ever met one like you. I realize you are offering to give something you do not possess, but you have accepted me as human being and I am warm with that.”

“I am warm with you,” said Grace.

“Now,” Eva asked, “shall I tell you our great secret?”

Grace smiled and waited. She had been surprised throughout, but on the whole satisfied, with her reckless candor. Was it really so easy to toss Blake out of her life simply because it was necessary? In some corner of her mind she knew she could be wrong about this woman but she didn't care. If Eva should blare out at breakfast that Grace loved Blake Allen, Grace would say, “Yes, I do.” If she should report to Blake everything they had said this evening, which she certainly would -- if she should tell him that “an older woman” was dying for him -- it would be no more than he already knew. And if the two love birds should laugh at her, she'd never hear it.

“Yes,” said Grace, “tell me the secret.” Thinking: “I once loved Douglas and now I don't.” Either this was true or it was false and she never had loved him. In that case her debt was infinite, and she was his for life, if he wanted her. And so Grace's mind had darkened before Eva Dybek began to unfold the secret.

“My father had medical exemption, that's why we could leave Poland, but his two brothers --” Here Eva paused, and Grace thought her eyes started glistening. Her voice was full and steady, her hands lay one in the other on her lap, against the royal blue background of her dress -- but -- Grace looked in fascination at her eyes --

“ -- my two uncles --”

Eva was openly weeping now, without the slightest distortion of her features. Tears ran over the brims of her eyes -- but her voice carried on and her color was the same.

“ -- uncles, father's brothers, dear Uncles Arthur and Paul, as you say in English, were reserve officers and therefore they were mobilized. As you know, Germans invaded us from

west and Soviets, the Russians who have always hated us, attacked from east, convergence of evils -- you know all this, Grace?"

"Yes."

"Do you know about prisoners?"

"No."

"Russians took thousands of Polish soldiers prisoner, whom they transported eastward to we know not where. All we have are rumors and reports of few escapees."

"They were captured in Nineteen thirty-nine?" asked Grace who remembered only that the Nazis had invaded on the first of September.

"Late Thirty-nine. We have heard nothing. We fear -- father is certain -- he says, 'They are dead, Eva, we must accept it.' I say, 'No, Father,' and he merely shakes his head in his mournful, terrible way. 'They are dead,' he says. 'I know Russians. They intend to emasculate Poland.' Beloved uncles, they were big brothers to me and sister."

Grace sat perfectly still. She did not evade Eva's eyes.

"I admit," Eva said, "that it is very probable I have lost them. My father and mother and sister and I will never see cheerful affectionate men, so beloved and so keenly attentive to two little girls like sister and me."

Grace broke a long silence by asking: "Are you saying that the disappearance of your uncles is a secret?"

"From Blake only."

"But why?"

"You see, Blake has never met family; they have all gone to Chicago where father now works. And I have never told him."

"Why, unless you -- why?"

"I fell in love with Blake night we met. No, hour, minute. I looked at lively face, at those laughing eyes, that manly physique with such broad heavy shoulders, so powerful, and yet a slender waistline -- have you noticed? and a flat belly, no big hanging sack like so many others carry around with no shame. Blake was man of my dreams. Perhaps you too? You who love him?"

Said Grace: "It took me longer."

“To fall in love? How long, tell me.”

“A week or two, maybe more.”

“I was instant. I never had doubt. But you see, I sent him away.”

Grace thought: “Then he told the truth.”

“I begged him to take exemption from conscription for necessary civilian work. He was qualified with job at G.M., war work. He could have won exemption. You see?”

“Do you mean to tell me that you ‘sent him away’ because he volunteered for the Air Corps?”

“That was main reason, but you don’t understand.”

“And you never told him why?”

“That would be selfish. To cling to him and sob on shoulder, ‘My dear uncles, my uncles!’ That would be saying ‘You must do this because I am already so deeply wounded by war.’ That would press him to decide for my sanity and not from pure love. It would be asking him question: Are you so cruel to do this? It would --”

“Your sanity?” Grace cut in.

“-- not be fair. So I told him, ‘This is what I wish, that you take exemption,’ which is to say that he merely stay at G.M. and do essential war work, ‘and you must make up own mind.’ I left decision to him to decide freely. He is strong, independent man. Nothing less would do.”

“But surely he was entitled to know, if you were engaged.”

“Even I don’t know to certainty.”

“You could have told him what you have told me.”

“Yes, you chastise me and you are correct.”

“I am not chastising you. I simply can’t understand. If you were married he would surely find out.”

“Precisely.”

“Why ‘precisely’?”

“If we married we would go right away to Chicago on honeymoon to meet parents and he would learn of bleeding gap in my family. He would see that I did not exploit opportunity to capture him through pity. He would then love and admire me even more.”

“Why wouldn’t he think instead that you underestimated him?” Grace asked boldly.

“How ‘underestimated’?”

Said Grace: "That you put him to a test before you would accept him as your husband."

"But I had already accepted him! We were already pledged."

"But later," Grace pressed on, still perhaps somewhat confused but sensing that Eva's stratagem had been too clever, "when you decided to send him away, you must have kept the secret because you feared he was unable to distinguish pity from love. That's what I mean by underestimating him, his character. And you tested his love a second time by -- when you more or less said 'If you love me you'll take an exemption from the draft.'"

"What means 'more or less'?"

"Basically, essentially, the same as."

"I do not understand reasoning."

"You must have believed that if his love were not strong he could be moved by sympathy. And you would be keen enough to recognize the difference."

"I am not keen enough to understand you."

"I admit I'm confused," said Grace although her confusion was clearing up. She believed that Eva had been cunning and secretive to keep Blake in ignorance of the uncles, perhaps because she feared he would volunteer even after being told of her family's loss. She blurted out: "If I love a man I share my whole life with him."

"Of yes, certainly, and Blake?"

"What are you asking?"

"Do you share with your absent husband fact that you disclosed to me tonight?"

"Actually, yes."

"You are strange woman, Mrs. Stanley."

"I confessed to my husband just today."

"Therefore you are testing husband."

"No," Grace insisted. "His suspicions had been aroused and I could confess or lie. I chose to confess."

"Think of terrible consequences, and of misery, your husband."

"I think of that all the time," Grace said. "I'm not sure you have the right to lecture me on that."

"But you love my Blake."

"Yes. I love and surrender him."

“Surrender?”

“I give him up.”

“To me.”

“That’s for him to decide, but I --”

“What, Mrs. Stanley?”

“I wish you happiness.”

“And I foresee misery for you. Forgive me speaking honestly. You will pay. I see no other possibility.”

“There is no other possibility,” Grace acknowledged coldly.

“Or else --” said Eva Dybek clasping her hands as if in prayer or meditation, leaning toward Grace and gazing at her as she might have gazed at a loved one in terrible pain, “-- or -- forgetfulness. Is that the English? To exchange love for forgetting.”

“It’s close enough,” said Grace. “To turn love into oblivion, that’s what I must do.”

Said Eva: “Impossible.”

Eva made a cameo appearance at breakfast when she talked easily and almost gayly to the boys and the pilots. Having put the table into a jolly mood she announced she had to pack her suitcase and departed. Thus Grace learned that she did not plan to spend a second night. After breakfast, when Jarman and Nick Petropolis and the boys were gone, she came down the stairs with her suitcase, looking fresh and rested and even more striking, feminine and confident. Grace apologized for being unable to drive her to the Field. She was out of ration stamps. She telephoned for a cab. She wrote Captain Foster’s number on a card and said: “Give this to the gate guard and he’ll call this man for you. He can tell you how to find Blake.”

“Yes, they allowed me in yesterday,” said Eva, “but I asked wrong person.”

And so they sat in the dining room, where a bay window looked out on the driveway, and waited for the taxi.

Grace said: “Could it be that you don’t really love him very deeply?”

“It could be that I love him selflessly,” Eva replied gently, “and therefore I seek his welfare only.”

“You love him and yet you dismissed him for serving his country.”

“I made mistake. I am here to rectify it.”

“By telling him about your uncles?”

“No. It is too late to make a difference.”

“Then,” said Grace, “I don’t understand what you mean by ‘rectify.’”

“I will give him complete love and he will be warm with sincerity.”

“You never gave him complete love before? I don’t mean sex but --” Or maybe she did mean sex.

“No, never,” Eva declared, “I saved myself for marriage. And you?”

Thinking she knew what Eva meant now and feeling a little shocked Grace disclosed: “I gave and I received.”

“You, a married woman.”

“Yes” -- thinking: “He was telling the truth. Blake, you are honest! But do you still love her?”

Chapter 26

Jarman Makes His Move

“Yeah, sure, but it could fly out of control,” somebody protested, somebody in Jarman’s brain. Jarman was winning an argument with the corpse of his better nature.

The thing persisted: “What’s that mean? What’s *it*? What exactly could fly out --”

“This little -- plan -- or whatever, that I’m seeing in my big boiling brain. What a woman! We’re making earthquakes together. We’re two wild birds, or -- I almost don’t have to do it, it’s already so alive in my -- fork -- licking those -- how they relax and spread out when she’s on her back and hang over my face when she’s hovering above me sayin ‘Bite’m, Buster!’”

“Don’t say bitch!”

“I won’t. You’ll never hear me disparage her. God when she fixed those cuts on my face and I was six inches from her mouth and she was breathing, you know, with concentration, and I -- Jesus! I shoulda moved right then.”

He was losing track of who was who in this argument. The corpse was arguing that this whole thing could explode in his face. But Jarman the main man didn’t believe it.

“Look, I’m not going to *assault* her. What kinda pervert do you think I am?”

“I don’t say you’re a sex criminal but suppose you take a few minor liberties and she smacks your face and her engagement ring, which is a good-size diamond, cuts you, and it shocks you, and you become a little more aggressive, let’s say your anger takes over and --”

“Yeah, and?”

“And you resort to force.”

“I won’t have to use force, you moron. The woman is no virgin. ‘She walks by night.’ In the rain no less. And I’ve got what she needs.”

“She smacks you,” said the voice paying no attention, “and you smack her back by uncontrollable impulse! Her head flips to the side and you see the terror in her eyes. She cries in pain. It’s a primitive sound and all of a sudden your cave opens up, you hear panic, mad terror, and your animal jumps out.”

“My animal? What are you --”

“Now you’re an animal, crazy, enraged, and she’s terrified. You go too far, use too much muscle, and she cries for pity and that arouses your -- I mean your cock takes over, your brain’s AWOL. You’re unstoppable and of course stronger and you’ve got another quart of adrenaline in your blood and then --”

“Christ will you shut up! I’m a man, she’s a woman with a body that I -- And God her eager face, her eyes! They’re so knowing and -- laughing -- But she better not laugh at me! Let me tell you -- she’s hungry, Mister, she needs it, and I’m the one can satisfy her. She’ll be digging her nails into my back, ‘More, more, more!’ I’m not *forcing* her, dingleberry, I’m pleasing her.”

“Be careful, you could end up in the stockade or hanged. The penalty under military law for rape is death.”

“Jesus, don’t get hysterical. If she really hurt me I might knock her around for a minute, which may be exactly what she wants. ‘Mrs. St-st-st-st-stanley, why so c-c-c-coy? I’m as good as he is, maybe better.’”

“As good as who, as if I didn’t know.”

Ignoring this, Jarman the main man went on: “If I do say so myself I’m pretty well hung -- So lie back and spread out and I’ll have you whimpering in no time. I can keep a rocklike *infiltrating force* going forever. There’s plenty of women who’ll testify to that. It’s called control, my lady. This’ll be the night of your life. Indoors and no rain! How bout that?”

The plan was: Phase 1: lose a bunch of money at poker. Already done that.

Phase 2: Sorry, gents, can’t play tonight, you already got my money.

Phase 3: Maybe just walk in. Yeah, just barge in. That’ll show some nerve.

“Because you’re actually a coward, right?”

“Hey, quiet!”

“Big Bad Blake, now fortunately gone somewhere, scared you out of your mind.”

“Well -- the son of a bitch swung on me, and thank god he didn’t land a solid punch because that glancing blow damn near --”

“Almost pissed your pants, huh?”

“I admit he scared the bejesus out of me, but don’t forget the bastard is bigger and stronger than me. Yeah, that wasn’t my hour of glory. I am god-damn on fire! I hate the man, hate and despise and fear him! Does that satisfy you?”

“Wait, I’m not sure who’s who any more.”

“I’m me and you are you. I’m the man who damn near wet my britches and I’m glad he’s gone. I can breathe free now.”

“No, no, you weren’t scared of him, you just couldn’t see any percentage in going after a tougher guy.”

“Yes, percentage. Or -- cowardice. But tonight’ll be different.”

“Yeah, but twenty dollars at cards, is she worth it?”

“Twenty-six, and yes, worth every cent. God her smell, her eyes --”

“Check! Did you ever smell her?”

“I told you I got a whiff when she was fixing my face. And now I can see the view from below when she spreads her legs. Do you realize how *complicated* she must be, how deep and primeval! Standing up, from the front, she shows a simple dark delta. Lay her down, spread her out, and by god it’s get-lost terrain with its ridges and ravines, and somewhere hidden in the valley is this obscure secret jungle path, just find it! Christ is this Death Valley or the source of all life? Look at those -- rolling ridges -- and --”

“But if you’re saying that opening her door is an act of courage maybe you better stay home and choke the chicken.”

He was up in his room trying to read. Nick Petropolis was downstairs playing poker and Blake Allen’s old room was empty. The blonde countess was off somewhere letting Blake Allen fuck her. She’d been pretty friendly at breakfast. “Give me your swimming blue eyes, turn your goddess body sideways and show the bazooms, send little waves of happy chatter across the table while I undress you with my eyes and you enjoy every step of it till you’re wriggling naked in a bed with red-white-and-blue sheets and begging and I say ‘Sure, Countess, if you really need it, sure.’”

The countess was gone but Mrs. St-st-st-stanley was right down the hall. “And I’m getting impatient.” He looked at his watch. A little too early.

He was reading *Life*, actually just the pictures because the print was all drivel for dumb-heads -- pictures of guts and glory. Get your balls blown off by a German 88 or die of heat stroke in the South Pacific. Ah, sacrifice! Ah, heroism!

He opened the door and looked left. The night-light was shining like a baby diamond. Good. Mamma home.

He went downstairs and roamed around the living room, listening for sounds from above, where she was, and heard none. The map showed the travels of Mr. Stanley's pleasure boat. My but the man did get around. Must be naked savages with swelling breasts swimming out to offer themselves body and soul to the Navy boys.

Back upstairs.

Off with the shirt and socks. In the bathroom he thundered urine into the toilet then washed his cockballs as a courtesy to the lady, then pulled up his trousers. Barefoot, no shirt, combed his hair. He was trembling like a front end out of alignment.

"She scratches your eyes and your judgment goes zip, you are mad, passion and rage, so instead of walking away from hatred and scorn you throw her on the bed, pin her down by the wrists and move your mouth close to hers and she twists her head to avoid your loving lips and you anchor both her wrists in your right hand and start reaching down and she spits! In your face! She calls you disgusting and revolting and --"

"For Christ's sake will you --"

"-- you choke her, there's no other way to control her."

"I'd never strangle her, you madman."

"You don't intend to, but you command her to open her legs, you say, 'Open or I'll have to strangle you,' only to scare her, and then you jam it in and god damn! she's not ready, but you penetrate by brute force and she screams bloody murder and starts blubbering, pleading, and you love it! You tell her shut up but you are mad drunk on those cries of terror and mercy."

"Mercy? I don't quite follow you. -- Anything else?"

He was in the hall — walking toward the night-light.

From that point on, the split of personalities was all messed up. The voice of caution had lost its place in his mind and there remained only the real man, but he was -- the real one -- was two people or maybe just one doing two things. Walking down the hall, seeing the little amber diamond, pausing at the door, pausing, not hesitating, he was doing it. He was not doing it. Turn back. He decided he wouldn't knock. He could make decisions. He had natural tendencies. She was available.

He went in and closed the door behind him. It made a click. He was amazed at the room, the luxury of it. Longer than wide, it was lit by two soft, yellowy lights, one by the bed and the other at a vanity at the far end.

The lady was reading by the light of a lamp with a pink shade. He believed he was in this room with her. It was definitely true. She was stirring, she knew something was wrong. He could tell by the look on her face. She was looking. She threw back the blankets.

He saw the book drop and heard its cushioned landing. There was a carpet by the bed, but he was walking on hardwood, on maple, pretty expensive stuff. Happy Days were not here again. Is it “Happy Days” when they send you to fly against a swarm of fighters and 88s?

She was on her feet and the blankets lay diagonally across the bed. She seemed to be coming toward him -- fearlessly. “Go ahead, look daggers, who’s scared of you?” Coming to meet him. “Aren’t you full of surprises, Babe?” Here she comes. “Yeah, you’re mad or pretending to be, a queen bent on punishing a bad slave. But I’m not your slave.” The idea gained on him that she was a queen. “Come on, come closer.”

“Get out!” A hiss, a harsh whisper. “Out!”

“Tell me ‘out,’ Bitch, and I’ll tell the kids everything.”

“Tell and be damned. Out!”

He started talking to her. Or maybe he had been doing that from the start. He said: “Quit pretending, Mrs. Stanley. We can make sweet music together.”

Another hissing denunciation; he missed the words but heard the rage. He thought: “Did she say ‘creep’? She called me a creep?”

Looking around sort of frantically as if she’s casting about for a weapon. Maybe the old man left a gun in his dresser drawer. That’s his dresser there for sure. The other one, the vanity is hers. Will she lunge for the gun? It’ll be in the top drawer.

He moved between her and the bureau but she was already running back toward the vanity. He chased her. She grabbed something and turned on him. Holding a square bottle of heavy cut glass.

“Put it down, Mrs. Stanley. Let’s be friends just for tonight, O.K.?” He thought of a quote from the Bible about creeping things that creep upon the earth. “I am not a creep, Lady. I’m one of your admirers. Put the god damn thing down.”

Some kind of flash when a facet of the glass caught the light.

“Christ, the stopper flew off. The god damn stuff’s all over me.”

Sweet sickening smell.

“Damn you, Lady, that’s not funny. You coulda hurt me with --” Thinking: “Move, go, catch her by the arms.”

Struggling like a hellcat, stronger than I thought. Swinging, scratching. A damn whirlwind.

“Don’t touch me!”

“Hey, you threw a bottle at me.”

“Get out!”

“I’ve got other plans. Damn, damn.”

Christ I’m out of breath. Some strange words -- “filth” -- “die.” Like, “I’d die before I’d --” Something anyway about death. Can’t argue now, got my hands full of hellfire, if she keeps this up I’ll have to --”

“Listen, relax --” puff puff -- “I don’t wanna -- I really don’t. Take it easy -- ha! Jesus! I don’t want to hit you. Ouch!”

Got me in the face, with what? Blood, for pity sakes. Was it the diamond?

Wrestling, dragging her across the floor, skidding on the varnished maple floor. How to get her up on the bed? Clothes ripping. Too bad, it was a pretty little jacket. A nightgown under it, delicate around the boobs. Thin shoulder straps, they’ll break, no sweat. Don’t want to do it this way. “Please, relax, please. We’ll both be --”

Spit! By god she spat in my face again, the bitch.

Never before had Zack Jarman felt such a vivid liquid hot sensation in his crotch with the thing still in his pants, a wonderful feeling, in his belly too, but mostly -- his mind! He was crazy and almost knew it, but the feeling was -- frenzy, in his mind and her body, she was exploding, Christ, the energy. Gotta show who’s boss.

“Damn you, Lady, shut the fuck up.” Puff puff, can hardly breathe.

A scream.

“O.K. gotta choke that off right away. That’s way too loud.”

Choking her now, but not for real, just to scare her. Throat’s alive, pressure, just for a second or two. Careful for Christ’s sake, don’t kill her. It’s hot and -- cordy, complicated. Her

eyes. Anyway she quit screaming. Jesus her throat in my hands, bend the fingers tight, dig the thumbs. Squeeze! God what am I doing? Careful!

Choke! What's this? Christ an arm over my windpipe from behind, across it like an iron bar. Pain! Air still coming through but the pain. Aaaaah! Jesus! Can't be Nick Petropolis, he's too fat, and he'd've pulled my head off by now, that fat-ass god damn Greek.

A hairless skinny little arm breaking my god damn windpipe.

All this passed through his mind in one whiff and told him it must be the kid. Can't be the little one, must be the big brat.

Lifting me by the neck but I'm too much for him. There she lies gasping, looking up at me like I was a poisonous reptile, an ugly nonhuman animal, that's me. Fury in her eyes as she comes around, she's figuring it out now. The little bastard's still -- got to flip him. Reaching back to grab his arm or hair or anything. Stronger than I thought, him too. Christ, flip him!

Reaching for the brat over behind, got him by an arm. Get some leverage and over he goes I hope.

She's slithering over the floor on her back kicking up at me, missed! Hit! Hit! God! In the balls! Agony in my neck, weakness. Another hit. Nut shocked. Like a balloon down there. A familiar kind of disabling pain, like that time a baseball hit me in the crotch and down I went and Jesus the -- no breath -- cloud of expanding pain, going to faint -- can't take it -- crotch, belly, balls. Can't breathe! Gimme air for Christ sakes. Fuck the brat!

"You swine Jarman."

Jesus, he's talking like a movie. "Lemme go, you little jerk fore I kill you."

Can't talk, can't fight, can't breathe, agony, my head's -- splitting pain! God what am I -- what's happening?

"You pervert, you creep!"

"O.K., O.K., get outa my way. You're the creep you little shit. Oww! Jesus lemme go."

Chapter 27

“Will You Stay?”

Blake Allen thought Eva might be paler than when they parted six months ago. Long hours of office work could account for that -- and the truth was he didn't know if pregnant women were inclined to pallor. Letting this question roll around brought him up against a wall of shame -- that he was treating her unjustly. “Shut up! She is honest and she is not pregnant!” Thus he threw the garbage out of his mind and tried to be a human being.

They were walking down a long corridor with photographs on either side of airplanes and pilots going back to the Wright Brothers, who had built their first airplane in their bicycle shop less than five miles away. Ahead were the double doors of the bar at the Officers' Club -- and these doors all but shook with the drumroll of energy and tumult behind them. The volume increased with every step.

Eva said: “What on earth!”

“They're celebrating,” Blake explained. “Some pilot flew in two cases of Haig and Haig Pinch from England.”

“Whiskey?” she inquired.

“Scotch whiskey,” said Blake.

Approaching the curtained glass doors they heard a sharp cry of “Hip hip!” and a scattered, multivoiced response of “Hooray!” Then came another “Hip hip” and a much louder response. On the third try the crowd found its voice and the “Hooray” resounded just as Blake opened one of the doors. Noise, cheers, smoke danced before them. They entered. Blake took her hand and they pushed into the mob and headed for the bar.

But holding her hand would give a false impression, so he let go, and pushed on. Turning, he saw only men in khaki behind him so he stopped and searched. When he found her she smiled indulgently and extended her hand again, and he took it. While they waited, pressing forward when an opening allowed, she said:

“I did not know war could be so jolly.”

She was still the same woman, original, lively and delighted to be his companion. She was not the woman who had broken their engagement but the one who had said Yes. A jet of grief shot across his mind, leaving a sensitive impression.

With drinks in hand they wound through the crowd till they found a group of Blake's friends. He introduced her as a visitor from Michigan, adding:

"She builds bombers."

"You're at Willow Run?" a major asked. This man wore the campaign ribbons of a veteran and the wings of a command pilot.

Eva said she was.

"The bombers built by a woman like you must be beautiful," said the major daringly.

"I think not," said Eva. "B-Seventeen is graceful but we are building B-Twenty-four which is awkward-looking machine having two tails in rear."

"But with a longer range and heavier payload than the Fortress," said the veteran devouring her with his eyes.

"Yes, Major. A very effective airplane I believe. This month we will produce three hundred."

"Keep it up! -- Function is form, therefore beautiful, don't you think?"

"If you will have it so. What plane do you fly?"

"The Fortress, Miss. Like our friend here, Blake Allen."

"Fortress, Seventeen, is queen. Liberator," she said, using the title given the B-24 by the British, "is more like chamber maid."

"But," said the major, "I happen to like that double tail. A tail in two parts has always appealed to me." He looked at her even more keenly while Blake thought:

"Another effortless conquest."

A captain asked Eva what her job was.

"Office work," she replied. "Finding machine operators and setup men of experience."

A captain asked what a setup man was.

"Operator," she said, "runs machine, a complicated task, but setup man is more, prepares it for job on blueprint, according to exact tolerances by engineers. To do setup requires deeper knowledge. Of this I know nothing. I search by telephone and through references for experienced men. We have women operators too."

She seemed to await the next question with patience and maybe pleasure.

A lieutenant asked how long she could stay in Dayton.

“I am afraid I must leave tomorrow.”

“And Blake here,” the major cut in, “is, of course, your cousin?”

“Of course no, Major, he is my sweetheart.”

A vortex of energy was swirling somewhere nearby. Clamoring for attention somebody cried: “Wrigley’s the man!”

Scattered cheers and shouts of “Wrigley, Wrigley!” rose above the furor, and soon the swaying but upright form of a red-headed, crimson-faced captain rose in the midst of the mob, on the shoulders of two pilots. This Wrigley was evidently the man who had brought the whiskey across the Atlantic. He waved a pinch bottle over his head while somebody offered another “hip hip” and the crowd responded appropriately. Then Wrigley proposed: “To England! To the RAF!” and they drank to that, then another voice cried: “To Scotland and Mr. Haig and his brother Mr. Haig!” which drew another echoing cheer.

In the privacy of his brain Blake Allen was singing: “Shout till the rafters ring” from the song about Maine.

Eva placed her hand gently on his chest and whispered: “Happiness.” He did not hear the whisper but read her lips -- and he kissed her. The kiss was involuntary; he had not meant to do it. Being in her aura, he had lost his sense of the present. If a group had formed around her -- people came but nobody left -- she knew why, and this intensified her pleasure in the celebration.

Blake was beginning to notice that there were two centers to the seemingly formless mob, Wrigley and Eva. There were three or four other women in the crowd but Eva had no peer among them. Not being as tall as Blake she perhaps couldn’t appreciate all this, but she may have sensed it. She was in fact quite tall, nearly as tall as Blake, taller than several of the officers in her court.

The dress helped. It was the blue sweater-dress that her aunt had sent her a year ago from Chicago. The first time she wore it the fit was careless, the aunt evidently being larger than the niece. But she altered it to conform to her figure in the most economical way. She also dyed it to darken the blue, from a shade as light as her eyes to a more dignified hue. When Blake praised her work she told him that a dress was meant to guide attention, not attract it. The dark blue “sweater” did both.

Blake realized that he and Eva were presenting themselves as two who belonged to each other. Conscious that he had decided that they did not, he was proud of her anyway. He just wished he had not kissed her. He loved -- not her -- but the calm perfection of her body and the symmetrical, achieved beauty of her face. She projected intelligence, he thought, even when she was not speaking. And when she spoke it was with an ironic humor, as if the man she addressed, like the major, was on the verge of making a delightful fool of himself. All this was expressed in her light blue eyes and the rising color of her complexion.

Blake had warned her: "These guys are mad for a woman."

"Therefore I should not be proud today?"

"Be as proud as you like, but be careful."

"They might carry me away to forest?"

"No, I won't let that happen."

"No," she agreed, "you mustn't."

"Has your gracious hostess told you --" Eva began.

They were now in the dining room and had just finished dinner. He had asked if she wanted dessert and she declined but asked for coffee. Blake was scheduled to fly early tomorrow so he skipped coffee.

Eva asked: "Has your so-attractive hostess told you that she and I had courageous conversation about you?"

"My 'so-attractive' hostess -- meaning?"

"Mrs. Stanley, your mistress."

"Mrs. Stanley is neither my hostess nor my mistress."

"Oh but recently."

"And what is a 'courageous' conversation, Eva?" -- speaking with extreme caution.

Eva explained: "We both spoke with courage, as if we had nothing to lose by honesty."

"In fact," Blake Allen said, "neither of you does have anything to lose in a conversation about me."

“Because, you will say, you no longer love me and you have abandoned her forever. That will be your statement.”

“I never said I no longer love you.”

“But you act the part of former lover with artistic skill.”

“Eva, you pushed me away. Please don’t pretend otherwise.”

“I pretend nothing. And now with sharp pain I have come crawling back.”

“You don’t know how to crawl. You have simply changed your mind.”

“Inside word ‘simply,’ my beloved Blake, is concealed half year of agony.”

“I’m sorry. I am truly sorry.”

“You don’t ask what she said, or I said.”

“Because I don’t care.”

“Come on, Mr. Blake Allen of Army Air Corps.”

“So -- you two had a conversation, and now you’re dying to tell me all about it.”

“You forget I know you well, so abandon false indifference. Beg me and I might tell you half.”

“And refuse to tell the other half.”

“No, Babest, I promise.”

“O.K., O.K., what did she say?”

“She? Not me?”

“Not I’ you mean. O.K., you too.”

“Very well my own Blake. She said she loved you.”

“But she also said it was hopeless, didn’t she.”

“Not exactly, or maybe yes, I did not take notes. Ha, ha!”

“And what did you say?”

“That of course women love you because of physique, dancing eyes, curly black hair and hero character. But that you are mine, I was first, she is too old and almost wrinkled, and too married and too -- with children -- impossible.”

“It is impossible.”

“Which you say with funeral voice. Gravity, hole in ground. And you ran away so you would not fall deeper into hole with easy hostess.”

“Let’s not talk about my grave if you don’t mind.”

“I have other advantage,” said Eva confidently. “I was not cruel to mention this to Mrs. This strong advantage is you are moral man. She cannot understand moral. You would never destroy family.”

“You’re mistaken about her,” Blake said. “She is a moral being. Whether I am is -- it looks like I’m not.”

“She cannot be. She told me what she did.”

“She did nothing that I didn’t do.”

“Of course not. Such is essence. But you acted from uncontrollable male urge in body and she was design.”

“Eva, I wish to hell you’d learn English. Stop reading in Polish and get yourself some books in English and for Christ’s sake listen.”

“All in good time as English peoples say. You go astray now, my Blake.”

“Right. You’re saying I’m the slave of my impulses and Grace is a sorceress.”

“Which means?”

“A witch.”

“You are not innocent, my Blake, but tortured by instincts since you left me.”

“Since you threw me out.”

“I have asked, I have pleaded, please forgive terrible error. And I come crawling back leaving pride in dust.”

He might have laughed at this, but he merely repeated that she was incapable of crawling.

She said: “Now I am claiming.”

“Claiming your property?”

“I should not use that word in speaking or thinking, but you are mine, as I am yours. You will see later.”

Wondering what she meant by “later” he gave a twist of his head, denying there was anything he did not already see. He said: “We’d better catch the circle bus.”

“We have one too, factory area is so widely, continuous bus. But if by ‘catch the bus’ you intend end, no, my dearest, it cannot be. She is impossible for you. I am yours. I am right in all angles, age, freedom, true love.”

He sat there staring, not at Eva but into his future -- possibly in the 8th Air Force. Almost certainly in the 8th Air Force. Speaking slowly with a half-smile he asked: "You think I need you to help me control myself?"

"I think you are man and need woman in your bed, and I am woman. We have already proved it."

"And love is forever."

"Always and ever, I love you forever. My poem with rhyme."

"But you still --"

"Please!"

"O.K., I'll leave it alone."

"This torments you, my man, because love still goes on. Shocked and shaken by my error but even terrible mistake did not kill it. Now you are in thrall of cynical lonely woman with two sons in house who somehow finds way to welcome you into arms. She has told me what she has did, as if she deserves medal. Distinguished Adultery Cross. This is not kind you need, dear Blake. She is beneath you. Perhaps I too, but I am no adulteress. I am faithful."

They rode the shuttle to a gate where taxis sometimes waited. They rode in silence, holding hands. Blake had taken her hand. Giving hers, she leaned closer and whispered her love. He was hovering over one of the two poles of his mental life -- the pole of self-forgiveness. Surely a man condemned to die can be forgiven for seeking consolation in the arms of such a lovely woman as this. Closing his eyes he could see her flushed skin as she breathed her happiness in long, desperate inhalations, and he could see her golden hair spreading on a white pillow, her grateful eyes searching for his own. He had decided to live as one who is condemned to die over Germany, as if his orders had already come and the number 80.5 was the coded expression of his fate. Die. Die soon, in the prime.

The other pole was: If life is limited, live in the best possible way. If you love a woman express your love, complete it with the merging of bodies. But this act completes love only if love is genuine. And genuine love arises from reverence and devotion. If these are absent, the merging of bodies is meaningless; it is mere biological release, and morally neutral. But suppose the reverence and devotion stand in the way of the physical passion. Suppose a man who truly reverences a woman would act in her interest as he understood it, and not necessarily his own.

On this reasoning Blake Allen would not touch either of these women.

He put his arm around Eva's shoulders and drew her closer, as if to steady her in the lurching of the little bus.

There were no taxis at the gate but a sentry telephoned for one and it came soon enough -- but not too soon for Blake. The ride downtown took fifteen minutes -- and they entered the lobby of the Van Cleve.

Eva walked toward the elevators but Blake detained her. He looked around for a place of privacy but could find none. She waited patiently. He thought she must be wondering -- but he did not want to explain that he was hoping to find a place where they could talk by themselves. He did not want to say goodbye, and he did not want to go to her room. A strange thought occurred -- that he could not imagine being in the same relation toward Grace Stanley -- the stealthy relation of one who is planning to escape.

He took her arm and they walked to the elevators, and ascended to the sixth floor. Eva turned the key and they entered her room. He saw the familiar suitcase lying open on an unpacking rack, and a nightgown thrown across the bed. The sheets were turned back. He thought: "Did she take a nap?" There were two books in Polish on the night stand.

She excused herself. He was pacing when she opened the bathroom door and he caught a glimpse of her cosmetics neatly arrayed on a shelf over the sink. This alone threw him back a year and in some supernatural way he was with her again. He seemed to be aware of two things, her scent, and the number 80.5.

Eva was seated on the edge of the bed, in the blue dress. She sat erect, with her back quite straight and her body leaned forward in a posture of contemplation.

Looking up to him she asked, "Will you stay?"

"I can't," he said.

"You told me, 'I never said I didn't love you.' It's true, you never did."

"I love you, Eva, but it's different now."

"The important is not different. You still want children fervently, of that I am certain. That cannot change with your sin. And new woman will never marry you. I will marry you tonight. I spoke to Army chaplain today and he said he marry us any time of day or night."

“What chaplain?” he asked in surprise.

“I don’t know. I have name though. I found him on base. I have number and building.”

“Is he Catholic?”

“No. Protestant.”

“But you’re a Catholic, Eva.”

“It does not matter. This chaplain will marry us. A priest would make big fuss because you are not Catholic and force you sign documents about raising children.”

“But you wouldn’t consider yourself married except by a priest.”

“I said once, yes. Now is of no importance. We find priest later. This man will marry us tonight.”

She was looking up at him and holding his gaze by the force of her will. She said:

“This Mrs. is wartime lust of false intensity; it cannot endure. I will be, I am your wife.

-- Do you remember river?”

“Of course,” and the scene rose in his vision.

“Our river,” Eva said as if reciting the title of a poem, “our first acceptance and giving of one another. From that moment I am your wife and I have never known another man before or since. I am faithful, and always will be, beginning on night by river. But she. Is she faithful? Does her vow mean anything to her? If she cheated husband during absence might she cheat you? What is sacred to her? Answer.”

“Eva, I will not listen to this.”

“But you are listening. Then listen also to this. Some day war will end and we will live as family, you, I, and our children, in world without ghastly violence which takes beloved lives and crushes them, a world where love not confined to few desperate hours stolen from business of day which is to kill. Then real life will be love, work, raising children, living in our house, visiting your parents in Saginaw and mine in Chicago, teaching children their lessons, helping with homework, loving one another. That could be future, Blake.”

“If I lived it could be, except that --”

“You will live. I have it from God.”

“God has told you I will live?” he asked with a sympathetic smile.

“My faith tells me.”

“And what if your faith is nothing more than hope dressed in fancy robes?”

“Blake dearest, you will live.”

She rose from the bed and came towards him. She moved to take him in her arms but he prevented her, saying:

“No, Eva. Forgive me, but no.”

He saw her eyes. Love, disbelief, pain, sorrow, anger: he did not know what he was seeing in her eyes.

Chapter 28

Aftermath

“What if he’s still in the house?” -- piercing her mind. She said to Doug Junior: “Quick, get Little Phil.” She threw aside the ripped jacket, slipped her nightgown over her head and went to her bureau. She pulled on her gardening slacks and a sweater, then went to her husband’s bureau and took his jackknife from the top drawer. She dropped it in her trousers pocket. She was lacing her work shoes when Doug Junior returned with his little brother. “We’re going down to make a phone call. Stay with me, don’t wander.”

She stopped at the closet and shut the lid of the laundry chute. Proceeding down the hall they passed the door of Jarman and Nick Petropolis’s room. Here she paused and listened -- and the face of Little Phil showed he too was listening; even his eyes listened. Could Jarman’s ear be three inches from her own?

Downstairs she paused again by the doorway leading to the cellar stairs. Light and conversation came drifting up, cigarette and cigar odor.

In the breakfast room she told Doug Junior to look in the phone book for a Foster on Canterbury Drive. She stood alert, listening. Doug Junior reeled off a number but Grace could not insert her trembling finger in the little metal circle. Her whole body was quaking.

She asked Doug Junior to dial the number. The boy obeyed, looking at her as she imagined he might if she were dying.

A woman answered and Grace asked to speak to Captain Foster. At his “Hello” she said: “Captain, this is Grace Stanley. You must come here immediately and get this monster out of my house. He has attacked me. -- No, my son saved me.” She reached out for Doug Junior’s hand and pressed it hard against her side. “Yes, yes, immediately, this minute. Jarman of course! We’ll wait for you in the front hall. No sir! Five minutes -- or I call the sheriff.” (The last thing she’d ever do.)

Her voice sounded as if it had been pressed between two plates of glass.

The card game went on in the basement for some minutes, then broke up. The visitors left by the back door, but soon Nick Petropolis appeared in the front hall. He stared in surprise at the mother and boys seated together on the stairs facing the door.

“Nick,” said Grace, “will you stay with us? I cannot trust Jarman.”

Nick Petropolis, he of the rumbling, belly-based baritone, a man of gentlemanly demeanor, said that he would, and sat on the carpet smiling at the boys.

Grace said: “For just a few minutes till Captain Foster comes.”

Nick Petropolis, glancing at Grace, asked if she were all right. She assured him she was.

But he said: “Your throat is bruised, Mrs. Stanley. It’s all purple.”

She touched her neck and winced.

“I’m all right,” Grace declared, half believing it, thinking: “Will he say to everybody, ‘She asked for it’?” But she did not protest her innocence. All she said was, “Thank you, Nick.” She knew that by tomorrow a story would be spreading over the Field and that the principal author would be Zack Jarman. She thought of telling Nick Petropolis the true story; this led to her imagining an interview in which she told the sheriff -- and she saw in one bright moment that she must say as little as possible to the fewest possible number of persons.

Whatever they believed -- whoever “they” were -- she must ignore them. She hoped that truth would be sufficient unto itself, for herself. If it were not, there was nothing she could do. And if the truth must be broadened to include her infidelity, then she must live in reliance on a form of truth that only she possessed. By this twisting route she reached the realization that her love for Blake Allen was all she had to sustain her.

“If he loves me,” she said in her mind, “I have that love whether he’s dead or alive.” She thought that a man so gifted as Blake Allen was likely to perish in the war, while Jarman would survive.

She put an arm around each boy and said, “I have my boys.” She whispered to Doug Junior: “You saved me,” and to Little Phil, “I love you, Phil.”

Captain Foster removed Jarman, much to the amusement of Nick Petropolis who stood by Grace through the whole episode. At the end he said to Jarman, “Off you go into the wild blue yonder.”

“Send me two more,” said Grace to Captain Foster, “but not another one like this,” as Jarman staggered out under the weight of a duffle bag, a B4 bag, a dispatch case and a stuffed pillow case.

Doug Junior called to him, “You’re a turd, Jarman.”

Nick Petropolis added: “Turd is the exact word.”

And Grace declared: “On this special occasion, Doug Junior, you may use a vulgar expression.” And she laughed -- nervously and far too much, but she did laugh.

There was nothing funny about the next day. If fear can look backwards she was looking with horrified fear.

What if Jarman had succeeded? Suppose Doug Junior had obeyed her and quit shutting himself up to listen in the laundry chute. Suppose Jarman had attacked while Doug Junior was fast asleep? Suppose Jarman had seized her by the throat at the very beginning before she screamed. Suppose he had threatened: “Scream, and I’ll strangle your boys one after the other.” Worst of all was her imaginary experience of waking to find Jarman on top of her with his thumbs digging into her throat and his awful breath whispering yield or die -- and the thrust of his repulsive member into her unready body -- and his vampire bite on her neck and his hideous gasp of orgasmic release --

She could not control her imagination. Yet her thoughts found unerring direction in the midst of this self-inflicted torture. She reached a conclusion. Her intellect and her soul, her “heart,” her human powers led to this bitterly resented question: “Must I abandon Blake because Jarman attacked me? Or rush back to Douglas for the same reason?”

Illogical and unjust. But so was her adultery. Was Jarman her punishment? She could not believe it. But it did seem to proceed from a violation of universal morality. She tried to search out the steps in her thinking that led to her conclusion. She realized it was not a process of thinking at all but fear and nausea.

“I am not polluted.”

Then why did she feel filthy?

“I did nothing to attract him. Quite the opposite. I despise him!”

Then what was this stirring emotion that felt so similar to guilt?

“It is not guilt! I have done nothing wrong.”

True? Nothing?

“Nothing to entice him or suggest to him that --”

But she had cleaned his bruises and steadied his head by holding his hair -- disgusting!

“You let him get close.” She saw a sickening image of Jarman moving above her and felt the shooting of his seed. She cried in horror and knew that she was pregnant. To carry the offspring of such a -- man -- would destroy her. He had raped and polluted not just her body but her mind.

A distant voice said, “Be calm. You were not raped.”

She thought: “Thank God for Doug Junior.”

She touched her throat and thought of exhibiting her bruises to the sheriff -- and quickly turned away, because justice does not exist. Punishment, maybe.

“Never tell Blake. Hope he never learns.” God knows what he’d do.

He might wreck his life by killing Jarman. She saw him smashing Jarman’s face with his stony fists.

Did the nausea confuse her thinking or make it clear? She had known before the attack that a life with Blake was impossible and that she should beg Douglas to take her back. For the boys. For --

“For myself! For a home, a family, for a deeper kind of love with Douglas.”

Her love of Blake was so physical! Not now, because now nothing was physical. Life was all convenience, economics, morals. These forces drove her toward Douglas if he would have her. Towards ascetic solitude if he would not.

“How would I make a living? -- I could teach English -- yes, poetry, stories, novels. I’d be a good teacher. But they’d never hire a woman like me.”

If Keezee should talk --

“No, no! She’s my friend, she will not talk.”

But somehow the whole world knew about Keezee. The pilots talk. Blake, never. But Jarman -- “He’s already started.” She imagined him justifying himself to Captain Foster.

It seemed incredible, but: “At the crisis of my life I’m going to let *convenience* and *economics* direct me rather than love. Morality too but I’m not sure I know what that is or how it ought to guide me. Convenience, morality and money all say the same thing: surrender.

“It turns out that life isn’t so important. Don’t pretend it is. Real -- actual -- realized love would be giving my body, life and soul to the man I love. But I can’t. So what is love? If it isn’t the heart of life then life is less than it appears. Happiness is a dream and love is a passion. Passions flourish and die. Life is as Nancy says, family, a house, school for the kids, enough money, and letting Douglas satisfy himself in me every few nights. A contract. Be thankful that his only passion is his business. A good man, everybody says, I say it myself. Forget dreams, they cannot endure, economics endures.”

She wept, her shoulders and body curved inward and her tears spreading through her fingers. Saying “He might die,” she meant Blake, but in her cage of sobs she realized she could have said the same of Douglas. She could imagine nothing more ghastly. If Douglas died in the midst of her betrayal, especially after reading her letter of confession, it would be unendurable. She would kill herself -- no -- she never would.

Her head felt as if it were bulging, but not fast enough to make space for new supplies of blood pumping into her skull and threatening to crack it. Her convulsive cries created fissures of burning pain in her forehead, eyes and cheekbones.

Blake was falling, his plane torn apart by the 88s. She saw the unknown officer who had visited her kitchen and reported that Wes Welles’s plane had spiraled down in two pieces. With index fingers pointed downward he set his two hands spiraling down and down till the fingers joined their mates in his fists and slammed the table. His eyebrows lifted and the eyes enlarged as he looked up at Grace. It was not Wes’s plane this time but Blake’s. She saw Nancy’s hand racing across a paper leaving columns of numbers.

She cried: “Don’t let him die!”

That would be too terrible. The world could not be so cruel -- “No! It is quite cruel enough.”

She couldn’t see any kind of justice if love and the act of love were to be excluded from her life.

But the fear and nausea pushed her towards -- the nausea -- still present, Zack Jarman still present -- pushed her towards surrender. If it’s impossible let it go. “But life is possible and real,” she said swimming in fear, as if riding the outer edge of a maelstrom.

Suddenly she cried: "I was not raped! Why am I acting as if I were polluted and destroyed? Doug Junior saved me. I fought the monster, Doug Junior dragged him by the neck, I kicked him. We won! He's gone and I'm saved."

There came a letter addressed in an unknown hand, with no return address. She read: "Grace -- I have to see you to explain about Eva. Please give me a chance to make sure you know the truth. -- Bridge, 8 p.m. Tuesday. -- Blake."

But 8 was too early. The boys would still be awake. Then her fear raced ahead of her thinking. She imagined the boys at home alone -- Nick Petropolis and the other pilots playing their usual game of poker in the basement -- and Jarman sneaking up the carpeted stairs to the second floor and finding her gone -- then stealthily opening the boys' door to take his revenge on Doug Junior.

"Not likely!" she cried aloud.

But -- possible.

"Not very likely," she repeated, but it was no good. Doug Junior was fourteen and she considered him mature enough to look after his brother. But he was not mature or strong enough to defend himself against a grown man, and what if Jarman came armed with a gun or knife?

"Ridiculous!" she cried.

But she knew that if she failed to appear at the bridge Blake Allen would consider himself dismissed. Pacing her room she caught an unprepared glimpse of herself in the full-length mirror and was appalled.

"Do I look like that?"

Stricken, pale, wild.

She ran through a series of ideas about contacting Blake at the Field, none of them very promising. She concluded that to seek him out, which was surely possible since Eva had apparently done it, would be to reveal her desperation to the whole Air Corps and city.

She tried to control herself by calling forth the trusty idea that Blake Allen was "impossible."

"What does it matter? What do I care about the truth between Eva and him?"

So that was settled at last. He'd come to the bridge and wait a few minutes, a half-hour or an hour -- so what! "It's over, it's over," she admonished herself. "It was an affair, that's all. Forget him." She construed the bridge question as a choice between her son's safety and her juvenile longing for another conversation -- no more -- with the forbidden lover. "I am an adolescent dreamer, a nitwit, a joke!"

When 8 o'clock on Tuesday came she was sitting in Douglas's big chair reading the *Daily News* and looking forward to an hour or two in bed with *Wuthering Heights* -- to give her some perspective on wild passion. She imagined Blake at the bridge pacing and fearing that she wasn't coming. She was vaguely aware that when they had called it "over" she had been less than sincere. Why had he assented without a fight? "If he said to me, 'This is the end,' I'd have to hear it three or four times before I'd believe it. I'd fight for our love."

Now, when he stood alone at the bridge, listening, trying to separate the sound of flowing water from the other night noises, he'd be convinced. The bitter sentence she wrote to Douglas -- "I will never see him again" -- would prove true.

"Take your spotless virgin or leave her. I don't care!" But she was losing control. "Damnation, stop crying. I can't believe this stupid sobbing. It's pathetic!"

The next evening Nick Petropolis dropped a bomb. He arrived with two new roomers, and he took her aside to tell her that Zack Jarman had been transferred to Siberia.

Her face was prickling all over with pins and needles and she hoped it didn't show, but Nick Petropolis was looking at her with keen interest.

She had to say something so she said: "They're sending him to Russia?"

"Nebraska to be precise. Foster talked to his boss and that one bumped it up to the top brass. A teletype to Washington and they stopped the war long enough to cut orders, return teletype, and lover boy's riding a gooney bird to the biggest corn field in this man's war."

"So Captain Foster believed me?" she asked in amazement.

"I called his attention to your neck and the way you were trembling and huddling with the kids and so forth. I know a genuine person when I see one, Mrs. Stanley. The turd is gone. Somebody should write a song about it."

"For the Hit Parade," Grace exclaimed on a crazy impulse. "So long -- to the unspeakable -- that's all the time -- for the unspeakable --" singing the Hit Parade theme.

“That’s all we’ll see -- of the turd -- pardon me, ma’am,” Petropolis sang in his belly baritone, and Grace thought:

“He really has a wonderful voice.”

Nick Petropolis said: “We’ll get your boy to write the lyrics. He’s got a way with words.”

“Yes, a poet and a wrestler. You should have seen him dragging Jarman away by his neck. You should have seen the monster’s little beady terrified eyes and heard him gasping ‘Lemme go you brat!’”

She was thinking: “The bridge. I’ll go tonight. Maybe he’ll -- probably not, of course, but -- a chance in a thousand. I’ll take it.”

After settling the new pilots Grace went out into the darkness, down the first hill, bending right and then left to descend the second, steeper hill till she came to the bridge some time between nine-thirty and ten. Blake was not there. She lingered, but he did not appear. She cried, a steady flow — the tears of despair.

From her perch in the bay window of the dining room, with legs drawn up, knees bent and cradled inside her elbows, she watched for the mailman. He stopped his car by her box, deposited something, and waved at her cheerfully. She returned the greeting and went outside. There was one V-mail. She opened it and read:

“My beloved wife -- You are a wonderful person, Grace. I know you down to your soul, and I could not be mistaken. Whatever that ‘friend’ meant about you having a ‘good war’ -- he can go to hell. He’s a malicious, sick, envious meddler. I am ashamed that I demanded an explanation as if I must believe him. I have complete faith in you. I love you as a woman, mother and wife. -- D.”

She could tell that he had written in haste, or perhaps when his ship was rolling in a turbulent sea. It was quite unusual that she could barely decipher some of his script, which was generally neat and, in a way, beautiful.

He had told her he could never be sure when he could send a V-mail; it depended on when the ship was refueled or resupplied at sea. So here was his statement of love and faith, written, maybe, in five minutes on short notice.

Her eyes swept over it with frantic anxiety. She started over -- beginning with "beloved wife."

She tried to remember when she had mailed her confession and declaration of her love for Blake. She realized that the V-mail and her letter had crossed. In full possession now of her intellect she read the whole missive again, thinking: "First Nick Petropolis tells me how genuine I am, and now Douglas says I'm wonderful, he has seen to the bottom of my soul. What will he say when he reads my letter? He 'couldn't possibly be mistaken.' He loves me 'as a woman' but that's precisely the part he doesn't know at all. Mother, wife, those are the roles I play and I must be doing pretty well -- No! God I'm not acting, I *am* a wife and a mother. I'm the one who should be ashamed, Douglas, not you.

"You had a right to an explanation. It's on its way now, Douglas, then you will lose your shame as well as your 'complete faith' in me, and probably your love too."

Had he already received the confession? Was he raging now with hate and contempt? But she slowly discovered a very different idea, that even after reading her letter he would write something in the same generous spirit as this.

She remembered a college friend exclaiming: "You're going to marry Douglas?" And she had replied: "This man has a different kind of poetry in him. Don't worry about me." And the woman parried with: "Grace, but a business major? I've been out with some -- and I can tell you they do not think like poets."

Even in the early days Grace had noticed something predictable about her husband. She who had spent four years studying poetry, drama and fiction had crossed a line to marry Douglas Stanley and was rather proud of herself. But she was also proud of Douglas. When they went back to Columbus for a party she displayed him like a trophy. Some of her friends who revealed their opinions before they saw that she was serious described him as plain. It was just this plainness that she prized.

After managing something or other at Rike's department store he took out a loan and bought a failing printing company. He revived it in the course of the first year. He defined business as engineering with more curve balls. He prospered.

Standing beside the mailbox she looked across the road at the main dividend of his prosperity, their English-style half-timbered house, large but not pretentious, the statement not of

an architect's vanity but of his respect for a tradition, built to last for the ages -- her home, the scene of her life as mother, wife and -- woman.

The phrase echoed: "My beloved wife," and she thought: "I don't deserve him."

On an overcast night, with filtered moonlight making its way through clouds moving under the influence of a strong wind aloft, she stood, as she had done not so very long ago, leaning back against the stone balustrade. Blake took her in his arms, but this time she did not yield to his kiss. She turned her lips and her body to wood. He withdrew in confusion.

Grace said: "Kiss Eva. Don't kiss me."

"What do you mean, kiss Eva?"

"Go to her. She loves you and wants to be your wife."

"Whether she loves me I don't know," Blake said, "but I don't love her."

"I think you will find yourself loving her as you once did."

"What makes you think that? Did somebody pass on a rumor about --"

"She's right for you. What she wants is what everybody wants, a house, children, a normal life after the war."

"She is not right for me, Grace. I love you. You know I do."

"We agreed."

"Yes, that we'd separate. I haven't forgotten, but I can't do it."

"I am convinced you love her."

"I don't understand. Somebody must have told you that I took her to her hotel."

"How suspicious you are, Blake. Nobody said any such thing, but now that you mention it, did you?"

"Yes."

"I'm so glad you told me that little fact."

"I took her to the O Club bar for a party, then to dinner, and we caught a taxi to the Van Cleve."

"So you had a lovers' reunion, how nice. Is she still a virgin?"

“Grace, listen. I can’t treat her as if she meant nothing to me. I had to talk to her and there was no privacy in the lobby, so we went to her room.”

“Where you found all the privacy you could wish for.”

“She wanted me to --”

“Undress her.”

“That, and marriage. She wants to get married.”

“And you, of course, want children and a house in a nice neighborhood, and you can go back to General Motors and live a typical American life. The two of you will make a perfect couple.”

“Grace, please, why are you acting so hostile?”

“I am not hostile. I wish you all the happiness she can give you.”

“Grace, for Christ’s sake.”

“For my own sake, actually.”

“Is that why you came here?”

“I came, it’s true, hoping you’d be here, to tell you I can’t go on.”

“We already decided that, and now we’re both --”

“Yes, weakening. I at least am, otherwise I’d never --”

He took her hands and she tried to free them but he held fast.

He said: “The war won’t last forever.”

“Whether it lasts six weeks or six years makes no difference. We agreed to part and we have to stick to our agreement. It’s the only thing that makes any sense.”

“Then why did you come here tonight?”

“Don’t hold that against me, Blake. I came hoping to see you. I couldn’t bear it if you thought I had been so -- harsh -- if you thought I had ignored your note. Eight o’clock was too early. Then I had an idea, maybe you’d remember that the boys would be still awake at that hour, so -- not the next night -- I allowed one or two more nights but I weakened. I used to think that I didn’t want you to marry me, only to -- embrace me and -- now I know that’s what I do want, and when I think about it and imagine us --

“When I go down that road,” she continued, “all I see is pure clarity -- that I should never have let you touch me, not that it was your fault! Here, on this bridge, in the dark like now, with a little wind. Do you remember?”

“Yes.”

“O.K., *impossible!*” she exclaimed vehemently.

Still holding her hands, standing so close she could almost see his features clearly -- and she certainly imagined them against the half-visible oval of his face -- Blake said:

“In a few years your older boy will be in high school. Little Phil will be a teenager. Both boys will be old enough to understand --”

“And forgive?”

“Yes, very likely to forgive as well. The war will be over, we can get married, and you can share custody of the boys --”

“You’ve figured it all out.”

“Yes.”

“Blake, you young, naive man.”

“People do get divorced now, it’s not like it used to be, when a woman was condemned to live in a loveless marriage all her life, till death do us part, when a man could --”

“Blake, stop. What do you think my husband’s lawyer would make of my side of the case?”

“He would of course make it seem pretty terrible but --”

“Because it is pretty terrible,” Grace said.

“But maybe your husband would let you go. Maybe there would be enough magnanimity and affection in him --”

“Precisely. And for that reason I have no right to call on that affection or beg for that magnanimity.”

“I agree that you have no right. But if he understood that you -- love me -- if you do --”

“Blake. Don’t.”

“-- if he could be made to understand, maybe he’d set you free as an act of love, and teach the boys, by his example, to love their mother as before, not to blame anybody, and we could --”

“Live happily ever after, as if nothing like this had ever happened.”

“No, it has happened, it is happening. We’d live through the bad part.”

“So we wound Douglas unforgivably and then beg his forgiveness.”

“Grace, you never gave me a chance to say that I did not make love to Eva.”

“I give you the chance now. Did you?”

“No. She wanted it, and I said no.”

“Thank you, Blake, but that changes nothing.”

“Surely it would change everything if I had.”

“Yes,” Grace acknowledged, “I suppose it would. Had you said Yes I could have walked home a free woman.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. You are a free woman.”

“Blake, dearest,” she said, raising her hands to his face.

He did not release her hands but neither did he try to stop her as she took his face in both her hands. And so they stood face to face, unable to see one another except in the imagination, but in intimate contact, her hands within the enclosure of his, and his face enclosed by her hands.

Grace said: “Blake, dearest, don’t you believe in a principle of punishment?”

“Yes I do, if you’ll call it justice.”

“All right, justice. Is what you are proposing just?”

“Is it just for him to make you to live in a marriage without love?”

“Blake, when did I ever say I didn’t love him?”

“You told me once that you did,” said Blake, “but then we fell in love. If you stay with him now you’ll be living a false life. You’ll never dare tell him you love me, that would cut too deep. You’ll have to pretend a love -- a kind of love -- that you do not feel. Do you see?”

“Yes, I see.”

“But you’re willing to do that?” Blake asked.

“I turn away from that with -- horror, sorrow, I don’t --”

“Is that why you spoke of a ‘principle of punishment’ instead of fairness?”

“Probably but, Blake, don’t be too clever.”

“Because punishment is what’s on your mind.”

“Yes. While you’ve been thinking of a fairy tale.”

“So I have a fairy tale in my mind and you’ve got a nightmare.”

The sight and smell of Jarman flashed in her mind. She was lucky that Blake had not mentioned him and she guessed that he did not know.

Blake said again, “A fairy tale or a nightmare. Does that sum it up?”

“No,” Grace said, “it cannot be summed up.”

“But you are free,” he declared, “and so am I. Let’s neither of us pretend otherwise.”

“I promise I won’t.”

So she walked up Big Hill Road in the dark, under a sounding wind, a free woman, alone.

Chapter 29

A Matter of Principle

The brigadier looked across his desk at Blake Allen with disapproval in his eyes, impatience, young eyes in a face no longer young. Everyone called him the Old Man. Having flown combat missions over France in the First War he was regarded as an ambassador from the pioneer age of military aviation. In the 1920s and 30s he worked for Wright Aeronautical, then for the McCauley Steel Propeller Company in Dayton, and finally for Curtiss-Wright, where he helped develop the P-40. He was an industrialist whom the Army had enticed back into uniform by offering him a brigadier general's star.

"I have your request," he said rattling a paper. "I'd hate to make a bad first impression on you, Lieutenant, ha, but it seems I must give you a lecture on how to win a war."

Blake had no intention of paying any heed.

Said the general: "Of course you have hopes and dreams and other human attributes, but to me you are a unit of production. Does that sound too impersonal?"

"No sir. You're the boss of the Production Division and I'm a cog in the machine."

"No, a flywheel. Cogs are interchangeable. I have received numerous reports on your excellent work, even outstanding work."

"Thank you sir," said Blake Allen fearing that these reports would now be held against him.

"I want you to take this seriously, Lieutenant."

"I am doing so sir."

"Good. I thought I detected a note of sarcasm in your voice."

"No sir."

"In this Division, Lieutenant, as you know, we test, improve, redesign, and strive to perfect the imperfect machines that will win or lose the war. These machines have their capabilities and limitations. We have witnessed that with the P-40, in its maneuverability problems against the Jap Zero."

"Yes sir."

“Our Division has been assigned a vital task. Is it glamorous? Does Betty Grable visit this base to display her bottom and her bare legs? No. Does Bob Hope bring his girlie show here? No. What point do you think I’m making here, Lieutenant?”

“Undoubtedly, sir, that we do the thankless work that allows the combat crews to thrash the Krauts and Japs.”

“To the world we are unknown. But to the flight crews fighting the war we make the difference between victory and defeat, life and death. They appreciate us if nobody else does.”

“I doubt it sir, but I see your point. Our work is vital to the war effort.”

“It sure is! Now, Lieutenant, as you know I’m a civilian draped in this uniform. I am loathe to bark an order even when I think it’s reasonable and right.”

“Thank you sir.”

“Don’t thank me prematurely. I could simply tear this up.”

“Yes sir.” Acting like a robot was not necessarily the best policy but you never knew when the brass, even the recent civilians, would be impressed with the mystique of “military bearing.”

“I hope you are not indulging in courteous contempt, Lieutenant,” said the Old Man suspiciously.

“I am not sir. I certainly am not.”

“Have you noticed that I keep calling you ‘Lieutenant’ instead of --” glancing at the paper -- “instead of ‘Blake’? I could try to make myself popular by treating subordinates as equals but generals, even in the Air Corps, are supposed to create an aura of indifferent power. I prefer when possible to be human, and after all we are not on the front lines, are we?”

“No sir we are not. We are in the middle of a well-defended country.”

“And that of course is your complaint. You want to kill the enemy with your bare hands, or like Sergeant York with your rifle, or like Colin Kelley with a bomb down the funnel of a Japanese warship. In short, glory.”

“No sir. I just want to fight.”

“The war will be won by fighters supported by workers. You and I are workers. You are ten times more effective in this Division than you could ever be flying a B-Seventeen in the Eighth Air Force --” waving the paper -- “because others could do that job as well as you. -- Are you getting enough flying hours?”

“Yes sir. I was up just yesterday.”

“Still qualified?”

“Yes sir. That’s no problem.”

“What is the problem then?”

“There is no problem sir.”

“Hmmm. Look at it this way. There are hundreds or indeed thousands of young men who can fly the B-Seventeen, and we are graduating another batch every few weeks. And here in this Division I have scores of men who are decent test pilots. You are not an engineer but I have plenty of those too. What I don’t have enough of are men who can make the right things happen. That’s called capability. Take the propeller testing procedure. You improved it. You made it yield more information. Your experience at GM, your knowledge of factory processes and of organizational behavior -- what, after all, is production? Your -- your personality --

“You see,” the Old Man rumbled on, “if we slack off, then all the problems we fail to solve seep into the armada, with terrible long-term consequences for the war effort.”

“Yes sir but I want to fight.”

“Any particular reason?”

“Yes sir. My blood is up.”

“Woman trouble?”

“Certainly not.”

“Well -- you of all people should know the odds, working in the Two Shop.”

“Yes sir, down to the last decimal.”

“All right then, why? Against such odds?”

Blake stared into the general’s interrogating eyes with what he imagined was a man-to-man “steely-eyed” intensity.

“Sir, why don’t you send me to the Eighth and let me fly my twenty-five missions. Then I come back here and take my old slot in the Division.”

“A long absence. A very long absence at a critical moment in the war.”

“It may be a long war.”

“And you may not come back at all, eh? Has that possibility entered your head?”

“Yes,” Blake said, and: “Pardon me sir if I mention your decorations from the First War. Evidently you wanted to fight the Germans too, and the odds didn’t stop you.”

“No but they almost killed me. Look, my young warrior, if I were in your shoes I’d be making the same request -- ‘Send me over there’ -- as we said in nineteen seventeen -- ‘over there.’ You know the song?”

“Certainly sir. ‘Send the word that the Yanks are coming.’”

“The drums rum-tumming and all that. I’d be straining in my harness to get into the big show and smash the Nazis -- if you’re going to fight anybody, lad,” said the general as if in confidence, “let it be the Hun. Yes, I was young and crazy once myself.”

He uncapped his pen, glanced once at Blake Allen with exasperation, and signed the paper. He said: “Give this to the sergeant out there --” indicating the open door of his office. “You’ll have your orders in three or four days.”

“Thank you sir. May I ask a favor?”

“You mean another one?”

“Yes sir. I’d like a forty-eight, if possible, starting immediately.”

“Just a forty-eight? You’re bound for hell and all you want is forty-eight hours of freedom?”

“Well, sir, a ninety-six would be better.”

“Tell the sergeant I said to give you a ninety-six, starting --” glancing at his watch -- “at sixteen hundred. Now get out. Somebody has to swish the papers around here and I guess it’s me.”

He walked outside with the 96 in his pocket. Coming out of an alleyway between buildings he was struck by a wall of wind rolling like a tidal wave over the vast reaches of the Field. He bent into it and headed for the warehouse where he and a few others had been given cots, desks and lamps. Reaching under the cot he pulled out his duffle bag and took a few essentials, which he threw into an overnight bag. He thought that if he wore his flight jacket and a necktie he’d be dressed for admission to any O-club in the Air Corps. He zipped the little bag and headed for Flight Ops.

He asked when he could catch a hop to Offutt Field. A sergeant studied the schedules and said a gooney bird would be taking off at 1730. Blake went to the mess hall. The evening meal

was not ready but a kindly cook fried a slab of ham and sliced a piece of bread, and Blake carried this repast to a vacant table.

He seemed to see his desk at General Motors, “the best-managed corporation in the world,” and he had been one of its hundreds of thousands of drones.

If he saw himself as the man who broke out of the drone’s cage to fight in the war he could never articulate his motive. He had not felt trapped. He’d been an ordinary slob, saving to marry his girlfriend. Least of all could he identify with the man who volunteered for flight school. Now it was dawning on him that something lay directly in his path. And if he concentrated on his decision to go to Offutt he could not imagine how it would end. And he was worried because he was a strong and wildly violent fighter. Two terrible fights in his life, one in high school and one in Basic: in both cases some savage entity, not exactly a human being, had taken control.

“What am I doing?” he asked. Could he gather an identity around the naked desire to live? Or was it more honest to say that he was nothing but a bundle of contradictions? Can a bundle be a man’s essence? Fear of death must spring from a need to protect something worth protecting, which was -- what? How can a man go wrong if his actions are just? His intention was all too vivid -- not simply to do it, but to live with the man who was doing it, during and after; live with that man all his life. He couldn’t believe he really intended to kill somebody. “I don’t, for god’s sakes, cut it out!”

If not justice, is the fear of death the only real organizing principle? That would imply an animal need to live whether or not life had any rationale or duty.

He knew that when he found himself actually flying into the flak of the German 88s and seeing their fighters rising to the attack with no American or British fighters to oppose them, he would perhaps be afraid, but it would be too late, in the emergency, to figure out anything that he really cared about. He’d be a trapped animal, cowardly, insanely brave, ferocious, steady as a rock -- anything but a human being.

So clear it up now. “Quick, before Offutt.” But he could not. He had to do Offutt. He knew that he loved Grace Stanley. “Sure,” he said, “I love her -- or at least want her. No, I love her because she is glorious and I need her.” So, beauty and need; one in her and the other in him. Do these two constitute love? But her “glory” was within him too, somehow, and seemed to be part of the identity he was groping toward.

He took his dishes to the scullery, said thanks all around, and went out to the flight line.

The ugly scenario came to life in his mental theater and gripped and twisted his spirit. The crushed face, the cries of terror, the bloody eyes -- the merciless drive to strike, and strike again. His fists ached and his deeper spirit cried out -- but he said: "I know what I've got to do."

Doing it would change him into somebody he was not. What difference would that make? "I'll be dead, so what." Therefore do what must be done. Nobody else would.

On his arrival at Offutt Field Blake Allen went immediately to the bachelor officers' quarters and got a room. He threw his bag on the bed, then walked to the O-club. Here he found Jarman after a few minutes of scanning the mob, standing more or less by himself, drinking. Blake Allen got a glass of beer at the bar and accosted Jarman from the side.

The man jumped and turned. "Hey Blake! Mister Fist! What the hell?"

"Let's sit down," said Blake Allen. He walked toward a vacant table beside a wall, at the edge of the crowd, literally the edge, for the room was mobbed at that hour. He looked back and saw that Jarman was following.

They sat down.

"So," said Jarman knowingly, "they transferred you too. Conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman, eh? Christ at this rate there'll be nobody left to comfort the ladies of Dayton. Ha ha."

"I haven't been transferred. I'm here on a ninety-six."

"You came to Nebraska for the night life?"

Ignoring this Blake Allen said: "Nick Petropolis told me what you did to Mrs. Stanley."

"Oh, I wouldn't believe everything Petropolis says."

"You're saying he's a liar? And I suppose you'll tell the truth."

"Sure, why not?"

"I should believe you and not Nick?"

"Yeah. How would he know? He wasn't there."

"Wasn't where?"

"I mean she led me on, and --"

"Wasn't where?"

“You know, she’s so proud of her body and all, I just kinda --”

“Careful, Jarman, your life depends on it.”

“My life! Jesus, are you crazy?”

“If I’m a maniac you’re in trouble, Jarman.”

“You came all the way here to threaten me?”

“No. I came to beat you within an inch of your life, plus maybe one inch.”

“Then you’ll hang.”

“What if I’m already dead?”

“Nobody’s already dead. You mean you got orders?”

“Did you ever hear of a principle of punishment?”

“Sure. Did you? You’re talking about killing a man for trying to screw some bitch who’s spreading herself all over the Field like a --”

“Stop. Don’t say any more.”

“ -- like a whore, as you should know better than anybody.”

Blake Allen leaned forward and asked: “What should I do to you for calling Mrs. Stanley all those names?”

“Get -- just get away from me, Allen.”

“Not just yet. If there’s a principle of punishment what have you got coming ? Speak up. Don’t be afraid.”

“If there’s punishment, do bullies get punished too?”

“I’m sure they do. Now answer.”

“You better read the Articles of War. Did you ever read it, the part about murder?”

“I’ll take your word that if I kill you I’ll hang. Kind of primitive, eh, Jarman? But suppose I just beat your brains and you go into a coma. I get the stockade instead of going to England. What’s so bad about that?

“Or suppose,” Blake Allen continued, “I just kick you multiple times in the balls hard enough to bring an end to your disgusting career frightening women. Suppose that, Jarman, come on.”

“No kidding,” said Jarman sounding stronger, twisting his mouth in a grotesque, comic curve, “you’re going to beat me again? B-b-b-bwaykee gonna p-p-p-p-punch innocent Jarman?”

Blake Allen stared at him a little surprised at his nerve.

“G-g-g-gonna mudder me? B-b-b-b-but Bwaykee so cool calm and collected. Jarman so sca-wed! I fwighted outa my bwains!”

Blake Allen said: “Come outside and get it over with.”

“I’m gonna ‘step outside’ and we’ll have us a Marquis-of-Queensberry fight -- pip pip old chap! Two squires dueling over a lady.”

Blake saw the stupidity of it but didn’t back off.

“Because of that bitch!” Jarman exploded. “Because of that cock-teasing cunt!”

“Careful.”

“Oh so Hollywood! ‘Careful there pardner fore I blast you with my trusty forty-four.’ I respond in a perfectly natural way to the bitch’s come-hither looks -- her dresses, her nightgown and robe and the way she wiggles her ass around the kitchen and leans over pouring coffee, with her titties bumping up against my face -- but no! She’s actually a bashful virgin, which *some people* know is a joke -- and you wanna crack my skull, you came halfway across the country to defend the honor of that whore! Hear me? Whore, bitch, slut! Got it, Allen? ”

“Drink up,” said Blake really quite calmly. It was a maxim with him that if he lost his temper the other guy was winning.

“Hey, were you in the room? Did you see it?” Jarman demanded. “Lemme tell you, you dumb ass. I’m coming out of the bathroom and she’s in her doorway in a silk nightgown with a cleavage like Grand Canyon at sunset and I sorta say, ‘Gulp, hi Babe,’ and what do I get? A *smile*, Allen. She turns and walks into the room but stops and looks over her shoulder so I follow the rotating globes, I mean why not? Didn’t you do as much?

“I go Onward Christian Soldiers and she’s pretty cooperative, she even starts unbuttoning my shirt. I’m fully clothed which is more than I can say for her ladyship. She kisses me. She kissed first! and she kinda moans a little, and ole dobbin wakes up and rears in his stall and so I start to do away with the nightgown but all of a sudden there’s a noise, a knock, and her boy, the older one, calls through the door, ‘Mamma, I gotta pee,’ and she goes freefall, but the kid has already opened the door so now she screams ‘Doug! Doug! get this beast offa me!’ He jumps me -- he’s skinny but he’s a wildcat, so I let him drag me off, I mean am I gonna K.O. some kid? So he drags me and I figure, ‘What the hell, I’ll have another chance later,’ and off I go with a case of blue balls but none the worse for the experience.”

“You choked her,” said Blake -- almost letting go.

“Like hell I did.”

“Nick saw your finger marks on her neck.”

“If she had anybody’s marks on her neck it must have been Nick’s. I didn’t touch her neck, Mister, or anywhere else for that matter cause she never gave me a chance.”

“Outside,” said Blake.

“Oh sure! Outside. Ha ha ha.”

Jarman got up and joined a group at the bar. Blake stayed at the table watching. When Jarman left at about ten o’clock with six others Blake followed and observed the room in the BOQ that Jarman entered -- two doors away from Blake’s own.

Jarman turned at the last minute and looked at Blake.

The BOQ presented a row of doors, each with a window to the left. Jarman’s was dark and Blake Allen assumed he was peering from behind the blind.

If Jarman’s room was like Blake’s it was just big enough for a double bunk, two desks and a wash basin. Blake waited, wondering if Jarman had a roommate and concluding that it didn’t matter. He would attack Jarman and block the door at the same time by pulling him to the door, spinning him around and forcing his back against the door while -- doing the business with his knee and fists. It wouldn’t take long.

He watched for half an hour and nobody else entered the room. He thought of the bruises Nick Petropolis had described and he had to force down a sob.

Walking back and forth and keeping the door in view he was half-aware that something was happening -- not exactly in his mind, which was all over the place -- but somewhere perhaps even deeper. His nerves danced as if on blistered feet. And now -- if “now” meant after some trick that he played on himself -- the dance was livelier -- benign? not a dance of joy, but -- He felt that he’d caught his mind lunging forward on some unauthorized mission. It was a case of intellectual arrogance, the mind saying “I know best. I am straightening this out for you.” He knew he didn’t intend to kill anybody -- yet this, even this, didn’t seem perfectly true.

The image of her bruises that had been driving him to a greater fury now evoked a greater love. He kept his watch, walking, resigned to an all-night vigil, and if Jarman should

come out he'd intercept him and knock him down, then let nature takes its course. The street, lighted only by the little lamps between the doors of the BOQ -- yes -- the street was almost dark. He withdrew under a huge old tree and aimed a splattering stream at the trunk. The dim light suffused the spray and the rebound.

"She did not say a word." This jumped into his head. A thrill ran through him. Why didn't she say anything? He tried to remember whether she'd been wearing a scarf, but it had been too dark. He could see her face clearly only because it was present to his vision day and night. In the physical world of the bridge there wasn't enough light. He imagined he saw the shadows spreading over her neck in the shape of two hands and two thumb holes.

"When did we meet at the bridge, before or after? After, I'm sure of it. Before Nick told me but after the attack." One fact opened all doors: "She didn't say a word." Instead she asked if he believed in a principle of punishment. "If I didn't I wouldn't be pacing around this tree." But he was confusing two kinds of punishment and two separate calls for justice. He said: "I came here --" and again a vision of violence entered his mind as if through a crack. He was smashing Jarman's impudent face. He was smashing and hating in a mad fury. Was it because he believed in punishment or because he didn't? He kneed Jarman in the balls -- "That's as close as I'll come to killing him."

He began to wonder where he could get food at this hour and realized he could not. He'd live with his hunger till breakfast at 0600. He went to his room and piled on the blankets.

His sleep was undisturbed by the running fantasy of what he'd do to Jarman. That had departed and left him in peace. If she loved him, she loved the man she thought he was. She believed that this man had no need to know about the attack. She had not trusted him with the knowledge of it because she did not want him to do anything that would make him a different man. She would not risk that. She loved him more than she trusted him. And he did not want to be the avenger. The savage cruelty of his fantasies filled him with dread when he saw how close he came to kicking Jarman's door open and -- all the rest.

He would take punishment rather than deal it out. She was ready to take hers. That each would be punished bound them together more firmly.

Chapter 30

Arrowheads

“Mom, it’s Saturday,” said Doug Junior as if with special significance.

“By golly it is,” said Grace Stanley. “The day after Friday and --”

“So me and Phil were thinking --”

“*Phil and I* were thinking.”

“-- that some of the trees are colored, and you like the colors, and it might rain tomorrow and blow all the leaves down, so this’d be a good day --”

“What a good day to pick bagworms!” the mother interjected.

“I hate pulling bagworms!” Little Phil chimed in.

“You rapsallions take the ladder to the front and have yourselves a wonderful time picking --”

“Bagworms prick my fingers, waa waa,” cried Phil.

“We are not rapsallions, we are mugwumps!” said Doug Junior.

Phil chanted, “Mugwumps, mugwumps, mugwumps!”

(Their father used to come home from work, pause in the kitchen, raise his eyebrows and call: “Any mugwumps here?”)

The mother now asserted that mugwumps are experts at pulling bagworms.

Said Doug Junior: “No, Mom. Mugwumps search for arrowheads at Fort Ancient.”

“The Indians were mugwumps,” Little Phil claimed, opening a new page in history.

“Me and Phil wanna go to Fort Ancient.”

“The word ‘me’ is never a subject and ‘wanna’ is not even a word.”

“You wanna go too,” said Doug, “I can see it, the way you hesitate and maunder.”

“I am not maundering. But -- are you aware that gasoline is rationed?”

Doug Junior opened the drawer by the telephone and took out the ration book and flipped its pages.

Their mother counted coupons, hesitated, and conceded: "We have enough. -- We'll see about this --"

"*We'll see* usually means yes," Phil said echoing one of his brother's standard lines.

Still hesitating she said: "When will you pull the bagworms?"

They promised tomorrow, and Grace issued orders: "Doug, make baloney sandwiches, Phil, you fill three jelly jars with water, caps on tight! Apples, crackers."

"Candy," Phil suggested.

Grace ran upstairs and exchanged her dress for slacks, clodhoppers and a red kerchief.

They started across a field of sere grass, walking three abreast until they came to a path. Doug took the lead, Phil came next, then Grace. Doug would turn from time to time and check on his mother.

On their right, behind a screen of tall hardwoods, they could see a rounded earthen wall which seemed to move closer as they penetrated deeper into the fort. When they could also see a wall on the left Doug Junior began to feel a sense of enclosure, but the space was so huge that there was no tension in it, rather an awareness of design.

As they went ever deeper the walls began to converge and now Doug could see the cut ahead, where a transverse wall connected the two peripheral walls; this transverse was cut in the middle by a narrow passage -- just wide enough for all three to pass though at once. Doing so, they entered a vast open space where the walls again spread out and disappeared into woods on both sides. So the feeling of enclosure vanished with the walls. But the boy, his brother and mother kept walking as if on faith, that they were still within, that they hadn't left the fort behind -- and by glimpses Doug began to see the peripheral walls again, and the grandeur of the fort reasserted itself in his mind.

"Let's go to the lookout," Grace proposed.

They bent half-right and approached the west wall at an angle.

Little Phil, who had volunteered to carry the lunch basket, now complained that it was too heavy.

"You wanted it and you've got it," Doug said indifferently.

Phil did not respond. His mother reached out saying, "Let me have it, mugwump."

"Is that the lookout?" Phil asked, and Grace said:

"The gap in the trees."

Phil darted into the gap, scampered up the wall and stood facing west.

Fort Ancient spreads out over a plateau virtually surrounded by steep ravines or bluffs. The walls stand at the edges of the plateau and add to the height of the bluffs. To the west the valley of the Little Miami, narrow at the bottom, forms a severe groove. The river itself is insignificant except during freshets. But the valley makes you work for every foot whether you are going up or down.

Standing on the wall with his brother and mother Doug looked west, his eye on a level with the treetops before him. His vision skimmed across miles of hardwoods, straight to the indefinite line of disappearance, where in the absence of any horizon he could deduce that the earth's shape had made all the rest impossible to see. He knew it was there, an infinite forest curving down away from him.

His mother was now sitting with her hands clasped between her knees. He sat beside her, and Phil settled on the other side. Doug was thinking, "This is what the Indians saw."

He felt the altitude and distance, the endlessness. The nearby treetops rustled in the wind that was forcing its way in from the west. The colors were mixed, mostly a past-prime green but with flashes of red and orange, and vague traces of a colorless gray where the leaves had already fallen.

The mother and sons watched in silence but not stillness. The wind, as it swept over them, seemed to Doug to bring with it the breath of the forest, which, again, his imagination divided in two -- the part he could see and the curvature he could not. This was what he wanted, this was the reason he had insisted they come here, this chance to see across the trees from a superior height, to listen and to think, with the fort behind him. He believed there was a concealed meaning in life and that he could sense its presence here. He wanted to believe in God but the ceremonies and sermons that he attended on Sundays with his father made no impression on him. When the nuns declared that we are placed on earth by God to know, love and serve Him Doug thought that if this were true then God was a lot smaller than He should be, for all His power. So he didn't believe it. He saw that his disbelief was a kind of belief but this realization

led nowhere. He didn't know what the Indians had believed and apparently nobody knew -- but the evidence of their intensity and certitude lay all around.

Had they left a written doctrine it would undoubtedly have disappointed him. But when he came here he knew there was a reason to live. He didn't think this was a fort. It was a cathedral.

They skidded and swung from tree to tree down the face of the bluff, crossed the railroad track and pressed through dense brush to the edge of the river. Here they sat down to lunch, watching the brown, curling water slide towards the Ohio.

Little Phil wanted to start hunting for arrowheads but Doug explained that anything near the river would have been washed away in the spring floods, and the things higher up the bank would have been found or buried when the railroad was built. Grace suggested they go to a plowed field, where farmers turning the soil for a century might have unearthed some arrowheads. Doug said that Daddy had once found an arrowhead in a forest, to which the mother replied that a plowed field would have been forested a thousand years ago when the fort was already centuries old.

She said: "Maybe there is no best place. Maybe it's pure luck."

"Daddy is lucky," Little Phil said.

The mother said this was true, and in her voice Doug Junior heard a tremor. Did it help or hurt her to speak of Daddy?

She rolled forward, landing on her hands and knees, and crawled to the water's edge. She began filling the empty water jars with sand. She took the basket and crawled up a little and gathered rocks and pebbles, which she dropped into the basket with the jars. Doug kept a keen, worried watch on her. She had started this just after saying, yes, Daddy was lucky.

Was that the reason? Could it be that her vlns was somehow -- what? She seemed to wince when she said "Daddy." He knew that her loneliness for Daddy was different from his own, and that it was part of being married. He thought of Jarman and wanted to kill him.

She placed the basket at Phil's feet and said, "All the Indians, including children, must have helped to build the walls. They are so high and so long."

“How high?” asked Phil.

“Taller than Daddy.”

“And three miles long,” Doug added.

“Longer than your walk to school and back,” his mother said. “Can you pick up the basket?”

Phil did so, putting one arm through the handle and the other underneath.

“You take it a little way up, then I will, then Doug because he’s the strongest.”

And they started climbing toward the fort.

Doug said, “Don’t spill it,” and the mother spoke gently:

“He won’t.”

Doug thought she had censured him. She always took Phil’s side. But Doug understood that it was natural for a mother to protect a little brother. It was just that she did it so often.

When they dumped the basket on the wall it made a very small pile.

Doug was afraid Phil would say something dumb like “We helped the Indians.” Nobody could help them. They had vanished centuries ago. He understood himself well enough to realize that if there were Indians living here now his fascination would vanish too. They had lived, and they lived no more. This told him something about the world.

Near the east side of the fort they found a cornfield where cattle had grazed the stubble and left their divided hoof prints in the dark earth. His mother lay down in the soft grass beside the field and wrapped her coat severely around her body. The boys followed the furrows. Returning by the adjacent pair of furrows they could see her lying on her back, perhaps sleeping. She had pulled her kerchief forward to cover her eyes, and Doug imagined the red cloth blocking her view of the overcast sky. He did not think she was asleep.

As the boys turned again to follow the furrows toward the distant treeline, leaving their mother behind, Doug’s brain was invested with a virulent hatred and rage at Jarman. If he was looking for arrowheads he didn’t know it. He was pulverizing Jarman’s smart-ass face till his nose spread like a pancake and his eyes swelled shut, black, purple and red. He could have done this, he could have choked him. He had his arm across his neck and could have crushed his windpipe. He knew why he had not done any of these things.

He had let the bastard go too soon and lost his advantage. Fear whipped him and all he could think was: "Now he's free." Now the bastard could tear him apart. He wasn't so skinny. He was a man.

Doug recalled the relief that consoled him when he saw Jarman staggering down the hall toward his room.

"I should have jumped him. I was too scared."

While he was dragging Jarman he had no fear, only power, strength. His arm was across the disgusting windpipe. He had saved his mother. That would always be true and never forgotten by either of them.

The boys had crossed the field three times now -- and their mother joined them. But she thought it was hopeless. Doug could tell by looking at her face. Watching her as she tramped her furrow he saw a dull, distracted light in her eyes.

Chapter 31

The Good Girl

Grace and Keezee sat blowing on their coffee like two novices in a tribal ritual.

Keezee said: "So the monster's gone?"

"Yes, my home is clean again."

"I shouldn't mention the football hero in the same breath but he's gone too?"

"Yes," Grace said, and no more.

"I mean, never to return?"

"Yes. Never."

"How important is that to you?"

"Terribly."

"I'm sorry, I'm really sorry."

"And you?" Grace asked. "Are you more or less happy? Pardon the shorthand."

"More or less. My flyboy is in Washington or somewhere but his clothes are still in my closet."

"Keezee -- tell me --"

"Yes? Tell you?"

"Is it possible to live as Nancy lives?"

"It must be possible. She's alive."

"So are plenty of amputees," said Grace, immediately regretting the word.

"Not only that," Keezee went on, "she seems to have settled on a deal with life. Cut off one leg but you can hop around on the other. I'm sure she's happy with it."

"Impossible."

"O.K., I admit there's a strain of bitterness and anger in her. But I'll bet she's happier than I am -- or you. You love this guy, right?"

"Oh -- do I."

"Every cell and chamber aches for him and your brain is obsessed, right?"

"My brain is gone. There's nothing left up there but a bleeding wound."

"I know the feeling."

“He asked me -- we parted, we decided -- and he asked me how I’d get along. I lied and said I’d be miserable.”

“I’ve prayed for misery myself a few times.”

Grace nodded and didn’t try to speak.

“This is your first love then -- I mean except for Douglas.”

“No, Keezee, this is my first love.”

“Be honest. I remember you raving about Douglas in the beginning. ”

“I raved but I was a hormone-soaked virgin. This is different.”

“But Douglas is a good husband, as husbands go,” said Keezee. “I suppose that’s part of the problem.”

“Part of it, but it’s mainly the boys.”

“But does he love you?”

“Which one?”

“Your husband, the father of your boys.”

“Yes. Does your husband --”

“Oh -- Harold! Yes and no. We get along, I’ll put it that way. But pardon me -- is this a wartime thing with Blake Allen or do you want to get married?”

“He proposed and I turned him down. He said we could wait till after the war when my boys would be older and I still refused.”

“Yeah but if you were childless would you divorce Douglas and marry this guy?”

“I would if he’d have me.”

“You just said he’s already proposed.”

“Yes, but he has just come off another -- girlfriend.”

“The old rebound.”

Keezee leaned forward and slowly turned a glass vase of cut flowers, zinnias and asters, examined it from the new angle and returned it to its original orientation. She said: “Sometimes I think I’ll wear frumpy house dresses and black leather shoes with low heels. And I won’t make all this trouble for myself. I’ll wither up to the point where I wouldn’t need you-know-what, or even want it. --So --” turning the flowers again -- “is this O.K.?”

Glancing at the vase Grace said it was fine.

“-- so you and Prince Lionheart have broken up,” Keezee continued, “but you’re farther gone than ever.”

“He may have forgotten me already but --”

“You know this has all happened more than once to me, but I got over it. I sometimes wish I hadn’t. I wish I was still in love and I wouldn’t care if I suffered because my stupid romantic heart says love is the main thing, which obviously it isn’t, I mean just look around you. Maybe I should never have tried to kill it. But I did kill it.”

“That would be Nancy’s way,” said Grace thoughtfully. “Kill it. Throw the corpse in the river.” Then seeing the Little Miami she said as if for the first time, “I couldn’t leave my boys.”

“If you did,” Keezee predicted, “you’d die, and anyway what would your hero think of you?”

Grace said: “That I was a selfish, irresponsible woman unfit to be a wife, mother or mistress.”

Keezee smiled. “That’s the joke at the heart of the matter. We are designed to go mooning after happiness but we are living in the wrong universe.

“I get a bloody nose every few years and sometimes I wake up,” Keezee said, “and realize I have no right to happiness, I, we, any of us. Then I sort of forget and go sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong -- again. So Douglas wants to stay married, so you say. A little strange, isn’t it?”

“He won’t when he gets my letter.”

“Ye gods, what have you written?”

“I confessed everything.”

“You poor honest fool.”

“I am not honest.”

“Well to a degree anyway. Why in heaven’s name did you?”

Grace told her about the V-mail and so forth. She added: “But I am glad I did. I couldn’t stand it the other way.”

“So you cheat, but there’s still a good girl inside of you crying for the rewards that are reserved for good girls. -- It won’t work, Grace.”

Chapter 32

Blake's Logic

If she loved him she was in pain. If he went to see her he would intensify the pain. If she did not love him there was no point in going to see her. If she loved him and was resolved on a break, then his going to see her would undermine her resolve and throw her into confusion. If she was already confused but trying to do what she believed she must do, and he went to see her, she would not thank him for doing what, at their last meeting, she had told him not to do.

Therefore stay away. In separating from him she had acted in obedience to a universal law, in spite of her love, if she loved him. And if she did not, the separation was her way of bringing a troublesome affair to a quick end.

But he knew she loved him. To admit any other possibility was to doubt her truthfulness. He reduced it all to: "She has made her decision and I agreed. I have to keep my word."

Thus the gate to the future swung shut. On the other side, nothing. But if Washington sent orders a hole opened up, a shaft. The loss rate being what it was, together with the Allied launch of thousand-plane raids, surely his orders would arrive in the dispatch bag quite soon.

He didn't take the remainder of his 96. A chance came up to fly the day he returned from Offutt and he took it. He ate a late dinner and then went to the O-club where he pushed his way into an argument with somebody about something. He drank too much and mixed his drinks recklessly, scotch, beer and brandy. He found himself reeling, and he suffered through the first half of the next day. By dinner time he felt well enough to eat a slab of roast beef, a baked potato and a spoonful of canned peas.

Next morning he went to the 2 Shop to work on his loss-rate figures, but there was no new data from England. The only thing left was Production, so he went to the propeller testing site, where he was not needed. After dinner he read for an hour in Freeman's *Robert E. Lee*, a book he did not like. He admired Lee's skillful use of limited resources but couldn't reconcile that with the hecatomb of Gettysburg. Blake's father had taken him to the battlefield when he was fifteen. The father and son walked Pickett's charge at formation pace. It took a little more than ten minutes. Dad said: "Notice, Blake. Ten or twelve minutes over open ground, no cover,

no defilade. And in the last three or four minutes a blind charge into the teeth of the Union cannon and rifles. And people call Robert E. Lee a military genius.”

He lay on his cot thinking of Grace. He started comparing her and Eva, seeing Eva’s body from all angles, remembering her kisses and her breathing.

In the morning he felt he had done a rude and low thing in comparing the two. He feared this fantasy of Eva while loving Grace would leave its footprints in his mind forever. He went to the club again but drank moderately and did not argue with anybody. There were six or eight men in the crowd that he knew well, and he had a decent time joking with them.

On the next day or the next he entered a kind of brain vacuum, in which only one emotion presented itself to consciousness -- a half-serious wish that Washington would lose track of his request. He had no feeling of suspense, fate or immanence. He drank more than usual but didn’t get drunk. He still felt as if somebody else had done the volunteering and it was up to him to live with the consequences. He was not afraid but his thinking was constrained, as if something were holding him back below the surface. He wished he could blow up; he wanted to blow up and holler but the constraint held him.

He was reading a mimeographed sheet printed in blue. One sentence popped out: “When released from present duty but NLT 1 November 1943 proceed directly and report CG 8th AF wherever he may be.”

Everybody, even the Germans, knew where he was.

The messenger was still standing there. He seemed to be holding something out for Blake’s inspection. It turned out to be a pen. Blake understood he was supposed to sign for the orders. He wrote his name beside an X and added a request that he be released ASAP. There were twelve copies. When it came time to stuff them back into the big brown envelope he found a white card with a message written in black ink. “Lt. Allen -- I envy you. I’d take your place if I could. Good luck -- Henderson.”

Henderson was the brigadier. Blake thought: “I bet he would. He’s an old war horse.”

An enlisted man walking by failed to salute and Blake thought: “I’m supposed to write him up but I’m a civilian too.” He didn’t feel like a civilian because he didn’t feel like anything.

A bunch of his friends, including several he had never met, dragged him to the O-club where he refused to drink, then to the mess hall where he ate heartily, then back to the club where he persisted in abstaining. Everybody else was drunk or getting there. “Sure,” he said to himself, “they’re alive.”

The group formed a little storm in the midst of the mob, and in the center of the whirl was Blake Allen, determined not to get drunk. He found himself being addressed by the major who had ogled Eva Dybek.

“What’s her last name?” the major asked. “I forget her last name.”

Blake said: “Tittle.”

“What? Come on.”

“Yes sir, she comes from an old Dutch family in Michigan. The Tittles from Muskegon.”

“O.K., Eva Tittle, Willow Run.”

“That’s correct sir. Look her up.”

“I just might.”

“Good luck to you sir.”

Then Blake got a surprise: Nick Petropolis. Blake asked: “What are you doing here?”

“We rescheduled the bus so we could come to the party.”

Blake said: “What party?”

“Your going-away party, you dope. This party right here,” waving his glass around.

“I see. This is my farewell celebration.”

“Come with us when the bus leaves, say goodbye to your hostess.”

What was Petropolis implying?

“I’m sure she’d love to see you one more time,” said Nick Petropolis in his fifty-five-gallon-oil-drum voice.

“O.K.,” said Blake Allen recklessly, “I’ll ride with you.” His mind was leaping. “I’m not dead yet!”

A man reached out his hand and Blake shook it, looking at the man without seeing him. The guy introduced himself and said, “We’ll all be following you sooner or later.”

“By ‘later’ you mean after the fighter escorts are deployed,” Blake said silently.

The grip of hands grew tighter. When Blake finally gained possession of his hand again he thought “That son of a bitch,” meaning Major Ogle.

The hand-shaker was saying, "I envy you, going to the real war."

Blake knew he was no better than the ones staying behind but he was tempted to think he was. He laughed: men envied him and seemed to think that his getting orders was cause for celebration. He sensed in himself a feeling of superiority which he didn't like. It showed in the comment he made to the hand-shaker:

"Hey Buddy, come on over."

Major Ogle for one had done a tour out of England and had a chestful of ribbons to prove it. Blake cast a glance at the major's chest and thought: "Would Eva be impressed?" Looking around for the first time he saw that his "party" was unstable with laughter. He didn't wonder why everybody was laughing. He knew.

He asked the driver to stop in Oakwood across the street from the Far Hills Theater.

Nick Petropolis hollered a protest from the back of the bus: "Hey Blake! What's up?"

Blake Allen called out that he was going to the movies. Working his way forward Petropolis asked the driver to wait, then took Blake by the hand in a grip that was almost harsh.

Petropolis said, "Don't forget to come back."

Blake didn't speak but tightened his grip for a moment, then broke loose and jumped down from the bus.

He crossed the street and stood reading the poster for "The Phantom of the Opera," listening to the bus engine as it started off, then faded. He started walking down Route 48, passed a low-lying cornfield on the left and the Custola ice cream stand on the right.

Still going south he crossed Dorothy Lane and went beyond Moody's bar a few hundred yards before turning right. He had considered going to the bridge but he guessed that she would be unlikely to wait there, even in the dark, for fear of being seen. His imagination showed him the beaten-down place in the grass by the creek. The night was cold, the grass would be damp. Then he said in his mind: "That wouldn't stop her," as if with pride.

"Shut up!" he commanded. His chance of seeing her tonight or ever again was -- this came tumbling out -- "Exactly 19.5 per cent."

He walked toward the house with the porch, the couch and the candle. There wasn't much warmth in his flight jacket. It was leather, designed to make the infantry jealous. Aloft you needed stuffed boots and sheepskins.

Half-dark houses on either side -- no moon, no stars, no cars and no people -- a curve and a descent to a crossroads, and suddenly he knew where he was. He took a left, then a right, and stood still in the road in front of Grace's house, staring: lights on the ground floor but none above: everybody was still awake. He relied on Nick Petropolis's busybody tendency. "If he sees her tonight he'll tell her for sure." Then: "Why should he? Everything is normal as hell."

Circling around he came unerringly to the house of their refuge. It was all dark. He went into the tight little stand of pines and followed the path to the porch. He entered as a burglar would -- silent, blind, careful -- closing the door carefully behind him. He remembered the low coffee table by the couch, and the Ronson Crown lighter, the candle-stick and the extra candle. Both lighter and candle-stick were silver; the candle was a rich dark red. He moved forward, crouched, with his arms low and extended. His knee touched the table and he knelt, spreading his hands deftly over the table surface. He touched the lighter -- and snapped it. The little yellow flame showed him a half-consumed candle, which he lit, remembering when it had been tall. It had shown him a beauty and a paradise.

He surveyed their refuge -- the couch, the table with an extra candle lying ready, a chair with blankets and towels, and the pair of glass doors giving on the living room. The glass reflected the flame; beyond lay darkness. He checked his watch: 8:45.

He saw her with her boys, he saw her in the shower -- and he saw himself walking back to Oakwood to the city bus stop, going to the Van Cleve and catching a taxi to the Field. The Van Cleve recalled Eva to his memory, and she dwelt there for a second or two, and was gone.

The candle burned down, guttered and went dark. He sat in darkness for a long time, but he felt impatient. He lighted the fresh candle. It was half gone when he heard a sound from behind him. He was sitting on the couch with his back to the double glass doors and the living room.

He stood and turned. The sound was a door being opened with a key and a push. The darkness beyond the glass lighted up and he was looking at a kind of foyer at the far end of the living room, and at a woman entering, turning and taking off her coat. She was opening a closet door -- hanging up the coat. Blake Allen thought: "Run," but he dare not run. He would terrify

her if he did. He stood frozen, watching, while she closed the closet door and faced in his direction. She saw the candle. She jumped and let out a scream.

Blake stood still. The woman stared at him, lifting her hand to her mouth -- then she took a step toward him. It was too late to run and too early to speak. He watched her coming steadily on.

When she opened the glass door he said: "My name is Blake Allen. I'm a friend of Grace Stanley."

"You certainly are," she said -- not the kind of response he was expecting.

"Yes -- I -- we -- came here a few days ago, and Grace said that a friend told her it was O.K."

"It is O.K., but Grace isn't here."

"I've been waiting, hoping she'd come."

"What made you think she'd come tonight?"

"Nothing."

"Waiting -- how long?"

"An hour, two hours," he said looking at his watch. "Nearly two hours."

She was still in the doorway, a woman with a grand, almost majestic figure, perfect in form but getting out of control. Her face was -- he thought of the word "jolly."

He was about to offer to leave when she said:

"Would you like a drink?"

"I'd better go. I didn't mean to disturb you."

"I only screamed because I'm still shaking from that movie. I need a drink. Come with me."

They crossed the living room, an opulently furnished party space with two big couches and a triangle of wingback chairs, a fireplace and a great mirror framed in gilt. In the kitchen she poured herself a bourbon on the rocks and he asked for the same thing. She introduced herself as Keezee Smith.

"I've seen you before," she said, "at a football game. You threw a pass to Grace, and another to Doug Junior. -- Grace will be sorry she missed you."

"I'm not so sure," he said. "We broke up."

"She'll be sorry," said Keezee.

“Well, I wanted to see her one last time.”

Keezee sat at a little table in the corner and motioned toward the other chair. Blake was thinking:

“Don’t blab about the orders.”

Keezee was saying: “One last time? I thought the last time was supposed to be the last time. Grace certainly did.”

“So did I.”

“But you weakened?”

“Yes,” thinking: “Stop talking.” But he didn’t stop. He said: “I thought there was a chance she’d come tonight. So I came.”

“On the wings of love,” said this enigmatic friend-or-foe.

“If you put it that way.”

“But she told me that you two had agreed, iron-clad, to separate.”

“That’s true.”

“But you still love her?”

“Are you kidding?”

“Do you still love her?” she repeated almost sternly.

“Yes.”

“And you wanted to see her ‘one more time’ meaning one more night on my porch and then you’d never come back. Not a very good arrangement for the lady.”

“I wasn’t offering an arrangement. If she had come tonight I would’ve --”

“That’s a hard sentence to finish, isn’t it. You would’ve what?”

“I would have seen her for the last time and that’d be the end.”

“As I said.”

“Not as you said,” Blake insisted.

“Explain the difference.” The face was still jolly but the eyes were not going to let him go.

He had not touched his drink or taken his eyes off this woman since they sat down. He said, “It makes a difference to me.”

“Lieutenant, you are a little mysterious. You love her but you don’t plan on ever seeing her after ‘one more time.’”

“Is she trying to forget me, do you think? Should I leave her alone?”

“There isn’t the slightest chance she’ll forget you. She’s in a -- let me say it this way: It isn’t in her nature to take a lover or to forget him once taken. There’s a good girl -- as we often say -- inside her, struggling -- as I said to her, and it’s true -- let me -- O.K., she seems to want to be that girl again but it’s too late. She is a strong-willed woman and she is very upset.”

“Is she -- Have you seen her since we separated?”

“I saw her tonight. We went to the movies.”

“At the Far Hills?”

“Yes of course.”

“I was standing outside that theater before I came here.”

“Then you two were within a few steps of one another. Could you feel it?”

He let that slide and asked: “Did you drive or walk?”

“To the movies? We walked.”

“So -- then,” Blake hesitated, “you didn’t go by her house? I mean you don’t know if everybody had gone to bed.”

“You don’t go by Grace’s house if you’re walking here from the theater.”

“No,” he said realizing finally that it made no difference. If Petropolis didn’t see her tonight he’d see her in the morning. And even if he told her, so what?

Keezee said: “You seem to be trying to ask me a question. Go ahead and ask.”

“No, I was just -- nothing.”

“Lieutenant, you are obviously quite stricken.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Crazy in love. You seem to be taking this whole thing rather seriously.”

“That’s a funny thing to say. Am I supposed to take it lightly?”

“You see,” she said ignoring that, “she’s my friend. I care about what happens to her.”

“You’re telling me to leave her alone.”

“I think that if you care for her, and if you two agreed to break up, it would be best for her if you disappeared --”

Blake thought: “I may do just that.”

“-- given her situation,” Keezee continued, “and her character. If she were somebody else it’d be different.”

“If she were somebody else I wouldn’t love her.”

“Do you really love her?”

“Yes.”

“Then disappear.”

“As things stand, I’ll be doing just that pretty quick.”

“You’re being transferred?”

“In a few days.”

“Where?” Keezee asked with a sudden, grave suspicion in her voice.

Believing that a stronger man would lie at this point, but also knowing that Grace would learn the truth eventually, he said, “Eighth Air Force.”

The jolly woman held his eyes in a fixed stare for several seconds then said: “Does Grace know this?”

“One of her roomers does. I expect he’ll tell her tomorrow if he sees her.”

The large blue eyes pouring into Blake’s eyes were steady with a molten intensity of thought.

Neither Blake nor Keezee spoke for some time.

Keezee said: “Lieutenant, come back tomorrow night.”

Chapter 33

Flashes

“What! You were the one who said I didn’t have the right. Now you’re telling me --”

“What I meant was --” Keezee tried to explain but Grace drove right on:

“I know exactly what you meant -- that I didn’t have the right to love him.”

“No, no.”

“Yes, yes! Because when somebody loves she declares she is free to love. Which I am not. Now you tell me to throw myself at his feet.”

“I’m only telling you for God’s sakes he waited for you last night. I believe he’ll be there again tonight. I thought you might want to know.”

“Why would I? And what makes you think he’ll come back?”

“He thought you didn’t know about the orders, that’s why.”

“But I did know. Nick Petropolis came in and I said: ‘You gentlemen are running late.’ He said, ‘We went to Blake’s farewell party’ and so I tried not to faint and I said, ‘Is Blake going somewhere?’ and he said *those words* -- Eighth Air Force.’ So you see I did know and I didn’t go.”

“You idiot, he didn’t know that you knew.”

“How could I know that?”

“Grace, you are getting incoherent. And there’s no need to bite my head off.”

“Who’s biting. Did he volunteer?”

“For Eighth Air Force? I don’t know.”

“I’ll bet he did,” said Grace glaring. She asked: “Did you tell him I’d come tonight?”

“How could I? Am I your social secretary?”

“But did you say anything like ‘Her ladyship will comply with any reasonable request.’ Be honest, you meddling -- preaching -- busybody.”

“Preaching? Me?”

“Yes! Didn’t you say I have no right to happiness? Deny my longings, my desires, my love, my -- self! If that’s not a sermon I --”

“I can’t remember saying all that. I only meant sort of philosophically that nobody has a right to happiness -- the human condition and all that.”

“How original, how profound.”

“Actually it is both,” Keezee insisted. “We may say ‘How obvious’ but we don’t act accordingly, do we? And since it is not ours by right we have to reach out and take it. Or else we’ll never get it.”

“So we should live an utterly selfish life and mess up our families.”

“Damn you Grace which do you want?”

“What do you think I want? Are you a dunce?”

“Then take it -- and pay the price,” said Keezee triumphantly.

“One price or another, I think,” said Grace. “The price of taking or the price of -- abstaining. A full-bodied person or a self-mutilated amputee.” She seemed to ponder this with a perverse satisfaction till she said: “You’ve stalled long enough. Did you or did you not tell him I’d come tonight?”

“What I said was -- after he told me he’d gotten orders -- that he should come back tonight.”

“Ah! One harmless sentence. Speaking of rights, what gave you the right to say that?”

“Nobody and nothing,” said Keezee.

“You reached out and took it, so to speak.”

“Yes, as your friend.”

“You came closer to true friendship when you told me I had no right to this man.”

“I meant that if you --”

“Skip it! The freest woman in the land telling me not to be free! Not to -- love -- this --”

Keezee sensed an emergency. She rushed to Grace’s side. Grace’s voice had failed her and she was staring straight ahead as if into the lights of an onrushing car. At first she sat passively and let Keezee hug her, then they embraced one another completely, as people do at the funeral of a beloved person. Grace was thinking that she could endure anything. She tightened her grip -- but she detected moisture on her cheek.

She pushed Keezee back for a view of her face and saw tears -- and on being found out Keezee gave up and began sobbing in heavy silent gasps. “Here,” thought Grace, “is a certain kind of freedom.” Renewing the embrace Grace cried:

“I am so terribly selfish! Forgive me, Keezee Babe. Is he O.K.? I mean your flyboy. Is he?”

Keezee’s man had been gone for nearly three weeks without writing. They discussed the possibilities and guessed that he was doing something classified, probably overseas. He was an instructor pilot with experience over Europe and the Mediterranean, he might have “gone over” to do some professor work among the engaged forces.

“He’ll be back soon,” Grace said half believing it.

“Yes, yes,” said Keezee cleaning up her face with a handkerchief.

“Oh god Keezee, when you smile through your tears you break my heart,” said Grace laughing and kissing her.

It was nearly time for the boys, so they went to the kitchen where Grace poured two glasses of milk and put out a plate of war cookies. She offered one to Keezee, who refused, explaining that “Hank” liked her as she was, but occasionally made cryptic references to “megaperfection.”

“We must learn what size and shape the kings of the earth prefer,” Grace said, “and endeavor to be that exact size and shape.”

“Yes,” said Keezee, “but of course it isn’t that they are selfish or egotistical or -- I don’t know what.”

“Domineering,” Grace supplied.

“Oh no! It’s just that they are men.”

“And they need us, the poor dears,” said Grace. “My project in life is to prove I don’t need them.”

Keezee said: “I’ll put it like this. The world says we have no right, but that is too cruel. Being cruel, it is -- unacceptable.”

“Surely you don’t think,” said Grace, “that the world cares a damn whether we accept it.”

“I guess it doesn’t. But then I don’t give a damn either.”

“The picture of the world you paint,” Grace went on with her thought, “is, first, we have no right, I have no right. Second, therefore seize it anyway. And third, pay the price.”

“You’re so well-read,” Keezee proposed, “why don’t you tell me what *it* is. What am I supposed to seize?”

“The fullness of life. Seize it and be destroyed by love or by loss.”

Keezee protested: "But there are -- rare -- flashes of beauty."

"In the world?"

"In this fickle felonious business of love," Keezee extemporized.

"Feeble flickering flashes in the frosty fog," said Grace irrationally.

"Fluky forgettable flashes," Keezee added still using her handkerchief. Then she said: "I admit that I sort of admire you."

"How felicitous but faulty of you. Anyhow, for what, for god's sake?"

"For staying away after you heard --"

"Last night?"

"Yes. Your conscience won a battle."

"I had my Joan of Arc moment," Grace conceded. "But I can't let that man go to England thinking I'm a plaster saint who cares more for my conscience than I do for him. I am totally stupid for that man."

Keezee took Grace's hand, smiling, and Grace saw tears still flooding her eyes.

"Don't call it stupid," Keezee urged.

Looking at that loving, honest face Grace asked: "Do you know how many days? Nick Petropolis just said 'a few days.'"

"Just -- a few days," was all Keezee came up with.

Grace kissed her and said, "Thank you. You yourself are a flash of the finest."

Grace was now in her bathroom bent over the drawer where she kept her diaphragm and spermicide. She'd been worrying that the spermicide was nearly two years old. This led to a tremor that descended like a waterfall into her bowels. But then came a flash of a different order. "I don't need this," and she tossed the tube and diaphragm back into the half-open drawer. "I will have his baby." Pondering, contemplating the physical, she said: "I will conceive his child." The act of conception, the child, Blake Allen, she herself and her future were carried in this sentence.

The image of herself pregnant, instead of plunging her into the lowest circle of hell, admitted her into a state of tranquil satisfaction. "I will bear him a child, and tonight may be my last chance." She could not speak the most important sentence to him: "If you are shot down you

will know that I am carrying our child.” But she could think it. She could revolve it in her mind and imagine its career in his.

She stretched out on her bed, on her back, and found that her heart was throbbing with a strange undefined thrill. Pregnancy would mean divorce, rejection, loneliness, poverty (unless she could get a job, and who would hire her -- to do what?) -- an unforgivable insult to Douglas -- and a judge looking down on her as if she were vermin, awarding custody of the boys to Douglas. But she thought: “They will forgive me. They will come to me.”

If she loved Blake she would give herself and take him into her arms while she had the chance. She began to compose a letter: “Dearest Blake -- Please my beloved, be safe! We are going to have a child! She will come in the summer. Be safe!”

The act of writing a letter in her imagination to her beloved threw her into the story of Clarissa, heroine of the ‘Great English Novel.’ Her life is presented in letters. She resists the wrong man and also the one who might or might not be the right one. She does not give herself but wishes she could. Grace was only half-way into the book. What lifted, what nearly intoxicated her was the beauty of Clarissa’s soul and the bravery of her life.

Grace searched her mind for the origin of her decision to have this man’s baby -- if luck allowed -- a truly mad temptation! Was it Blake’s danger, her feverish love, or was it -- Jarman! She recoiled from the name and the image. “I am not polluted. I fought, Doug Junior saved me, I am innocent.”

Grace tried to think in a straight line: conceiving a child, if she could, would vivify her love when Blake’s need was greatest. It would make his plan of marriage after the war reasonable. Pregnancy was a disaster, but she had said to Keezee or to herself only today: “I can endure anything.” Whatever ordeal she faced as a pregnant woman would be shared with Blake. The phrase “with Blake” covered all her needs.

She was in or near her fertile time and had felt a disturbance yesterday that she associated with ovulation. Throwing the “implements” back into the drawer had been an act of self-destroying madness, like an addict’s picking up his needle. While she lay on the bed her heart went faster and her panties turned wet. Closing her eyes she dreamed that Blake lay her down and spread her legs. She felt his gentle fingers circling her ankles. She thought: “We’ll be together after the war. We will love one another.”

She saw her plan: Make a new arrangement with the manager of Douglas's printing plant, who seemed to think he had to report to her every month. Rent the house out. Move to Pittsburgh and take an apartment near Jenny Welles. Change her address with the Navy so her allotment check could follow her. Find a school for the boys in Pittsburgh. Of course Doug Junior would know what was going on. She would explain to both boys. She would ask their forgiveness.

She trembled with an emotion that was rearranging her insides -- happiness and fear or both. "If I make love tonight it must be honest, complete love giving my body and my being to him. Now I have conceived the idea I must show that I mean it by coming to him in my natural state. To interfere would be like lying." She saw that she had reached the crisis: deny him her body or give it.

"And if I withdraw my love I'm to blame for everything. I've come too far."

But she said: "Wait for the letter." She meant the letter Douglas would write when he received her confession. If he damned her she would be no more guilty than now, but freer. Therefore: "Wait." To be damned by her husband would destroy something in her that she valued. But it would be worse if he wrote in loving forgiveness. Still shaking, she saw that what she wanted from the boys was forgiveness, but from Douglas, damnation.

"Give me what I need so I can hate you for it." This slithered through her brain like a -- rattlesnake -- and she tried to deny it. She stammered out a revision: "If you forgive me I will love you for it." Then something she could not deny: "I love you now, dear Douglas."

What if a judge took the boys from her and Douglas died and she could not get them back? -- because of her stigma. She rolled off the bed and went to the boys' room and looked down on their beloved, innocent faces.

"I know what I deserve," she said in her arena. "Does that mean I cannot love and be loved?"

Looking again into the half-opened drawer she wondered if she could get away with it. Make guarded love with Blake tonight and beg him to find her after the war. Take the safer road.

In all this there was one felt desire. "When he flies over Germany I want him to know that I love him absolutely."

He had asked her to marry him and she had said "Impossible." Not so. Here was the way. "This may be my last chance. He may die!" She choked this out. She caught the edge of

the tub. She was thinking, “Who knows when the letter will come? It could be weeks.” Douglas may not have gotten her confession yet. “Weeks!” And, “Tonight’s opportunity may be my last. Don’t say it again!”

If she could pray she’d ask God to soften the boys’ hearts. She had never prayed since childhood. “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake --” Why throw fear into the hearts of little children? Does the Lord “keep” your soul from harm or “take” it? When he takes it, does he drag you off to judgment?

She had said “I can endure anything.” The inner voice said: “Are you sure?”

Freely given love, free of caution or compromise, complete, body and soul, free of fear.

Then came a flash of shock, disbelief -- staring down into the drawer. Was this whole thing madness or a mad kind of goodness? “He has only one life. So do I.”

Chapter 34

Liberty

His body refused to sit, his legs wouldn't be still. He opened the door -- not the double-glass set leading to the living room but the other one, leading to the grove of young pines. A rough wind stirred the lofty needles. The sky spread black over his head and a chill draped his shoulders.

Returning to the shelter of the closed-in porch he saw that the candle was distressed by an entering gust. He shut the door gently, and the flame, which had lost its yellow color and had been guttering white, left its death agony behind and bravely rose, regained its gold hue and stood sentinel. He sat down on the couch in order to calm the flame.

He had worked out a test: if the flame leaped and guttered, making its strange chuckling sound, it meant life. If it stood sentinel till he himself disrupted it by getting up to leave, it meant war. War meant the circus to death; life meant her love, hope, being with her after the war.

He had flown early in the morning then spent the rest of the day getting signatures and releases signed, including a release on a set of radios in his custody, worth thousands, worth ten times the money he had possessed in his whole life. It took some doing but he found an officer willing to take them over. He thought: wheels-in-the-well at 0600, then Gander, then Iceland, then England.

He watched the flame gutter and go white. He heard its death throe, then saw it come alive in silent rectitude, as the door clicked closed and Grace Stanley stepped out of the shadow and smiled at him joyfully.

He stood. She rushed into his arms, and joy and beauty flooded his body and set his brain burning. She pushed back and looked into his face, and the world shifted from the death axis to life.

He helped her out of her raincoat and threw it onto the chair that already held two blankets and two towels, plus his leather jacket and garrison cap with its gold eagle clasping arrows and lightning in its talons. The raincoat landed like a descending sail, and Grace tossed her blue beret, which landed on top. They looked at one another, both of them struck by something gallant about the way she had sent the beret spinning across the room, and they laughed. They embraced again, in happiness, not passion, and sat side by side on the couch. She

lifted her legs jauntily -- she was wearing gardening slacks and clodhoppers -- and crossed them at the ankles, on the table. The candle flame jumped and so did Blake Allen's heart.

She asked: "When do you leave?"

"Six in the morning."

"Oh! So soon?" She was kicking her feet toe to toe.

"Yes." And he recited the route.

"You volunteered of course."

"Of course."

"And having volunteered you demanded to be sent off immediately. Be honest!" She did not seem in the least unhappy. In fact her voice was gently scolding as if he'd been a bad boy.

He admitted this too, and she said,

"I have three disobedient boys on my hands!" and kissed him with warm lips, but her face still bore the outside chill.

He said of her boys: "They seem like pretty good kids to me."

Grace said they were sterling but explained about Doug Junior's listening over the chute.

"He's been watching 'The Dead-End Kids' at the Saturday serials," Blake surmised.

And she said, "Luckily for me." She went silent while he figured that out, then she said:

"I was afraid that if I told you -- something had happened -- you'd fly off the handle again."

"I nearly did," he said, "but I knew you had your reason. I'm a hot-head, my mother always said so."

She rubbed his head and said half-moaning, "Oh so warm. -- So -- six in the morning. We have only tonight. When I heard 'orders' I almost knew it -- Yet I --" She let that slide and continued: "Take this," and gave him a paper on which he read Jenny Welles's address in Pittsburgh.

"When you come back -- will you come back to the Field?"

"Maybe. Don't know. Possibly."

"If you come back and can't find me -- should you wish to find me --"

"*Should I wish to find you!*"

"-- and I'm not here, write to Jenny Welles. She'll know where I am."

"Are you going somewhere?"

"Maybe. But look in Dayton first, this neighborhood -- if you want to find me --"

“Grace, cut it out.”

“ -- and if I’ve gone, write to Jenny.”

He thought this sounded grave but also delicate so he said nothing, but took the paper and folded it into his shirt pocket. Examining her throat he asked:

“Did Jarman hurt you?”

“A little.”

“A boy saves his mother,” Blake Allen said. “A great event in both your lives. He’ll always know himself as the boy who fought for you when you were attacked.”

“He is my knight, we are bonded as never before. -- Did Nick Petropolis tell you?”

“Yes and I went charging off to Offutt Field to beat him bloody.”

“Petropolis!”

“No, no, Jarman, of course.”

“And did you beat him bloody? Not a bad idea but --”

“I let him go. I saw it through your eyes at the last minute and said ‘If she didn’t tell me, she had a reason,’ so I tried to be the guy you want me to be.”

She kissed him in a sisterly way and took both his hands in hers and looked seriously into his eyes. She said: “You have to decide whether you want to be associated with me.”

“Associated? What the --”

“I am a dishonest woman. I have betrayed my husband and I may break up my family if I’m not careful, but I have come to see that I must be completely honest with you. You’d better just go to England and forget me. You should, Blake. Consider it.”

“I’m dishonest to exactly the same extent as you.”

“Not really.”

“What we have done, we did together.”

“Blake, think seriously. When I say I must be honest with you I mean that if we make love ever again it must be honest love, and for me it must be absolute. I will not deny you any part of my body which is my way of being yours completely. I want no other kind of love.”

“Are you saying you’re not safe tonight? Pardon the question.”

“I am saying that I do not care whether I am safe or not.”

“By which you mean --”

“Absolute.”

Blake was thinking of the death axis and of the other -- the new life -- after the war. He hadn't yet translated "absolute" into the image of a baby, much less the chaos that would follow.

Grace said: "When you face the Germans I want you to know that I love you with complete love."

"So," he said stubbornly, "you are not safe."

"I don't know or care. Yes I may be fertile."

Getting up, pacing the room, as if each foot weighed a hundred pounds, listening at the window to the tumult of the wind, his hand in his pocket touched the little packet he had obtained that afternoon from the dispensary. It poured a certain malevolent potency into his fingers. It was the anti-absolute.

Facing her he said: "I do not consider that I have been dishonest with you, except that we were both --"

"But this is different," she said gently.

He guessed what she meant but out of stubbornness and anger he demanded: "Why? How?"

"Blake, dearest, your orders."

He came close to cracking a crude joke, that the orders entitled him to one last piece. But the face she lifted to him was so affecting in its courage and love -- as he stood with the packet still between his fingers -- that he felt himself --swinging --

"You say honest. But I have not been dishonest."

"Nor have I, not to you."

His mind leapt into a possible future. It was not lost on him that this dream replicated Eva's plea. To see Grace nursing his child surrounded his heart with a regard for her so tender that he felt tears start in his eyes. Divorce, custody battles, her suffering and guilt, her disgrace, these assaulted his mind as if it were a citadel, but it repelled the assaults. His love was secure within. He was half aware that somehow the survival of his love depended on an envelope with twelve copies of orders -- "Report to CG 8th Air Force wherever he may be."

He could not leave her tonight, and if he touched her it must be --

The packet still in his hand represented something other than the kind of love she was offering -- not shameful, perhaps, but -- nothing much. But "absolute" seemed to signify that they belonged to one another for life. He knelt and unlaced her mud-caked shoes.

He held her feet, narrow, white and warm, close in his hands and pressed them together and kissed them, and felt her fingers weaving through his hair. He rose and drew her to a standing position and lifted her sweater. She let her arms rise with the sweater. She wore nothing under it.

Around her waist she wore a narrow leather belt with a brass buckle. He unfastened this, and the slacks fell. Naked here too. Gazing at him with a soft, smiling acceptance she placed her hands on his shoulders and stepped out of the slacks, then began unbuttoning his shirt.

The awkward part came when he had to sit and remove his shoes and socks. But she didn't seem to mind the wait. She stood looking down on him perfectly at her ease, as it seemed, and when he stood she did not hesitate but took his cockballs in her hand and raised her eyebrows in congratulation when this had the predictable result.

“Do you know what I'm thinking?” he asked more or less in a gasp.

“No, Mr. Spheres, what?”

“When you went galloping through your garden and I saw your -- hips -- and --”

“My fanny.”

“And I went wild over you. Trampling your victory garden and wrecking all those vegetables and -- your rear, your legs flying --”

“Only the carrots and squash,” she informed him calmly, still caressing him deftly. “The rest was already picked.”

She lay on her back and lifted her arms in a slow curving motion like a ballerina's. But when he joined her and covered her with his body she gave what seemed an involuntary twist of her pelvis, and threw her arms around his neck and kissed him with sudden urgency. He pressed against her breast and responded to her kiss in the same spirit. Her mouth opened, and he entered into its warmth. He sensed an undulation beginning in her pelvis, but it was the kiss that aroused him almost beyond control.

For he ached to control his body. If he accompanied her to the wild place that she seemed to be entering he would die too soon, and he wanted above everything to carry her over the falls with him. But she was whipping her face left and right, she had placed one hand on his

shoulder and the other on his buttock, and she was moving like a slick animal running through wet grass.

“Too fast,” he was thinking, but how could he slow her down? She was crying “Give, give” and it was becoming clear, as he felt the contractions begin in his loins, in the back, that he would be giving all too soon.

She pressed him to her breast, kissing his face all over, dragging from one kiss to the next. Her breathing came in sharp, swift breaths and she shook him from side to side crying “Yes!” He noticed that she didn’t call him by name -- just “Give” and “Yes.” And his giving began.

He went through several throbs of exquisite consciousness in the flesh, and even while the pulses continued he remembered a record in his life, that once or twice with Eva he had experienced twenty-four pulses before the crisis changed from a dance within his loins to a piercing, steady ecstasy and fire.

This was different. After a few throbs he seemed to withdraw into his mind. He was unaware of any physical feeling. He was flying against Germany, the 88s were bursting black all around and the fighters were ascending like hornets. Yellow flames shot from beneath their wings and there came a fatal clattering from somewhere in his Fortress. He did not die or crash, the scene had no end. He was clinging to Grace, both of them sweating and panting, above all breathing. That was what was most urgent in his awareness, that they breathed desperately together. Gradually he felt the sweat cooling between her breasts and his chest. She was kissing his cheek, and her hands were sliding up and down his back.

When he rolled onto his back she lay on his chest and he watched her face, her eyes. He caressed her and explored the dampness of her hair. He traced a line from her shoulder to her buttock and listened as she praised him, but he knew she was hoping he’d try again. That hope was what he saw in her eyes.

He asked: “Are you really all right? You look well but I was afraid Jarman might have hurt you.”

“Do I seem all right?”

“Yes, but different.”

“I am different,” Grace said evidently in discovery, “but it wasn’t Jarman. Or, maybe -- I don’t -- ”

“But he didn’t -- injure you?”

“He did not succeed. You know that, don’t you?”

“I understood it that way, yes.”

“If terror leaves an injury maybe I am injured, but fear came later. When he walked into my room I was furious and completely unafraid. I told him to get out and of course he went after me. But I fought and screamed and Doug Junior dragged the monster by the neck. My terror -- worse than fear, Blake -- a ghastly knowledge of danger, as if the danger persisted -- it was -- He would have taken me if Doug Junior had stayed in his bed after story time. If he had taken me I have no doubt I’d be -- struggling to stay alive. I don’t know how a woman lives through that.”

He held her closer and they kissed, as if to give her time.

She continued: “If I am different it’s because I acknowledge my love for you and all it implies.”

“And I --” he began.

“Shhh. Do not match me vow for vow. You leave tomorrow and there will be days, maybe weeks, my beloved, when you won’t even think of me. That’s as it must be.”

“Not likely,” he said.

“The difference is that I am holding nothing back, because now I can’t. You are my life. I have my boys, yes, and I fear the hell ahead, but it would not do anybody any good, not even Douglas, if I tried to forget you. No, dearest, do not say anything. I love you regardless and if after the war you want to find me, search and ye shall find. If I am pregnant I’ll write you.”

He thought: “Pregnant!” but he didn’t speak.

Grace said: “This is a cruel force, inflicting pain, and I am guilty. But I love you with my whole soul and I want to keep you alive in my womb if I am blessed -- I’d better not talk about being blessed -- let’s say lucky.”

When she had aroused him again with kisses and caresses, but chiefly with her own arousal, with her “Come to me again” -- when he felt the changing shape and hardness -- all this time she lay still, expectant, with her legs not quite together and her fingertips touching her

shoulders. He rolled her onto her side, so she lay facing him. He drew her upper leg over his supine body and encouraged her by saying, "Sit up, Grace, straddle me."

Which she attempted, but it was obvious she didn't understand what he wanted. He guided her -- she said, "What's this?" -- and when she straddled him he felt her mons exerting its downward pressure on him.

He had learned this rider's straddle from Eva who got it, she said, from a friend in Catholic girls' school. Eva called it her liberty.

Grace's knees were too low on Blake's body so he encouraged her to move higher, towards his chest, and he stirred beneath her. She was watching him fascinated. He said, "Rise a little," and she did, still with uncertainty in her eyes. But she was now in the "liberty" place as Blake understood it according to the gospel of Eva Dybek. Grace hovered above him, balancing her weight with her hands on his shoulders. He said, "Now lower yourself on to me," and she cried out in pleasure. He said, "Do as you wish now." He took her breasts gently in his hands and lifted and pressed them, and explored their compliance and resistance. He marveled at their elongated shape as she bent over him. She took a quick breath, and began to move her pelvis tentatively. Caressing the hard little nipples, forming and reforming the suspended breasts he said, "You're free."

"But is this good for you?" she asked breathlessly.

"Babe -- yes."

"Do you want to move?"

"First lower yourself more," which she did, moaning. This entailed a forward roll of her pelvis. Still very tentative, she followed this with a seemingly spontaneous rolling motion. For a while he allowed her to explore her possibilities, then he joined her and they shifted to a more complex kind of contact between their two bodies, in which the primary experience was not from shallow to deep but cyclical and rounded, the reticent exploration of a new bliss. She said it was bliss, amazed. Her breath came faster, and she at first tried to match her rhythm with her breathing but it was too fast and he urged her to ride slowly.

"Can I?" she cried.

She began crying out in sharp little yells, searching for his face with her hands and putting her fingers into his mouth. She swept her hands over his chest and shoulders and, leaning forward over his face, braced herself more strongly against his shoulders.

She gasped when he began moving in harmony with her. She bent over him, keeping the rhythm and listening, apparently, to his words of encouragement. He kept saying, “Slow, Grace.” She strove to keep it slow but the downward pressure increased, of her mount of Venus against him, and “slow” came to mean “gentle,” and “gentle” came to mean “deep,” and “deep” meant “full.”

From this adventure of the bodies he passed into a dance of the spirit. He still knew she was there, moving with joy upon him, and he still was conscious of his penetration and of her inner grasp and her heated undulations, and of her kisses when she bent above him and consumed him with her sweeping, hungry lips. He was not her lover but herself. He was Grace and she was Blake. Their spirits were fused in the love of their bodies, and the fused spirit entered a new universe. It was a knowledge of himself superseding the selfish or even the individual, the protected and the personal. It was a new self given to him by the woman and from him to her.

He sensed the coming of her crisis as a phenomenon within her and blended in him, making her even more dear and an object of love. He was himself declaring love for her, a person. He called her “my beautiful girl” and he caressed her ever more gently till he remembered something about Eva. He took the nipples between his fingers and gently pulled. Grace screamed and began a convulsive throbbing and crying that he prolonged by a more vigorous but modulated thrusting higher and higher into her body. Her contractions consumed him. The two bodies went over the falls together, down a cascade of the spirit, till he stopped, to prolong the burning circle -- and they both seemed to listen in the silence of this pause -- wondering -- till he thrust upward again and again, straightening her body. And then he didn't know either oneness or separateness.

They walked side by side through the old farm fields that lay between Keezee's house and Grace's. The unmown hay was heavy with dew and there was very little light, but Grace brought them straight to an opening in the lilac hedge that bordered her back yard. Passing the swing set and the basketball bankboard they reached the garage, where the huge double folding doors were shut tight.

Grace said, "Nick Petropolis is right up there," pointing. Nick Petropolis occupied Blake's old room above the garage and Blake knew how loud the opening of the doors was.

She pulled one door while Blake slid the other, and the noise was quite a racket. Grace started the car, a 1939 Buick, and backed out.

Nearing Wright Field she asked: "Which gate?"

These were the only words either spoke on the drive. He told her, and she pulled up just short of the sentry post.

They kissed and Blake said:

"Wait for me, Grace."

She said: "Love me."

As he walked along the edges of the great sheets of concrete he could imagine with clarity what he saw but dimly, a rank of Fortresses at a distance. His guts leapt and he kept walking. He found his cot as he had left it, with the duffle, the overnight bag and the dispatch case lying ready in a little space he had arranged as if arrangements made any difference.

He lay on the cot. There were few words in his head, just a pouring forth of love, fear and agitation.

He awoke at 0500, shaved and ate breakfast. He was waiting beside the runway at 0545.

The Fortress took off on a heading over the city, then curved up and left. The engines pulled the big plane eastward.

Blake wanted to look for the dawn but his window was on the port side facing north. He couldn't see east. And there was no moonlight. It was 29 October and the beginning of the dark nights.

Chapter 35

The Letter

In one sense she was busy as ever teaching Doug Junior rhyme scheme and Little Phil fractions, organizing the PTA exhibit at the Fall Festival, keeping up with housework and urging the boys to do their share.

All this reached her through a veil of mist. She was waiting for her period and for Douglas's letter. She could sense no changes in her body, but she had never suffered from morning sickness or other early signs of pregnancy, so she had nothing to rely on in the way of signs and signals. Her anxiety grew hotter as she awaited the letter. He must have received her confession two or three weeks ago, but nothing came.

To what had she actually confessed? She couldn't be certain. The message she wanted to send was "Set me free" but did it get through to Douglas?

What ran through her like an electric current was the dread of destroying him. But if he were half as dull as she had been pretending to think he was, nothing would do that. He'd explode in fury, kick her out, fight for custody and go searching for another wife.

His being good made no difference. How could that be, in a just world? It was true, because she made it so. People do what they think they must or should do. If they have to put a story together after the book is closed, they do it. Meanwhile she would pause and ask: "Head, stomach, knees, throat," all quite normal. Sometimes she was ravenously hungry but so what? She was more slender than before the war but that was easily explained. Her weight was steady at one-twenty-five.

So -- a man is good, conscientious, reliable and even affectionate for fifteen years and it doesn't count in his favor. In such a universe maybe a woman like herself could elude justice. But who would wish for such a world?

One day Mr. Sloane came from behind his meat counter and said, "Mrs. Stanley, I saved half a pound of Swift's bacon for you."

"Goodness, Mr. Sloane, I'll have to hire an armed guard."

She put all but two strips aside for the boys, fried the strips, sliced one of her last tomatoes and toasted a bacon-and-tomato sandwich. She took it and a glass of water and sat cross-legged on the dining room window seat watching the mailbox.

At length the mail man pulled up and put something in the box, tooted his horn and drove on. She forced herself to finish the sandwich, then carried the plate and glass to the kitchen and went outside without putting on a sweater. Returning, she sat in Douglas's easy chair and examined his handwriting on the envelope, with the word "free" in the top right corner. She did not play games with the word; her mind was paralyzed. She unfolded and read:

"My God I have your terrible letter in front of me and I can't believe it. But it's your handwriting. I hope you can read this because we're in a Sea State 7 and I can hardly get the pen to slide over the paper so look carefully because I've got something important to say.

"Number One I forgive you. I am stunned with surprise at this letter but *Number One* I forgive you my beloved wife since you *are* my wife and neither one of us can change that by herself or himself.

"You love somebody else? Grace, have you lost your mind? Do you mean you actually slept with another man? Why can't you do what I do which is to take care of myself, or don't women do that? Why not live with it like everybody else? I myself don't actually need much since on 3 or 4 hours of sleep all you want is to lay down and close your eyes.

"In this Sea State I lie on my back and brace my elbows against the bed frame and ram my hands into my belt and I lie pretty stable while the ship rolls 30 degrees or more and pitches and the bow -- I'm in forward officers' country -- comes smashing down into the trough, three-quarters of an inch of steel between me and death. So why are you so god damn special! Control your animal instincts for god's sake, be human.

"Four hours of sleep week after week. One day I had six because I took a nap in the afternoon and the exec came bursting in and chewed my ass out for malingering. Six hours and I felt almost normal. We're on a three-section watch plus normal work hours and sometimes port-and-starboard screening the carrier task group, orient the screen, change the axis, the exec threw me off the bridge and sent me to CIC and that's my watch station now, Combat Information Center, radars, speakers, sound-powered phones, charts, displays -- and hey I understand it all. The only thing I couldn't do was integrate the radar picture with the one in my head when I was on the bridge. Now I'm pretty much OK but the smell, the heat, the stuffy heat in CIC and

radios constantly, radars, displays. Well I can handle it. Why can't you -- you god damn slut!
Slut, slut, slut!

“Ever see a 40-foot wave? You look out and try to find the surface and you're looking straight up! You start thinking about the maximum righting arm, how far can we roll before we capsize? Destroyers do that sometimes in rough weather, there you go, 225 or 250 men but don't sweat it, Mister, the bottom's only 10,000 feet down, you'll come to rest someday. Animal! Stop it! Never see him again if you want my forgiveness or by god I'll never let you see the boys again, not even on weekends, not on class picnic days, never!!!”

Stiffening, she read on.

“We're on water hours, no hope of a shower, we're lucky to have shaving water, our evaporators are shot, everybody stinks. What are you, Grace? A false mother.”

This was what she'd been anticipating. It tore a hole in her mind.

“Leave your husband aside, I'm not much of a lover, you want -- rod, I guess -- but what about the boys? What kind of witch would think of -- only a whore. The boy's will go to school and the other kids will teach them whore, slut, bitch. Slut, desertion, filth. Have you been taking lessons from your friend Keezee, because news of her has reached me! I get letters. Pretty soon I'll get another letter about you! My fine loving faithful wife, my slut-bitch.”

She read this with a strange avidity, almost wanting more of it, to deepen the hole.

“Do you think I don't love your body too? Is this stranger better than I am? How good a man can he be if he takes advantage? But my god I love you!!! I forgive, not in a godly way but because I can't help it. I'd rather say go to hell but I wouldn't mean it. I don't want you to suffer in hell or on earth, I want to hold you in my arms and kiss and forgive you and tell you I understand. I want you to go on raising the boys and serving us dinner and reading to the boys at night and we could go to a Dayton Ducks ball game like a real family and greet people like always. I forgive because I love you in every cell of my body. Give it up, Grace. Come back to us in your heart. Do not destroy, Darling, create and nurture. Give your love to those who love you and who need it most. -- D.

“P.S. I apologize for calling you slut etc etc but I won't tear it up since it's what I think you are, but I still love and need and I forgive out of need, I see that. Not so very noble of me. How can love be such torture? -- D.”

Chapter 36

Body and Soul

Nancy was walking briskly home after school, reflecting on a day well spent. She had guided a class through problems in trigonometry, calling on her best pupils to the front to demonstrate their solutions on the black board. She loved to let the bright kids do the teaching. She would sit on her desk and let her pleasure show, peppering questions and comments over her shoulder, sensing without looking that the class was involved -- all perhaps but a few, for this was an all-volunteer class.

At age thirty-seven she had a prime feeling about her, and she stimulated it by walking to and from school in all weathers, and sometimes by puffing through a set of YWCA calisthenics in her basement.

She threw her book bag in the back door and started up her car. She had only an A card so she seldom drove, but today she needed groceries and headed for Drummond and Sloane's.

She had dumped the last of her purchases in her basket and was turning toward the register when she saw something that stopped her, an old crone bending over the produce and picking laboriously through the scanty offerings. Who around here had a double-bent granny whom Nancy had never noticed? Her brain told her that new people were constantly flooding into the Field and NCR, where they manufactured machine guns, and so -- But something about this oldster baffled Nancy.

This "old lady" did not have white hair. In fact her superabundant flowing hair was amber-to-black, topped by a blue beret. The picture reassembled itself and Nancy saw a pair of tan slacks (not a skirt) -- and something familiar, a pair of muddy clodhoppers.

The inner voice spoke with a gasp. This old lady was Grace Stanley. First stunned, then appalled, Nancy approached cautiously. Had Grace been losing a battle with cancer her body would be driven into this defeated posture, her face would look like this. The specter could only mean that Douglas had been killed in action. No other explanation was possible. Nancy softly

called "Grace," and the corpse seemed to be responding as best it could, turning slowly towards her.

"Grace -- are you all right?" she pleaded. She moved still closer and put her basket on the floor and for some reason reached out for Grace's basket, which Grace yielded, as it seemed unconsciously.

Nancy asked gently, "Grace, what has happened?"

"Oh hi, Nancy."

"Is Douglas all right?"

"Douglas? He stopped writing. I guess he's safe, on the average."

"On the average? What are you talking about?"

"Nothing. How are you? Where have you been hiding? Is everything -- is Bob --"

Nancy took Grace firmly by the shoulders and said: "Are you finished shopping?" -- looking searchingly into her friend's face.

"Just finished," said Grace looking around for her basket.

"O.K.," said Nancy in a teacher's voice, "I'll meet you at your house and we'll put your stuff away, and then you're telling me what's up. Do you hear?"

Grace turned her eyes up to Nancy -- who was several inches taller, in fact a tall bony woman -- and said:

"I can handle it myself."

Nancy said, "Of course you can but we're meeting at your house all the same."

"Have you looked at yourself in the mirror?" Nancy asked.

"You mean do I know I'm a wreck? Yes I know it."

"But are you well?"

"Not exactly. Nothing like tuberculosis or the flu. Just the thing that is not true. You know Gulliver? -- No? O.K. Somebody says 'the thing that is not true' -- they had no word for lying."

"Grace, tell me plainly if Douglas is O.K."

"So far as I know, yes. I'm not hiding any big calamity."

"But you said he wasn't writing."

“I haven’t had a letter in -- well actually yes I -- ”

“Maybe they just couldn’t transfer any mail off his ship,” Nancy speculated. “Have you checked with the Navy?”

“Are you kidding?”

“Why not, for pity’s sake!”

“Because how do you do it? You pick up the phone and ask for Roosevelt or what? Anyway there’s a simpler explanation.”

She pulled her handbag towards her and took out an envelope which she passed to Nancy saying: “I’ve been meaning to tell you. You’ll find out anyway.”

With an uneasy feeling Nancy unfolded the letter, glanced quickly at it and cried: “I can’t read this!”

But Grace said: “Please, I want you and Keezee to know everything.”

Disbelieving, condemning, resisting, Nancy read it. She then folded it, placed it in its envelope which she smoothed against the table top, and pushed it back, taking care to look Grace in the eyes with a certain boldness and even hardness.

“So, you are struck dumb,” Grace surmised with half a smile.

“True,” said Nancy hoping that would end it.

Grace said, “I love somebody else and now he knows it. I’ve outsmarted myself. It’s a death sentence.”

“No Grace!” Nancy cried and reached out.

“Oh god no,” Grace seemed to wave away some ridiculous guess, “I’m not committing suicide. I mean what can I do but write him back and say I’ll be his faithful wife forever?”

“You call it a death sentence to live the life you’ve been living for the past how many years?”

“Fifteen. But it won’t be the same life.”

“Certainly not, not after this --” nodding toward the still-visible envelope which Grace held between steady fingers. “But look what you’ve got -- for a life --” Nancy went on -- “this house, theater and ballet in Cincinnati, shopping for towels and bedding at Gattle’s instead of the five and ten, all the books and records you want. I mean what --”

“Exactly,” Grace cut in.

“What’s *that* mean? ‘Exactly.’ Don’t turn up your nose at the good things in life, my girl.”

Somewhat chastened Grace acknowledged, “Douglas has given us a good life, you’re right, and I appreciate it for what it is.”

“*For what it is.* Your trouble is you’ve never been poor --” an old theme of Nancy -- “otherwise you wouldn’t --”

“O.K.! But he calls me a slut, which I am. Just like you called Keezee a whore, remember? You keep some pretty low company for a school teacher.”

“Don’t -- don’t,” Nancy urged. “We are friends, Grace, don’t. I didn’t mean it about Keezee.”

“Well Douglas means it about me. The man calls me a slut but wants me? I have no choice because he forgives me. I’m his for life, and what a life it’s going to be.”

“Grace, I say in all kindness and compassion and all that, you seem to be blaming Douglas.”

“Oh no, I blame myself entirely.”

“But why can’t you let him storm and call you every name in the book if he forgives you and says please stay with us, with me and the boys? Let him rave, who cares, give it time.”

“I do let him. How could I stop him? I understand his rage and I’m paralyzed by his forgiveness.”

“Forgiveness is an act of generosity and love. It does not paralyze, it sets free.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes! Are you saying he doesn’t love you? After -- ‘why is love such torture’? Be fair to the man.”

“The only way I can be fair is to go back to him.”

“Which you call a death sentence.”

“Yes. I do. ‘Come be my slut.’ He doesn’t want me, he wants his old life back after the war.”

“You fool, he wants you. You are his old life. He’s driven out of his mind by the thought of you lying with another man. He loves you that much. -- Who’s the man?”

“I don’t know if you ever met him, maybe once, Blake Allen.”

“Oh sure. Big Voice. A magnificent animal.”

“He’s more than that. He’s a loving, caring man.”

“Come off it, girl. These guys are out for one thing and they’ll do anything to get it, including playing the role of a ‘a loving, caring man.’ And you’re telling me he got what he wanted?”

“He got me, thank god.”

“Thank god! Are you sane, Grace?”

“That’s what Douglas wants to know.”

“Maybe Douglas is thinking more clearly than you are,” Nancy argued. “By ‘loving and caring’ you obviously mean he’s better in bed than Douglas.”

“Douglas tries -- not very often -- but occasionally.”

“But you won’t give him the only thing he needs.”

“That’s me, and I am giving that. I just told you. Only please don’t harp on my boys. I know all about that.”

“Grace, you sound almost cruel.”

“I am cruel. I know that too.”

“Then stop! If it’s cruel don’t do it. Do something kind, forgive him for calling you a --”

“I have nothing to forgive. I am going to do the only thing I can. But you seem to think a sham marriage is generous and kind -- and easy. It’s a horror. What do you think it’ll do to the boys? They’ll grow up in an atmosphere poisoned by pretense and falsehood between their father and mother, certainly not freely-given love.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Yes, yes. Do you hear me denying it? But think about this blissful marriage, just think. A false wife and broken mother, but I will do it, and I insist it’s cruel. But I will do it! I have no choice because of the boys. I will put on a stage play to deceive and shape them and they will come out of it some day and see the deception when they’re already hardened by cynicism and -- reduced in life -- distorted in their ideas about family life and love -- ruined.”

“Calm down, Grace. This is no time to go off the rails.”

“I will be calm. ‘Douglas, dearest, shall we make love tonight? Why of course I’m in the mood. How could you doubt it? You know I adore it when you jump me and *bash bash bash* and roll over and sleep!’ Ah, the romance, the intimacy, the tenderness!”

They fell silent as if the preordained impasse had been reached. Nancy forced herself to look again at Grace's ravaged face. She said:

"Grace, please, you are doing the right thing. Now try to see that the man has forgiven you. What more can he do?"

"He has done all he can do, I see that. I see everything. But listen, Nancy, I wanted you to know all this because I hope for your friendship. I hope we can be friends in the future."

"Of course we can! I love you, Grace, or I have *affection* for you," she said laughing and reaching across the table to squeeze Grace's hands. "My god, girl, you look so used up, so forlorn and weak."

"I mean," Grace said bearing down on her words, "I hope you'll be my friend -- when I need you."

"I will! I am!"

"See --" Grace hesitated. "I'm going to Pittsburgh but I'll be back in a year or so."

"Pittsburgh? Why?"

"I have a friend there."

"You have friends here, starting with me. Why go to Pittsburgh?"

"To be alone," Grace said and it seemed to Nancy that her voice dropped.

"For a year? Without the boys?"

"No, god no, I'll take the boys."

"Yank them out of school?"

"There are schools in Pittsburgh."

"Grace my girl, what are you trying to tell me?" But she saw in a sudden jump, and she felt her gut yawn open. She said, "Don't tell me!"

"Yes." The eyes Grace directed at Nancy were enlarged, shining, bloodshot.

Nancy spoke in disbelief: "Going to Pittsburgh to have a baby? -- then coming back -- when?"

"Douglas'll be home by then I hope," Grace lunged on. "If he's not -- I'll come back anyway. I've talked to the manager of the printing business and --"

"Good god, you don't mean you told him!"

“Of course not. He says everything’ll be O.K. in the business. And Captain Foster said he could rent this house to the Air Corps. And I have filled out this byzantine form to get my Navy check forwarded.”

“You already have an address in Pittsburgh?” Nancy felt a momentary relief to be discussing an unimportant detail.

“Not yet. I gave my friend’s address.”

“You’re disrupting the boys’ lives like crazy.”

“Would they be better off if I stayed here while my belly swells?”

“God. God.”

“Yes, what a horror I’ve created.”

“But you couldn’t help it. Is that your defense? You were swept away by your hero and you abandoned all responsibility.”

“Yes, that’s my defense.”

“And you say ‘Thank god.’”

“I do. I have seen real life now.”

“The boys aren’t real. Douglas is not real.”

“I know what life can be now, for me, or could have been.”

“And those of us who don’t cheat on our husbands, we don’t know. We are totally in the dark, living an unreal life.”

“You are living your life,” said Grace sounding almost contrite, “and I am living mine.”

“You are creating chaos.”

“The ruin of my former life.”

“And now begins the death sentence!”

“Yes, because he wrote this letter,” and she put it into her handbag and looked at Nancy with dull defiance.

Said Nancy: “It comes down to this. That you were helpless against this man, this heroic flyboy --”

“Not against him.”

“-- and now you’re equally helpless against Douglas’s forgiveness.”

“True, but I have lived.”

“What, a few nights of sex?”

“A very few nights of love.”

“Cloaked by lies, deceit and selfishness.”

“Don’t forget lust. I am not an amputee.”

Bewildered by this strange word Nancy rose and went to the kitchen, drew a glass of water and drank, looking out the window to the east lot, scene of the Sunday football games. She had a vivid memory of Blake Allen passing to Doug Junior and cheering him on. All lies. She wandered back to the breakfast room where Grace still sat staring.

Looking up Grace asked: “Have you never given yourself to the one you love completely?”

“Loved him completely or given myself completely?”

“Given in surrender,” said Grace.

“Sweet surrender?”

“Don’t mock it.”

“In fact I have surrendered ‘body and soul’ but reality intervened in about week. When you say ‘surrender’ or ‘give yourself’ maybe what you mean is giving in. Weakness. I never would have dreamed you were so weak.”

Grace replied: “Nothing I did was weak. I was strong throughout and I will be strong in the future.”

“You will be scorned and humiliated.”

“That’s why I will be strong.”

“You will humiliate and shame Douglas.”

“He wants his slut.”

“Your boys will be -- I don’t know -- notorious -- in school.”

“I said I see everything.”

“And you say, ‘Thank god.’”

“Yes. For Blake and for the baby.”

“Douglas is right, Grace. You are insane.”

Chapter 37

In Pittsburgh

“Dear Douglas --

“You will notice the strange address. I have moved to Pittsburgh and entered the boys in school here. They (the schools) are ahead of ours in Dayton and both boys are studying hard to catch up. They are good workers and will be O.K. in a few weeks. I have met some excellent women teachers and have no doubt the boys will flourish in school.

“They were very unhappy being uprooted but I hope for the best, and they are pitching in. I have not explained the move fully to them -- but I now explain it to you.

“I am pregnant. I moved here and took a year’s lease on an apartment located close to a friend, the widow of one of my roomers. She is a true friend, generous and sympathetic. My baby will come in the summer. This news frees you of any obligation to me that you undertook in your letter of forgiveness. Not that you need to hear me say that. My intention is only to acknowledge that the forgiveness you offered and I accepted is yours to withdraw. When you come home we will settle everything to your satisfaction except that I will insist on still being mother to our boys.

“Should you still want me as your wife I will stay with you. Should you dismiss me I will leave. In either case I will raise my baby. Do not suggest I put her up for adoption. I would never consider it. As your wife or alone I will raise the child. I will keep her by my side. If you cannot live with that, so be it.

“If you try to take the boys from me I will fight you by fair means or foul. I suppose you might win since the court would probably agree that I am an unfit mother. I only ask that -- no, I ask nothing. I have betrayed and gravely injured you, and put the boys into an impossible situation. I know it.

“My baby’s father is overseas now. Whether I will ever see him again I do not know, but my decisions are the same in either event. I am first of all your wife if you want a *slut*. Your forgiveness has two edges. Both cut me but I make no complaint since I deserve it. I must and will be your wife if you want me. I can hardly believe you do, but I am willing. And I still love

you, if you can believe it and if you still care. I will be your wife. (Provided I keep my new child.)

“People will talk when I go back to Dayton. They are already talking, I have no doubt. I came here mainly for the boys’ sake, to reduce by what little I can the shock of notoriety. A baby somehow seems less sensational than a swelling belly before the amazed, smug eyes of the neighbors. A swelling belly in our neighborhood! What a gift to the malicious.

“This child’s surname will be Allen.

“A few weeks ago you proposed that we start a new marriage, created out of the elements. Shall we return to that idea? Is it possible? If public opinion coerces us, no. If you want it, Douglas, yes. Please believe that I still feel a deep affection and respect for you. There are actually people who consider those emotions sufficient basis for a marriage. I am aware of my responsibility for the present situation, and I do not ask you to extend your forgiveness. I have no right. If however *you want me to be your wife* I will be that woman. I am a dishonest, reckless and, as you have already said, an *insane woman*. But: I am firm in one thing, the child. If you cannot stand another man’s child, then dismiss me. -- Grace”

She wrote this during her first week in the apartment in Pittsburgh. She knew it was a cruel letter and that was why she didn’t add the essential sentence which was: “Please let me go.”

Feeling a superstitious dread of mailing letters to Douglas and Blake together she walked to a mailbox nearby and slipped the letter through the slot. Returning to the rickety little table in a corner of her bedroom she wrote to Blake Allen as follows:

“My dear pilot -- I am very very pregnant and full of joy -- joy and a baby! Within me I carry a beloved memory of you, and my future. Our baby is already a presence; she is a person of the future and she saves me from falling into a terrible abyss. I will try to take good care of her even though now she’s the one taking care of me. Already I adore her. (Yes, ‘she’ may be a boy.) Think of us now and then dear one. We think of you constantly, which is my other joy. I have three, the baby, you living in my heart, and my boys. I am rich and happy. Troubled, yes, but if I keep my strength up I will be all right. I have never had a moment’s doubt.

“Write if you have time, and there is no need to give me false assurance. I hold you in my heart.

“I am living near Jenny Welles. She is my whole social life. She is a good-hearted, charitable woman and I fear she is still devastated by her loss. -- With love -- Grace”

She left something out of this letter too, because she could not believe that Douglas would summon her to her duty, given her insistence on keeping the child. Whatever her own mental state, Douglas was the sanest man she had ever known.

Her allotment check arrived a week late, having been forwarded from her Dayton address. So the change-of-address form she had filled out for the Navy had not taken effect. They didn't know where she was. She ran short of money and tapped for the first time an account Douglas had established at his company. To do this she had to write to the manager, whose uneasiness about her when they last met had been written all over his face. The money arrived but not before she had spent the last dollar in her purse. She took the two checks and opened a bank account and felt a little more secure if not normal. She had plenty of money and she was frugal. She did some sums and concluded she could make do with the Navy check alone.

She was settling in in Pittsburgh, making the adjustments that go with moving from suburb to city. The big surprise was finding out she could get along without a car. Nick Petropolis had advised removing the battery and wheels and raising the Buick on blocks. So there it stood, beside the stacked wheels, in her garage in Dayton while she roamed the streets of Pittsburgh from post office to grocery to Jenny's house, conscious of a pleasant freedom. Her landlady had loaned her a coaster wagon. She hauled her groceries home in a red Radio Flyer.

And the baby was making herself at home in her body.

Jenny Welles came twice to help unpack boxes, bringing her “Little Champ.” And Jenny came a third time on an afternoon when the apartment was less inviting by reason of dark skies and unclean windows.

The conversation turned suddenly alarming.

Jenny said: "I love my husband but you threw yours away."

Grace felt the stab.

Jenny went on: "I never stopped loving anybody in my life. I had a boyfriend in high school that I loved till he married somebody else, and then it took months, years really."

It seemed to Grace that Jenny was comparing two lives and finding one stark and wicked.

"And then I met Wes. The moment I saw him I was sure. He was my be-all and end-all. If he was a bank robber I'd've robbed banks with him, a beggar and I'd beg with him. -- But don't you love him?"

"Love Wes?" Grace asked in confusion.

"No, your husband, the one you -- the one --"

"That I cheated. Yes, and I love him still."

"Then how -- you're such a kind and good woman, Wes thought the world of you, and when I was in hell you came to me and I leaned on you, God you were so good to me, just being in the same room. I wanted to kill a million Germans, I was a dead spirit, in agony."

She began weeping but Grace did not believe she had a right to embrace her, for she was herself the cause of this breakdown. "I should never have come here," she thought.

After a few minutes of silence, except for Jenny's slowly-controlled crying, during which she rocked her baby against her breast and tried to wipe her tears, Jenny said: "Do you mean you love them both?"

Said Grace: "I love my husband out of respect and because he is the father of my boys. I love Blake with my body and soul --" realizing that this plainsong was the only language that expressed her true condition.

"He's the prince of your life?" Jenny asked naively. "I read that in some movie magazine. I get 'Silver Screen' and some others and I know it's trash but there's truth in it too. Are you talking about Blake Allen?"

"Yes."

"He's the father?"

"Yes."

"Well I can see that! Such a man. And now he's with the Eighth Air Force?"

"Yes."

“God protect him.”

“Jenny -- I make a mistake moving here. I’m sorry.”

“Oh no you didn’t! Not at all!”

“I should have seen that by freely giving up what had been torn from you by war and violence I would be reopening your wound.”

“No, Grace, it was never anything but wide open. No, no, I want you here. When you came the last time you saved me from I don’t know what! No, Grace, please.”

“I hope we are still friends.”

“Of course we are, and if I start blubbering it’s not because you’re here. I cry a lot more when you’re not.”

In her letter asking if she might move to Jenny’s neighborhood she had pressed too hard, requesting something it would be unkind to refuse but which could cause fresh pain. She had written the letter anyway and just now she could not remember how she had rationalized it.

“I should have gone anywhere but here,” she was thinking. She knew people in Dayton and Columbus, but both were out. Pittsburgh was the only place she had a friend. “I took advantage of her,” she thought. This came accompanied by an impulse to rush to Jenny’s side and embrace and weep with her. She resisted. It felt like the first good thing she had done in weeks.

Jenny was saying: “My mother calls you a great lady. She’s so glad you came.”

“But she doesn’t know I’m pregnant,” Grace objected, “unless you told her.”

“I didn’t.”

“What will she say when she finds out?”

“Well as a matter of fact,” Jenny said, “I was born three months after my parents got married.”

“But she wasn’t married to somebody else,” said Grace driving it in like a prosecutor.

“True, but let’s give her a chance.”

Here then was a new source of anxiety, giving Jenny’s mother a “chance” to pass judgment.

“You must tell her right away,” Grace said. “I don’t want any more deception in my life.”

“I’ll also tell her you’re my friend and that I forgive you.”

Grace was silent.

Jenny recovered: “No, not *forgive*. I mean I’m trying to understand. If you love him, your husband, how could you -- Grace, forgive me, I think of Wes all the time, but maybe because I had Wes I don’t know that somebody else’s marriage could be awful. Maybe your husband was nasty and mean but you couldn’t help loving him then you sort of fell apart when Blake Allen came along, I mean --”

“He was a good husband,” said Grace.

“Well if he abused you or whatever --”

Jenny sobbed, and this time Grace could not stand back. She embraced the girl and both wept -- it seemed -- for Wes -- or maybe Douglas, or one another. Grace insisted she had never been abused and that Douglas was a good man. Saying these words was agony. Her throat contracted in a sobbing cramp. She pressed Jenny closer, disturbing the “Little Champ” who now began to cry too, till Jenny gave him her breast and spoke softly to him. He took refuge from his fear in his mother’s breast and voice.

Grace saw in Jenny’s marriage an ideal love free of transgression, saw that there had actually been a place in the universe reserved for such love, for Jenny at least, until the war took it away. But there was no such place for Grace.

That same night everything broke loose. It started when Grace’s voice cracked while she was telling the boys a new Robin Hood story -- one crafted to avoid such concepts as loyalty and trust. Little Phil apparently mistook the strange sound for a sob. Her throat still ached from the cramp she had suffered while sobbing over Jenny in the afternoon. Phil began crying, looking aside at his mother with a terrible distress in his frightened eyes.

Seeing those eyes Grace took in the child’s fear, for she thought a complete crash was coming. And so it happened. While Little Phil cried Doug Junior said in a tone of command and resentment:

“Why are we here?” There was no fear in his eyes, rather a strong assertion that he was entitled to an explanation.

Grace stumbled through some vague declaration that her marriage had become “awkward” -- thinking: “Don’t lie. No more lies.” Then she cast aside all caution and told Doug

Junior that she had fallen in love with another man, and even more foolishly, perhaps, she named Blake Allen, thinking: “Too soon. They are not ready. I am not ready!”

But she plunged on like a drunk demanding another drink from a bartender who has shut him off. She told them that she was pregnant. The word exploded in the air before her eyes. Little Phil wanted to know what it meant and she explained hastily, but the meaning was quite clear to the older boy. She saw the disbelief and then the -- she could only think: the horror in his face. Having gone this far she told him -- neglecting to translate for Little Phil -- that she believed she and their father would divorce when he came home. She said that Douglas had forgiven her, but added without mercy to herself that this had happened before he knew she was pregnant. Little Phil asked again what pregnant meant. The repetition took her breath away; she could not answer. Her hands trembled and her voice reached the air as if through a green reed.

In self-defense she said: “I love Blake.” To her ears it sounded pathetic and even false. You cannot claim as a virtue that which you have transformed into a vice.

“And you don’t love Dad?” Doug Junior demanded.

“Yes I do! But I believe our marriage is over.”

“So we can’t live with Dad any more?” he asked and without waiting for an answer he seemed to shift into a dialogue with himself, from which her ear extracted one syllable, “vlens.”

Never having heard this before, she guessed it was boy talk for something like slut. She winced. She stared pleadingly into her son’s face but his eyes were opaque glass; their hue was a lighter, less human blue.

Little Phil asked: “Do you still love us?” She embraced him with one arm and reached for his older brother with the other. She was sobbing wildly. Doug Junior did not move away but the contrast was sharp between Little Phil’s desperate yielding and Doug Junior’s indifference.

Doug Junior said: “Let’s go home.”

“We can’t,” said Grace.

“Why not?”

“Yeah!” cried Little Phil. “Home!”

“We haven’t got anything here and I don’t like the school,” Doug Junior said. “Let’s go.”

All Grace could say was: “We can’t.”

Chapter 38

An Episode in a Naval Officer's Life

Lieutenant Commander Bill Fleming, the naval officer who read Douglas Stanley's letter about searching for the survivors of a torpedoed ship, knew nothing of naval operations at first hand. But he had a strong interest in the Pacific War and a fascination with the strategic implications of the "Defeat Hitler first" decision. He read steadily and long into the night -- newspapers, books and the *Proceedings* of the U.S. Naval Institute. The answer he had given Grace Stanley to her question on her husband's chances of surviving the war was as good as any, and better than some. If her husband's ship survived, Bill had said, he would survive.

Bill Fleming still remembered the doubtful -- shadowed -- look in her eyes -- for he certainly looked directly into her eyes when he handed back the letter. That glance changed his life more than the war had yet done. To him the war began as a mere interruption of his career at DuPont; and now he wasn't sure he'd ever go back there. In fact he had no clear vision of a postwar life. Not that he expected to be killed in action. He was securely placed in the Navy liaison section, U.S. Army Air Forces, Air Materiel Command, Wright Field, Dayton, Ohio -- where his job was to move aviation gasoline from a multitude of sources to the main ports on three coasts.

In his section there were two kinds of men, the ones who wished they were in the real war and those who were glad they weren't. Bill Fleming was in the first category. He was dying to fight the Japs but had almost given up trying to convince the Bureau of Naval Personnel that he was fit for the job. The Invisible Hand had already done him one favor by rescinding his assignment on commissioning to the Supply Corps. He had written a passionate, patriotic letter virtually demanding the Bureau give him the star of an officer of the line, theoretically "qualified for command at sea." So now he wore the star over his two and a half stripes instead of the humiliating (to him) leaf of the Supply Corps -- but he was stuck with the lieutenant commander rank because of his age, thirty-eight on the day he was commissioned, and his experience at

DuPont. It was this experience that convinced BuPers that Bill Fleming knew how to find his way around a big organization; and he did dispatch the avgas pretty efficiently. He kept the Navy's planes in the air over the Pacific.

Trapped in a safe job that also happened to be necessary, he slipped frequently into his besetting weakness. He didn't know what to call it. He did know where it came from, his mother. How he loved and pitied her when she would throw herself on a bed or even the floor crying, "What's wrong with me?" She would sob or merely stare. She'd roll around and make fists that she pressed into her forehead. She pleaded with her only son, "It's O.K., Billy, don't worry, Mommy'll be O.K." but the boy watched her suffering with terror and foreboding. When he reached adolescence he had his first attack, or "fall" as he called it. His mother wept over that. "Billy what have I done to you?" And he said, "It's O.K., Mother, I'll be O.K.," but they were not O.K.

When Billy was sixteen his mother's angel Death released her. Bill Fleming had hoped to find his release in war -- blasts, bombs, rockets, mines, torpedoes, hurricanes, the sea -- but BuPers sent him to "the place you can do the most good, Mr. Fleming," which was thousands of miles from either front. He wrote another letter asking to be transferred to the real war -- this was only two weeks ago -- but he didn't send it. He had looked into Grace Stanley's eyes, and she had seemed to respond, not reciprocate, just -- see him. She actually looked at him.

Now came more trouble of a different kind, in the shape one of those major nuisances the Navy calls a collateral duty.

In addition to his work as gas man he had lately been drawing the "notification and assistance" jobs. Knock on the door of some woman who is a widow but won't know it till you tell her. So tell her, that's all. Tell a mother, who thinks her son is lying in his rack on a destroyer somewhere writing her a letter, when in fact he's at the bottom, what's left of him. All you have to do is tell her.

The admiral seemed to think Bill Fleming was just the guy for this terrific job. "You've got empathy, Mr. Fleming, and you don't come across as too military. You're the man."

These visits, while he watched their minds working out the problem of who he was and what he was trying to tell them, were the dark merging into the greater dark of his life. The Navy had uncannily chosen the darkest mind to perform the dark duty. Lucky for him he didn't bleed on the outside. But, cutting against the grain of that piece of luck, was the fantasy he had

entertained since childhood that inner pain displayed itself in the face of the sufferer. If it did, people could give him credit for what was happening behind his forehead. But then the Navy would never have sent him to officer training and he'd still be worming through the DuPont maze and sinking into his --

He had no name for it. It was just himself. The word "depression" was less than suggestive. There was no word. There wasn't even a concept.

Forty years old, divorced, childless, alone, Bill Fleming went careening along in defiance of common sense. His tenderness on the subject of Grace Stanley was nothing but a stupid movie in his mind, let it roll!

One evening while gazing blankly out the window of his room in Nancy's house the vision took on life, there she was, Grace Stanley striding along the road in a light rain as if to an important destination, and the sheen on the pavement sent her shadow back towards his eye. This was the first time he had seen her since he moved to Nancy's, and it proved to be the last. A wave passed through his body -- he sensed her presence with his whole physical being -- yet he knew it was absurd, this dependency, this obsession, expressive of a need she could not meet and he could never declare.

Watching her -- openly when he handed back the letter, surreptitiously over the next three days before Captain Foster moved him to Nancy's -- summoning up her image in the theater of his aching mind -- plunged him into a hopeless but utterly necessary condition of mystical embrace. Words that he repeated relentlessly -- "impossible, unreachable, untouchable, *married*" -- lost their meaning and assumed the character of a challenge and sent his hot brain off on crazy imaginings. He was helpless and wanted no help. During working hours he moved his avgas and joked with his friends; but at night he remembered those deep, revealing brown eyes, the sculpted figure, the voice.

This last time he saw her was just before Christmas. After that he walked by her house every night and observed a change in the pattern of lights. The living room where he had talked with her was dark now. He connected this with the rumor that she had left the city. Nancy never mentioned her. He didn't ask because Nancy was a suspicious woman. He lived through January in suspense.

On a morning in February he came into the office feeling pretty cheerful until he pulled the papers out of his box. Here was an irksome note from the exec: "Mr. Fleming, please see Chief Herbert re casualties."

Herbert was the chief yeoman, the main paper-pusher and the man who made up the packets for the next of kin. Each packet contained insurance and pension papers, information on the body (if any), a form to fill out if the family wanted a military funeral, and other -- junk.

Chief Herbert said he had six Killed in Action and gave Bill Fleming six packets. At his desk Bill counted the packets without opening them, then went to work moving avgas. He called the motor pool and ordered up a car for 1400. He would do two calls, geography permitting, this afternoon and two on each succeeding day. Chief Herbert had said all six were in the "corner," the area where Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky meet.

Sliding into the driver's seat and slamming the car door, letting that common sound get into his head, he knew it was coming, the Mother Lode. It was more violent than usual. It was like a nail being driven by a double-heavy hammer, he was the nail and the hammer drove him into a fearful hollow in one blow, the slam of the door. He called it fearful in order to deny the truth that it left nothing to fear. Where fear is banished so is hope. He didn't want joy. It would hurt too much. The slamming car door, a sound without meaning, made meaninglessness excruciating. He was already drowned in a black ocean, a creature not fully human who would have given anything for an intelligible object of fear.

This ocean was a nothingness that offered no cause for regret. What should he regret? He was a nothingness in acute pain, in which there was no cause for pain, no object of fear and no vision of hope.

He slid his briefcase on to the passenger seat and took out his road map. A sob pressed its way up his throat. Push avgas in the morning and torture the aggrieved in the afternoon. He started to unfold the list of the next of kin but stopped, sensing a way out. "Yes! Get to the war!" He walked quickly back to the office and opened the belly drawer of his desk, took out the letter addressed "LCDR Detail Desk, BuPers" and dropped it in the out box on Chief Herbert's desk, then made his getaway before anybody could detain him. Of course he didn't feel any better. He was in the deep stage where he didn't want to feel better. Best not to want anything, not even to die. Here he paused. Why not die? Run into a propeller like somebody did just

yesterday. He cursed himself for a coward and the cursing sucked him deeper into self-hating pain. “Is it pain?” Sometimes he thought he’d better embrace it because it was all he had -- almost. He was wretched and his only course was to stay that way.

He cursed and hated -- who but himself? “It was mother.” He said the word “Mother” again as he climbed back into the car and started looking for the city names, which Chief Herbert had penciled in the top right corner of each packet. He had always loved the sound of “Mother” so he sometimes threw it into his stream of verbiage and music. Bill Fleming could see the city names by flipping the top corners. Thinking of his mother he flipped through the papers. “She had so much, she passed it on to me!” He roared -- bellowed -- laughed -- just as she had often laughed and exclaimed: “Sometimes I actually enjoy this!” Maybe he was too much like her; maybe this *nihil* really was his only possible self. To escape it would be death. And after laughing not quite hysterically his beloved mother would throw herself down again and he’d hear, “What’s wrong with me?” Thus Bill Fleming as a teenager discovered that even love is lacerating.

He wrote the cities, with plenty of space between entries, on a yellow tablet. Xenia -- just east of here. Cincinnati, south. Troy, north. Two packets for Dayton (do those together on the last day.) And Middletown, on the way to Cincinnati. So: Xenia and Troy today, Middletown and Cincinnati tomorrow, and Dayton next day. He arranged the packets in order and set out for Xenia.

The old lady screamed and fell, he thought she fainted, but no, it was worse than that. If only she were unconscious! -- but she was shuffling forward on her knees, clutching his legs, sobbing and making speech-like sounds. He felt the heat on his thigh, he felt the hands grasping. He imagined he could feel the wet gap of her mouth pushing against his trousers. He tried to pull her up but he thought: “Let her alone!” So he stood there making a crooning noise of his own, stroking the sparse gray hair, through which he could see a background of white scalp -- ugly, repulsive.

That was Xenia. Troy was -- a man in full control, old enough to be the father of a young sailor. Staring at Bill Fleming the man said: “Do I tell her or do you?” Bill’s guts opened and he

managed to say, "That is your decision, sir." The door started swinging shut but Bill stretched out his arm and said, "Let me explain these documents." To which the father replied: "Keep your damn documents."

The mouth on his leg -- if it was a mouth -- and now in this father's face the fury alloyed with hatred.

That night his brain played a drama with his ex-wife dancing and stripping for him. He took her with a cruelty he had never shown in life. She loved it. He found relief and shame. At two or three in the morning he may have drifted asleep; all he knew was that he was awake at 0500 trying to bring Grace Stanley's image to his rescue but she wouldn't come.

The paradox was tightening. Nothing matters, therefore you must suffer excruciating pain. Grace Stanley couldn't save him. His love, her beauty, intensified his distress, and were his only desire. He tortured himself with her image and aura. It was a good joke that she didn't even know she was playing the lead role in his idiotic drama.

Next day he drove a twisting road to Middletown and stopped as usual on the outskirts, checked the street address and began making inquiries. The house he found was an old bungalow that had once been painted white. A window set in the door showed him a service flag with one blue star (soon to be gold). Approaching, he thought: "Is that why nothing satisfies me?" -- because he had been offered too many opportunities? If he settled on a plan of life he immediately began searching for something better. Having an important job to do for the Navy he kept trying to squeeze out of it, with the excuse that he had joined up for "action." He thought action would cure him.

What happened in that bungalow in the next half-hour was a cure by horror, temporary, no doubt, but thorough. When he left the house he was staggering. He had a tough job of it putting the key in the ignition. He sat there trying to resist the temptation to drive back to the Field. "I can't take another one," he thought. But he was half-way to Cincinnati -- and he knew that his motive in going back would be to medicate his brain with two or three drinks at the O Club -- "Only two or three." Having been raised by an alcoholic father, having seen the decay of two alcoholic uncles, he knew what lay in that path. Besides, prompt notification was part of the job. He owed it to the next of kin. He drove south.

Compared to Xenia Cincinnati was mild. At least nobody tried to gum his leg. So Cincinnati got thrown out the brain window as he drove back north, wondering where he'd get

dinner and a drink. He was too late for the club. For a time while driving he was O.K., that is to say normal, like other people. Driving relieved his mind. When he veered toward suicide he would get his hands on a car and drive. He asked whether the man who walked into the propeller had walked upright or dived. "It couldn't hurt much -- or maybe, yes, shock and pain, then: Nothing."

Suddenly: "My god she's superb. I'll live! -- just to see her again."

Four o'clock in the afternoon, with one visit remaining. For the second time he read the word "Dayton" in the top right corner, and for the second time he said, "I can't do another one." But his conscience prodded him, and for the sake of "prompt notification" he uncovered the first sheet of this, his last packet. His eyes went unerringly to the box with the name of the next-of-kin, and that name was Mrs. Douglas (Grace) Stanley.

Like a burn that we cringe from before the pain reaches the hurt place -- a burn that allows an interval during which the burnt person awaits the burn -- so the typed words "Mrs. Douglas (Grace) Stanley" struck him and then withdrew; and in the interval Bill Fleming's cunning mind shot out a wicked idea: "Now I can marry her."

In defense of decency the burn came home to inflict its full measure of punishment. "You cannot marry her, she will be assailed by grief, her love and loyalty to her husband will intensify the agony. She has lost the most important thing in life -- she will be removed from ordinary life, living as an angel of suffering."

This phrase pleased him and he felt a sudden awe and almost worship for her under this her new title. He realized that he was her opposite, an egotist taking advantage of her affliction. She was the angel of suffering, noble but unfree. And even if she were free, he realized, "I'm the last man she'd ever marry. Never! Not a chance."

He thought -- staring at her name and address -- "I'll go to the exec. I can't possibly be the one to tell her. He'll say why not and then what'll I say, that I love her? Ha! Wait. Let some stranger do it? No! By god I'll do it -- wait -- Maybe I'm a stranger too. She might not even

recognize me. No, she'd remember that I told her that her husband's chances were pretty good. Now this. What exactly did I say? What I remember is her face."

He flipped pages to the "Narrative," which was short enough. Jap torpedo, forward magazine blows, gone in four minutes. Twenty-three survivors in a crew of 273.

His uneasy brain plunged into the four minutes. A man can run nearly a mile in that time. So where was Mr. Stanley when the torpedo hit?

If he was an engineer and belowdecks, in a fire room or engine room -- not much chance. If he was on the bridge that'd be bad, with the explosion of the forward magazine, which Bill Fleming thought was somewhere two or three levels below the main deck forward of the bridge. Bill tried to recall the schematic of a destroyer he had studied in officers' training.

Moving aft, he thought: "Maybe he was on watch in C.I.C." But he couldn't quite place C.I.C. in his vague schematic -- it was in the superstructure aft of the bridge: that much he knew. "There's a chance there -- on the 01 level with access to the weather decks. But this is pointless. He's dead! And there's no body. That's what it says!"

He'd ask the exec to let him interview the neighbors and find out if the rumor that she had left town was true. If so, he would see if Nancy or anybody else knew her address. He'd tell the exec, "I know her, sir, I'm a friend. I know her boys. Better that I tell her than some stranger."

He drove to her house and rang the bell, and got no answer. He hung around till the evening bus came and asked the first man off if Mrs. Stanley was at home. The man had never seen Mrs. Stanley, and he'd been at the house two months. Bill drove to the Field and medicated his nerves with Jack Daniel's.

Next morning he told the exec she was no longer living at the address in the packet. "I'll have to make inquiries," he proposed.

The exec agreed but added: "Keep the avgas flowing."

Bill Fleming tried to call Captain Foster but got no answer. He left the office in mid-afternoon and drove to Nancy's house and put his question.

Looking at the scowl which was her only reply Bill thought: "I'd hate to be in her math class." He said, "It's government business."

"What the hell does that mean?" Nancy demanded, and Bill saw that she suspected he was up to something.

He said that he could not disclose the nature of the business.

“Why-ever not?”

“It’s a matter of -- it’s confidential to the family.”

“And you’re family?”

“No, I’m the messenger.”

“O.K., I’ll write a letter and ask if she wants me to give you her address.”

“That would take too long.”

“So it’s urgent?”

“Look, Nancy --” the first time he had called her by her first name -- “what harm can it do? Just give me the address and I promise I’ll stick to business.”

“I’ll write her a letter.”

“Nancy, please, at some point you have to trust people.”

“Including men?”

“Even men.”

“I doubt she’d want me to give her address to ‘messengers.’”

“And what if I say,” he retorted, “ that if she knew what this was, she’d want you to give me the address.”

Maybe a new gravity had crept into his voice -- he didn’t know -- but Nancy looked as if she suspected something serious.

She asked warily: “Is Douglas all right?”

“I can’t answer that question,” Bill said giving the whole thing away.

Nancy shot him a look. She took a notebook from her purse, wrote, tore off the page and handed it over:

“976 Willow Street, Pittsburgh.”

Said Nancy: “Don’t abuse this.”

And Bill Fleming charged her equally: “Don’t mention this to anybody.”

He returned to the Field and asked to see the exec. While waiting he looked into his own mind to identify a rather strong new awareness. He was feeling what he believed normal people feel most of the time, which is the absence of what he called pain.

The exec said: “Pittsburgh? Why not just send a teletype to the Naval Receiving Station?”

“Sir,” said Bill Fleming, “I am a friend. I know her sons. I’d rather not leave this to a stranger.”

“Meaning you want to get off the base for a day or two.”

“No sir. I mean it would be better to hear this from a friend.”

“All the other people you visit are strangers, Mr. Fleming, and you are a stranger to them.”

“Correct, sir. But in this instance we have a chance to act in a more humane way.”

“But the news will be the same, won’t it? Is this man dead or missing?”

“The ship went down in four minutes, sir, and he’s listed as KIA.”

“What kind of ship?”

“A destroyer, sir.”

“What class?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Well what’s the hull number?”

Bill checked the narrative and read out the number.

“She’ll be a Fletcher class,” said the exec. “And you say she’s -- they -- have two sons.”

“Yes sir.”

“What was his job? What space would he be in?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Four minutes,” the elder man mused. “She must have blown a magazine.”

“Yes sir, forward.”

“If he was in Officers’ Country forward, or on the bridge, or in C.I.C., blooey,” the exec said. “There’d be a few minutes maybe between the torpedo detonating and the magazine blowing. If you’re the captain you’ve got to decide, you know, can you save her or abandon ship? If he was belowdecks -- your man -- in a boiler room, no chance.”

“Sir, where is C.I.C. on a Fletcher Class?”

“A couple levels up from the forward magazine and somewhat aft. If he was in C.I.C., there’d be only one officer, and you’ve got to open the classified safe and pull out the Secret and Top Secret documents and code books in the lead jacket, cause if she’s disabled you pitch the jacket over the side. What do you think, Mr. Fleming? Could you remember the combination after the torpedo hit?”

“I don’t know sir.”

“Could you twirl the dial? Eh? With steady fingers?”

“Probably not sir.”

“We none of us know till the time comes. And if you can, if you’ve got that kind of steadiness, and don’t forget the deck is moving toward vertical -- then comes the big one, the magazine. You’re right under the pilot house on a Fletcher class and only two levels above the forward magazine and aft only about fifty, sixty feet. See what I’m saying, Mr. Fleming? On the other hand maybe he was way aft, he could have been anywhere. It makes no odds, he’s K.I.A., right?”

“Yes sir.”

“O.K., I’ll get somebody else to move the avgas. Go to Pittsburgh, but don’t waste any time.”

Bill Fleming knew that the sight of his uniform terrified the wives and parents who opened their doors to his knock. But what could he do about it? He couldn’t dress in civvies or tame the splendor of his two and a half stripes of gold on each sleeve, with two vertical rows of brass buttons holding the “blouse,” as the Navy called it, taut against his chest. The best he could do was to wear his plain black raincoat which carried a modest gold oak leaf, the badge of his rank, on each shoulder. But the garrison gap, with its blazing silver eagle and shield and crossed gold anchors announced “officer” to the whole world.

He feared that his appearance on Grace Stanley’s doorstep would knock her down. In his gold and silver she would see calamity -- unless perhaps she recognized him and mistook his visit for a renewal of old acquaintance. But that would be even worse. He’d have to disabuse her quickly. He gritted his teeth and knocked.

She took one look and stood before him like a hostage waiting to be shot.

“Mrs. Stanley, do you remember me? Bill Fleming. I slept on your couch for a few nights last fall.”

“Oh Bill!” she cried in recognition and relief, swinging the door wide and reaching for his hand. “How did you ever find me? Come in please --” taking his hand in her eager grip.

He noticed a change in her face, not in any way disappointing, but her features had blended into one another in some subtle way, her eyes actually seemed larger and darker -- but sparkling. They were not exactly the eyes he had been imagining but she was even more lovely, he was in fact astounded at her beauty. One difference was that she was a little disheveled. Her blouse was not tucked into her waist; her hair was longer and a little wild, thrown back on either side of a central part; and, now that her fear of the uniform had passed, her complexion was richly colored. She smiled with such obvious happiness that he thought: "Tell her right now!" But that was not easy.

Instead of: "The President and the War Department regret to inform you --" he said he had gotten her address from Nancy but only after a long argument, that Nancy had sought to protect her privacy.

While he rattled on in this way she took his coat and garrison cap and draped them over the back of a chair.

He was saying: "I told her that if you knew -- you would agree it was -- necessary --"

He stumbled through this, declined her offer of coffee, and noticed that she had caught something ominous in his words.

"If I knew -- what?" she asked.

He stood dumb for several seconds, never taking his eyes off her; and he watched almost in fear as she seemed to move toward suspicion.

He had to go on. "Mrs. Stanley -- Grace --" but his throat closed.

She was staring at him now out of an alarmed mind.

"Mrs. Stanley, your husband's ship went down. A few men survived, twenty-five or so out of a crew of nearly three hundred, but he was not among them."

Eyes hard, metallic, believing.

"It was too quick. Four minutes," Bill Fleming added hoping she wouldn't ask for more.

Her eyes suddenly lost their luster and she seemed to look up and then she sank to the floor. He should have caught her but — He looked down and saw her lying at his feet. A dark stain was spreading over her skirt. Her mouth and eyes were open, the mouth gaping.

He stared amazed at the spreading stain -- then his brain woke up. He looked around the room and saw a hallway. He hurried down the hall and came to a bathroom. He snatched the bath matt from a hook and returned to her, and spread the matt over her skirt. He took three big

pillows from the couch -- noticing that the couch and everything in the room was more austere than her furnishings in Dayton -- and he built the pillows up into a platform. She was wearing slippers, no socks. He took off the slippers and lifted her ankles onto the pillows.

“She’s not dead” -- this shot through his mind to reassure him against the elements of the grotesque in her features, especially the mouth. But the eyes too were unnatural.

Her tongue was visible between her lips, and he looked on with disbelief as foam collected on her cheeks. Her eyes were open wide but the pupils had rolled up; all he could see was half the iris and a field of white beneath.

He ran back to the bathroom, played a stream of warm water on a wash cloth and returned. He wiped the foam. Her breathing was deep and regular. He groped for a pulse in her wrist; it beat strong and even. A searing pity passed through his soul as he wiped her mouth and she lay passive under the strokes -- his pity flowing into a love so strong that a new life arose in him. It was an impulse of adoration. He would do anything for her, he would be totally selfless, he would devote his life to this unutterably beautiful woman. Conscious of the whole scene at once, of the tongue and foam, the half-invisible eyes which had no knowledge, the stain on her skirt, her slender ankles supported on the three pillows, seeing all this with his eyes and in his mind he waited for her to come back, as he knew she must. He was not afraid now. He took her hands in his own and felt no response; he kissed her fingers, kneeling over her.

This ecstatic devotion lasted a minute, perhaps a little longer, until he saw her breast heave and her lips close. He wiped the last of the foam away and saw her draw another breath. Life and consciousness were returning to her eyes: one moment she was absent and the next she was searching the ceiling with a wavering gaze, seeming to gather intelligence and memory. He did not release her hands. As her awareness returned, so did the real woman, who was not the same as the object of his ecstatic adoration. He adored the object and half feared the woman. He released her hands. She was gaining intelligence. Her eyes showed no distress, only worry.

At length she looked at him. Because he was hovering over her she could watch his face without lifting her head. She did not speak but he knew that she remembered. He sat back on his heels, and she returned her gaze to the ceiling. Her hands moved over the bath matt. He placed the wet cloth in her hand and she wiped her cheek and refolded the cloth.

Bill Fleming removed the pillows, setting her feet down gently, resisting an impulse to slide the slippers back on. He placed one pillow under her head. She lifted her head to allow this but did not look at him. Bill sat on the couch and waited.

When she moved to get up he reached out to help but she dodged him. She rose, holding the bath matt against her body, and went off down the hall. Bill waited.

He listened to the plangent sound of water running into the tub, then to the closing of the bathroom door, the flush of the toilet, the cessation of falling water. Did she expect him to leave? He was recalling how her breathing changed from deep and regular to a quicker, more agitated rhythm when she woke up. He kept seeing her serious, persevering eyes as she searched the ceiling.

He was still on the couch; she had taken a chair at an angle and was pressing him for information. She had twice said, "I must know everything." He warned her that nobody knew everything, or even very much. Her eyes were the eyes with which she had crisscrossed the ceiling while trying to comprehend how she had come to be lying on her back.

Flogging a topic Bill Fleming would prefer to forget she asked: "Would one torpedo be enough to sink the ship?"

"Yes, but --" Why tell her about the magazine? Why add to her store of raw material for dreams and torment -- enough to last the rest of her life?

"But what?" she insisted.

"I don't know enough about ships or torpedoes. I'd say the ship could have survived one torpedo -- maybe."

"Was there more than one?"

"No, just one."

"You know more than you're telling me."

"Well -- there must have been a fire."

"Oh god no, no, they didn't burn did they?"

"No, they did not burn."

"Bill -- tell me."

“All right. But why do you want a bunch of details? What good will it do?”

“Bill, tell me.”

“All right. The torpedo detonated below the water line, of course, pretty deep I imagine, and it must have set off fires belowdecks forward. Something blew, or the fires spread, but -- the forward magazine exploded. My guess is that when the witnesses say she went down in four minutes they mean from the time the magazine blew.”

“Magazine?” She was right in his eyes now.

“A compartment where they store ammunition, propellant and projectiles. The blast from the torpedo may have ripped it open, then it was just a matter of minutes before it blew. That would tear the whole front of the ship apart.”

“How long between the torpedo and the explosion in the magazine?” Her tone was relentless.

“Not very long. I don’t know.”

“You must tell me everything, you agreed to that.”

“But I told you I know very little about ships, and all I have is a few sentences in the narrative.” The pallor and exhaustion in her face moved him. While she still lay supine “trying to remember” she had been the woman he loved. Now she was like some double of Grace Stanley only twenty years older. He loved her more. He said, “I’ve never been on a destroyer in my life.”

“I have,” said Grace. “I had dinner on that ship in San Diego. Such a crowded, self-contained world, so intricately designed. Never any silence. Motors and blowers going all the time.”

Bill Fleming was squirming but he tried to hide it.

“If he had four minutes,” she began thoughtfully, “why couldn’t he jump into the ocean like those men he rescued in his boat, you know, in the letter.”

“I don’t know. Can you tell me where he worked?”

“Yes! Yes! A place called C.I.C. What is it?”

“A space in the superstructure full of radars and radios, with a voice tube to the bridge, as I remember -- what little I remember about destroyers -- a phone line to sonar -- the nerve center of the ship.”

“Could he get out? I mean --”

“Yes, you can go right out to a weather deck, I think.”

“A weather deck,” she repeated, “an open place where he could jump.” Bill detected a driving energy in her voice even as her face displayed a total absence of vitality. She repeated: “So why couldn’t he just run out and jump into the ocean?”

“Maybe he did, but I doubt it.”

“But if he did --”

“If he did he’d be consumed in the fireball when the magazine blew, or sucked under by the plunge of the ship.”

“Not if he was quick enough,” she claimed.

“Grace, you can’t just jump off your ship until the captain has given the order.” Bill was thinking of the safe.

“Well why not, if it was sinking.”

“Grace, please, use your intellect. This is all speculation. We don’t even know that he was in C.I.C. He could have been in his rack, or smoking a cigarette on the fantail. All right. Now listen. There is a safe in C.I.C. and in that safe are Secret and maybe even Top Secret documents and code books. If your husband was in C.I.C. the chances are he was the only officer. It would be his duty to open that safe, put the documents into a lead sleeve, and --”

“Lead, as in metal?”

“Yes. Put the documents in the lead case and throw it over the side if the ship is disabled.”

“But why, if the ship is sinking?”

“The order covers all contingencies.”

“What on earth can you be saying? The ship is sinking and --”

“Suppose it doesn’t sink.”

“Fine! Put the codes back in the safe!”

“If the ship is defenseless, without power for example, dark --” and Bill had a vision of Douglas Stanley shining a flashlight on the dial while the deck rose toward ninety degrees, and then -- a huge detonation with no flash. “If the ship is defenseless and the Japs -- he’s got to pitch it over.”

She had no answer to that.

Bill said: “What’s the point? Why let your imagination torture you?”

“I must turn it off,” she said brightly making a click with her tongue. “Gone!” She let out a witch’s laugh and said: “Don’t be alarmed, I’m not crazy. I know he’s dead. And you know nothing about ships.”

“Not exactly nothing, but if we don’t know where he was when the torpedo hit --”

“He may have been spinning the dial on the safe,” she said irrationally.

“Mere speculation. I wish you wouldn’t pursue this, Grace.”

“Well anyway, Commander, you were right when you said ‘If his ship goes down hundreds will die.’ Remember?”

“Yes, I am terribly sorry.”

Bill watched her carefully -- wondering when she was going to leap up and scream.

She stood up and took his garrison cap and raincoat in her hands and waited. He put on the cap, and she helped him into the coat. He was trying to think of a reason to stay.

Opening his briefcase he took “her” packet out and said, “May I explain these documents to you?”

“Leave them. -- What are they?”

“Well, one is about the pension.”

“I don’t need a pension. I am now the owner of a flourishing business.”

He replayed this startling sentence in his brain and it worried him. She had said, “I’m not crazy” but would a sane woman say this at this moment?

“You’d better take it,” Bill said. “And there’s more, for example do you want a military funeral?”

“Oh heavens yes! Just exactly what I want.”

Bill did not respond. He buttoned his coat

“No, I’ll take the pension for my baby. Oh no, goodness, wrong father. God I am piling up so many sins and errors.”

Bill Fleming spoke before thinking. “Your baby? You mean little Phil?”

“This baby, this little girl,” Grace said spreading her fingers over her abdomen. Bill noticed the gentle swelling under her hand. Also now he noticed something else, which he had evaded till now, that her breasts were larger than he remembered.

“Yes,” Grace said, seeing where his eyes were directed. “I’m pregnant.”

Bill kept his mouth shut but not for long. There was only one thing he could say, and he said it: “Grace, I will do anything to help you.”

“What would that be?” she asked.

“I’ll help you in any way I can, now or after the war.”

“But how, Bill?” she asked, “how can you help me?” -- and it occurred to him that there was a trace of ironic cruelty in her question, but who was the object of it, she or himself, he couldn’t have said.

“Grace, I love you. I have loved you from the moment I first saw you.”

“Don’t take that burden on yourself, Bill. You are a sweet and considerate man, but don’t say you love me.”

“I can’t help it.”

“Stop. Give me those papers.”

She accepted the packet and opened the door. “You saw me wet my pants! How can I ever forgive you?”

“That’s nothing,” he said fearing she might break out laughing.

“So physical,” said Grace. “Everything comes down to the physical, like drowning, that’s very physical, like an explosion, getting a baby, especially giving birth, all so physical.”

“Grace, please say that if you need anything you’ll --”

“Go now. You are a friend, I will love you in return, as a friend, but go.”

That night he imagined a scene of unendurable grief -- when “unendurable” means “that which must be endured.” She was telling her boys their father was dead. He wept, he inhabited a shaking bag of bones that were trying to fly apart. But in this paroxysm he made a discovery. He recalled when she had said “Yes I’m pregnant” and spread her hand over her belly -- when he had seen that her breasts were less perfect in form but fuller and prouder -- this was the moment when he discovered that these physical signs of pregnancy, and the subtle changes he had seen in her face when she opened the door -- that these changes strengthened his love. He didn’t care who was the father. “The baby is not mine. The woman is.”

Actually, no, if “mine” means possession. Whether she belonged to -- he was thinking of Blake Allen -- he did not know. He didn’t want to possess, only to love.

He went to the bar in his hotel and drank two doubles. The barman had no JackDaniel’s, and the stuff he sold Bill burned its way down his throat.

Chapter 39

The Unforgiven

Little Phil was in bed reading Robin Hood. Doug Junior was working out an algebra problem at his desk. Grace entered their room and sat on Phil's bed. The act of looking at her boys burned her eyes and stiffened her jaw. She did not believe she could control her voice.

She told them their father's ship had been sunk by a torpedo and that only a few men survived, not including Daddy. She repeated Bill Fleming's narration about the safe and its contents. Perhaps unnecessarily -- under the power of her fascination with the image of Douglas struggling in the dark with the dial of the safe -- she told them that code books had to be destroyed in case of capture. In her mind the deck was rising at an angle under Daddy's feet but she did not mention that. She said the explosion in the magazine "tore the ship apart." She found she could say no more. She closed her eyes, hoping to gather strength, thinking that maybe he had burned to death.

When she looked up Little Phil was staring at her in the labor of trying to believe. But Doug Junior turned a glare of hate on her. She was sure it was that. The word "hate" sounded in her brain and she felt as if she were shrinking.

"You said you loved Blake Allen -- my terrific friend Blake, our quarterback -- well now you can marry him can't you?"

"No, Doug."

"Sure, and go off and live with him somewhere and leave us back here in this crappy place."

She saw Little Phil take alarm and dart a glance at her.

"No," she said gently, encircling Little Phil in her arm, "we have lost Daddy and we must stick together."

"Not me, I'm leaving."

"No, Doug, don't say that."

"So Blake Allen and you -- aaah! So he's a cheater too."

"Yes darling, we both are cheaters."

“Those guys playing cards in the basement were right then. I looked up slut and it means ‘a slattern woman,’ a cheap-ass bitch -- ‘one who distributes her sexual favors to many takers,’ indiscriminately, or discriminately I forget which. Does that sound right?”

“Yes,” she said awaiting the next lash.

“So marry Blake and forget about Dad.”

“I will not marry him, Doug.”

“So you say, but who cares what liars say? Did you lie to Dad too?”

“No. Worse.”

“Yeah. You say you love Blake but with you love means cheating, slutting, strumpeting. I looked up ‘strumpet’ too. Jesus, Jesus!”

“Doug, your father forgave me.” She knew she was going too far in claiming forgiveness but resolved to clarify what she meant later. She was holding fast to the conditional scrap of forgiveness he had offered before he knew the worst. “He cursed me too,” she admitted, “but he did forgive me and he wanted our marriage to go on.”

“Did you?” Doug Junior demanded. “Did you want it to go on?”

“No.”

“Fine! So why take credit? Anyway, when he forgave you did he know you were pregnant or did you hide it hoping he’d be killed in the war?”

“Doug, my dear dear son --”

“Oh crap! Crap on your dears. Did he know you were pregnant?”

“I wrote to him, yes, but whether he got the letter in time I don’t know.”

“And if he did get the letter before -- just think of — what it was like for him, his last days alive. Did you think of that?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah but you still lie and cheat. Because you have no right to say Dad forgave you since you don’t know if he knew, I mean if he got the letter on time. Right?”

“You are right. I should not have said it.”

“But you’re so quick with lies that you did say it!”

“Yes.”

“And what about Jarman?”

“What about him?” she asked in shock.

“Yeah -- Jarman. Dad didn't know about that, I'll bet. How did Jarman get into your room?”

“He barged in. I looked up and there he was. You saved me from him.”

“Or I interrupted you.”

“No!”

“And now you're pregnant. Explain to Little Phil how that happens. You'd be a good teacher, go ahead, tell him all about it, how the man, you know, jumps -- you know. Explain.”

She closed her eyes and held Little Phil close.

“And now,” said Doug Junior, “you think if you admit you lied it's all just hunky-dory. Everything is O.K. because you sent a letter saying you were pregnant, and you're forgiven.”

“I wounded him deeply. I will carry that the rest of my life.”

“But if he hadn't died you'd have married Blake Allen, right?”

“If he would have me.”

“And maybe when your guilty conscience gets tired of -- maybe then --”

She opened her eyes as if the boy had explained something obscure.

“And you expect me to stay and live with you?”

“Please, Doug, we need you, Phil and I do. Daddy said you are the man of the house.”

“You don't need me or want me, you already deserted us. ‘Desertion, abandonment or flight from one's duty.’”

“Please don't do what I did,” she pleaded, “knowing it is wrong.”

Little Phil cried out, “Don't go!” and sobbed in her embrace. She hugged him tighter and kissed his tear-streaked face.

“Maybe I'll take him with me,” Doug Junior threatened, and for the first time Grace felt a nudge of hope, hearing the bravado that had crept into his voice.

To his little brother Doug said, “How bout it, Phil?”

He got no answer.

Grace said: “Your father called me a slut but said he loved me. He said his love tortured him, but he did love me, and I love him.”

“Oh bull!”

“I do.”

“You love Blake.”

“Yes, it’s true.”

“Don’t you see you’ve got to choose? Even sluts have to choose.”

“I have chosen.”

“You mean when you said you wouldn’t marry Blake? Who cares what you say? And now Daddy’s dead!” He broke down in a series of jerking sobs, covering his face, all but suffocating his words: “I bet he committed suicide when he got your letter.”

“No, Dearest, impossible. His ship was sunk so quickly.”

“He jumped into the fire. He shot himself” -- gasping and sobbing, covering his scarlet face with scarlet hands.

Grace’s body convulsed and her eyes went blind with tears. She reached out blindly but Doug Junior jerked away.

Embracing her, Little Phil sobbed: “It’s O.K., Mommy, we love you.”

“I love you, Phil, we must all love one another.”

Little Phil said: “I want to say that I’m sorry Daddy is dead. I’m very very sorry. I want Daddy to come home.”

Caressing the boy and whispering love, she closed her eyes again but found no solace in the darkness. When she looked around, Doug Junior was gone. She heard the front door open and shut.

“I love Daddy,” Phil said.

“We all love Daddy,” said Grace, her lips an inch from the boy’s ear. “We must all love one another.”

“I love Doug too,” Phil cried. “Some guys, the big brother hits’m, but Doug never hit me.”

“Of course not, Phil, Doug wouldn’t hit you.”

She was so deeply pierced by love that she was unconscious of anything else. She pressed Little Phil to her body and they wept together.

Next morning Doug Junior came back to change clothes for school but she kept both boys home. She did not ask Doug where he spent the night and he did not speak to her throughout the day. She telegraphed Nancy asking that she arrange a memorial service as soon as possible -- thinking of her swelling belly -- knowing Nancy would understand. And Nancy

was the person to arrange the service. She and Douglas attended the same church. Grace was not churchy. She occasionally called on God without knowing why.

She wept for much of that day. She tried to keep hold of rationality, for example in her refusal to agree that she had ruined Douglas's life. Too much of his life lay beyond any effect she could have. But she had wounded him cruelly. Conscious of her betrayal she awaited true grief. She had felt its approach when she embraced Little Phil but she hoped for a clearer sign. She knew that if she didn't grieve sincerely for Douglas she would be destroyed. All this time she awaited a new thrust from her older son, who roamed the apartment like a prisoner, sometimes talking under his breath. Grace stayed close to Little Phil, and would have carried him everywhere if she could.

The three were seated for dinner but no one had tasted food. Neither did anybody look at anybody else. Grace thought: "Where are we? What is this strange apartment?" She heard:

"My Dad died for his country but it was you who killed him."

She was almost grateful that he had gone so far. She could not say: "There is no truth in that, Doug," so she said nothing. She didn't see any point in arguing and now she wished she had never claimed forgiveness. Little Phil sobbed helplessly, and Grace waited in fear.

Doug Junior got up to leave but this time she tried to stop him. Running after him into the living room she cried, "Wait!" but he turned on her a horrid face, as if he were watching his entrails spill out of his lacerated body.

She fell on to the couch. He was gone, the door stood open. She rose to close it and found herself staring at the wood grain, seeing waves as in an ocean of dark brown. "If they start moving," she began, and didn't finish. Later she lay on the couch. Little Phil was lying beside her crying, hugging her and telling her he loved her. She said, "We all love one another, Phil, as I love you, you love me and we both love your brother. We have lost Daddy but he lives in our hearts."

"We love Daddy," the child sobbed.

"Yes, Phil, we love Daddy." She felt a pressure to say, "And Daddy loves us," as if he still lived in "heaven" or somewhere -- but she was struggling to preserve her fundamental beliefs, which did not include heaven.

There followed an hour in which everything was accomplished. She had the rest of her life to criticize it, but she never found a flaw. This always surprised her. "I should have been mentally helpless" -- during that of all hours, but it wasn't so. The damage to her mind came later. In that one hour of the second day she was supreme. She judged the past and analyzed the future fearlessly.

Staring again at the grain in the wood, hoping Bill Fleming wouldn't come back to repeat his avowals of self-sacrificing love, she was thinking: "Now I can marry Blake." Douglas was dead, she was free and there'd be no further damage.

Events having granted her permission to marry her beloved Blake Allen, she seemed to be embarking on a predetermined course. But her mind clicked forward, free in its own way and for its own purposes. It was not really "her" mind. Rather she was its woman.

She began to be aware that she was moving toward an understanding of something, that she was being led by the hand. She and Blake were lovers but they were also partners in a conspiracy. She had said: "I don't want him to marry me, just take me."

Musical notes were being struck in a minor key in the background, as if on a piano by an unskilled musician. "Douglas is dead. Douglas is drowned." This was the accompaniment of her next thought, or step. "Free" meant its opposite, "Predetermined." She could not leave the decisions to anybody else, not even Blake. Being free to act she must be herself. Being who she really was, she must act in a certain way. There was a sensation in realizing this, like the sensations of cold or heat, a dilation in her mind. The woman who had been ruled by her body and exulted in that style of surrender must now be, perhaps already was -- because Douglas was dead -- a new woman. "Yes!" she cried, "because he's dead." Then:

"You cannot marry him," forming a picture of Blake Allen coming into her kitchen in his white T-shirt stretched across his chest.

Leading to: "Of all the men in the world, he is the one you can never marry." She accepted this in the act of saying it. She assented without a struggle. Never.

She began sobbing for her lost new life. She was standing over the stove and had to turn off the gas because her sobs were bending her forward over the flames. Closing her eyes and covering her face she wept, shaking like a wooden house in a hurricane. She was giving up her great discovery, her new-found land. In a revival of the spirit of resistance she decided she'd

write to Blake and tell him her husband was dead, then wait to see if he wrote back promising to come to her after the war.

But her mind was clicking forward. Yes, she'd write to Blake but the message must be that they were finished. To hope for Blake and his love was to swallow poison. Everything else followed from this cryptic declaration about poison. Blake was guilty too. "We are guilty together." She clutched her abdomen in gratitude for the baby. She, the little one, lived in innocence within her mother's body. "I am allowed the baby, I will keep her." There was no principle of punishment against the child. The world was not perfectly malevolent. But she and Blake had poisoned their union in the act of creating it. "I would never say that if Douglas were alive."

Her mind clicked forward through the sob storm. She cried out in protest: "No! If only Douglas were alive." Then she could marry Blake. "But he is dead. Good God!" She was crying not for Douglas but for the loss of the life she had discovered with Blake Allen. "Is this another sin piled on all the rest?" A woman receives the news that the husband she has betrayed has been killed in the war. She falls into a whirlwind of grief -- for herself. But she knew the value of what she had lost, the love of a true companion, the path to the spirit through the ecstatic flesh.

The memorial service was a parade of unconscious mockery by a pastor who knew less than he assumed about the Stanleys and couldn't stop praising them as an exemplary family knit together by mutual charity, faith and love. Grace listened with sickly attention and wondered what Nancy and Keezee were making of it -- they and how many others?

Grace had inspected her body in the mirror at Keezee's, where she and the boys were staying, and the image did not necessarily look like a pregnant woman's. She thought that nobody who didn't know would have reason to suspect. She pressed her open hand against her belly, under the skirt and slip, against the skin, to absorb the heat and life. "My boys, my baby."

The boys wore their church suits and neckties. The outfits made Little Phil look younger and Doug Junior almost a man. His manliness threatened her. "He's a man already!"

She found some truth buried in the preacher's ignorance. "We are all of us born in the common clay of humanity. And Douglas Stanley's life and death prove again that God can fashion a good man out of that clay." He announced that the congregation had taken a collection to erect a plaque in Douglas's memory in the church vestibule. He called the Stanleys "the salt of the earth," and Grace uttered a prayer, her first in many years: "Please help Doug Junior."

She was leading her boys out of the church toward Nancy's car, at the curb, where Nancy waited in the driver's seat. She thought she had finished with the meeting and greeting and the strain of the pastor's references to her family. But a couple she knew by sight, the Wiltshires, approached from the side. She was forced to stop. Her feet and legs were like stones.

Mrs. Wiltshire extended her hand and Grace did the same, then shook hands also with the husband. Doug Junior took a step forward and seemed to join the Wiltshires, facing his own family from across an open space. The Wiltshires' son Burdett appeared and joined them. Grace had always wondered where Burdett got his name. She knew him rather well as one of Doug's school friends. She greeted him but he held back, glancing aside at his mother, who now said:

"Mrs. Stanley, may we have a word with you?"

Grace stared, numb with fatigue and sleeplessness.

The husband said: "You have our deepest sympathy."

"Yes of course," said the wife. She was dressed (and so was Grace) in a dark woolen suit with buttons up the front of the jacket; both women wore hats with veils turned back. Grace found herself searching for a difference in their attire. This led to a closer scrutiny of the other's face and eyes. To Grace the woman looked brittle. Grace was judging but trying not to. "Do not judge." It was the makeup, the hair coloring, lipstick and rouge, the overall attempt to eradicate the marks of encroaching middle age.

"Mrs. Stanley --"

"Yes?"

"This is a terribly difficult time for you."

Grace's eye wandered. She saw Nancy waiting in her car.

"And we have a proposal to ease your burden. Don't we George?" -- the husband.

He murmured something and the wife went on:

"And Burdett. Don't we, Burdett?"

Looking down he said yes.

Grace looked at Doug Junior for a clue but she got none. He did not meet her eyes. She glanced at the curve of his forehead and thought: "This boy came out of my body, his head passed through my birth canal."

"We've been talking with Doug," Mrs. Wiltshire continued, "and thinking about school and whatnot. Now we know the schools in Pittsburgh are good, excellent, don't we, George?"

"We do, yes, excellent."

"But Doug and our Burdett are the best of friends, isn't it so, Doug?"

Grace's elder son agreed it was so.

"And they both like math, isn't it so, Doug?"

Suddenly alert, Grace took Little Phil's hand in her own and said facing Mrs. Wiltshire: "No."

"*No?* You haven't heard me out."

"I don't need to. We are a family and we will stick together."

"Just for the rest of the school year," Mrs. Wiltshire persisted. "He'd have a bunk in Burdett's room, we've got a little desk in the cellar for him and the boys could bring it up, and with basketball in full swing and Doug is such a star -- and I've already talked to the principal --"

"You should not have done that," said Grace. She was angry but steady. She was granite. "You must learn to mind your own business, Mrs. Wiltshire."

"It is my business when a troubled boy comes to me begging for help and asks for a -- temporary home -- among his friends, his school, his neighborhood -- and when I see how --"

"The answer is no," said Grace.

Still holding Little Phil firmly by the hand she reached out and took Doug Junior's, first grasping his wrist because of some quick movement of his, then sliding down to grasp his hand. She stayed in his eyes during this movement and she saw doubt and -- love! perhaps relief. She was afraid to hope but she kept his hand and turned both boys toward the street, and all three marched to Nancy's car.

Their luggage was already in the trunk. Nancy started the engine, shifted into first and asked: "Union Station?"

Little Phil piped up: "Rumble Tumble Station!"

Sitting in the back seat and holding each boy by the hand Grace crossed her arms over her body and said: "Rumble Tumble Station!"

Doug Junior didn't speak, and Grace didn't look, but she guessed and hoped he was crying. Then she looked. No. His eyes shone but his features were fixed and cold. She wrapped herself more tightly in her own and her sons' arms.

It seemed to her that Doug Junior's face, his icy eyes, and the tremor of a sob that burst from his throat, showed that he knew in his deepest mind something she did not yet understand, that Douglas was dead. She could see the explosion "tear the ship apart" and see the gray slender shape of the destroyer slanting into the black ocean -- but "Douglas is dead"? Inconceivable.

Chapter 40

Grief

She awoke in confusion, asking: "Is my baby born?" The child was due. She placed a gentle hand on her belly. Safe and sound. Perhaps sleeping. "Indwelling," her word for the life within. She could feel that word in her mind.

But she was sure she'd heard a baby crying; maybe in a dream. She realized that she was lying under a blanket on Jenny Welles's bed, in her room, with a crib and bureau. The crying came from beyond the door, the Little Champ lustily bewailing his fate, and Jenny was murmuring assurance. The cries stopped and Grace knew why.

She put the blanket aside and sat up, and the room whirled. She lay flat again, letting it come to rest, and then very slowly she sat up -- and all was steady and normal.

She found her shoes on the floor and slipped them on, then stood up, straightened her skirt and blouse. She opened the door on a scene that imparted some of its peace to her own heart, and she bent to kiss Jenny Welles and to inhale greedily the odor of the child. She said, "I'd better go home. The boys will be coming soon. Thank you, dearest Jenny."

"Mother can walk you home," Jenny offered.

"Thank her for me but I'll go alone."

She caressed the baby's fuzzy head. She found her coat and stood ready to go, or almost ready. She could not leave yet -- looking around at a room that was a real home despite the loss of Wes. She met Jenny's generous eyes.

"Call me," Jenny urged.

A buffeting wind assailed her as she walked the wintry streets, till she came to the mail box into which she had slid her letter of renunciation to Blake Allen -- only a couple of hours before.

She had written: "I cannot marry you. Douglas is dead." This clear-thinking woman, she who accepted Douglas's death as part of the architecture of the universe, was the intellectual

descendent of a sixteen-year-old girl named Grace who had wandered in a trance of the imagination in the circling ruin of Fort Ancient nearly twenty years ago. She had first visited the ruin with her Campfire Girls troop on a Saturday morning in the spring. On the day she got her driver's license at age sixteen she went back and roamed again in that incomprehensible circuit, erected over decades and perhaps centuries, inspired by nobody knew what. Walking freely, alone, she contemplated the mystery of the Moundbuilders, their life and extinction. It was her first lesson in death. It was here that she decided -- what she had forgotten for many years -- that she must live her life in anticipation of death. Her spiritual task then and now was to live in accord with life's true value. It was not a prelude, as the preachers insisted against all logic. It was the genuine and only gift.

The girl of sixteen was seeing the same view the Moundbuilders had seen, feeling the same breeze and sun. From the west parapet she looked on the undulating surface of treetops stretching out at a level with her eye, stirred by the wind, fleeing away as it had must have done a thousand years ago. She slid and skidded down the bluff and crossed the tracks to the edge of the river. She imagined the women carrying load after load of dirt and rocks and dumping their meager weight on the ever-growing linear mounds. She could scarcely conceive of lives more radically different from her own, but this difference brought them closer. They cooked deer meat at fires blown by the wind. They suffered cold in the winter and worked under a hot sun in summer. They bore children in pain or death. They grew old, feeble, blind, arthritic -- and they left no record. She said: "I knew then that I too would die but would find the courage to face it." She saw that her life was precious but that the reason of it, the explanation of it, would never be revealed. She was the recipient of an undeserved gift. The ancients had possessed the same gift and were gone. She would go where they had gone, she supposed, nowhere. She would soon be there, in a place that was not a place.

Leaving the mail box behind she achieved something like clarity. In renouncing Blake Allen she had done the only good thing left to her to do. Blake was a good man. Douglas was not his responsibility but hers. If she was to be a good woman in any sense she must renounce love, and so she wrote the letter to Blake Allen. "Do not come to me. Do not try to find me after the war."

If she belonged to any man it was Douglas. Thinking of him she thought of her boys. Having made her decision she had recovered all that she could of her innocence. It was not

much but it seemed to bring her close to the sixteen-year-old girl with her affinity for the lost people.

She lay on her bed and wept for Douglas -- pain, relief and lacerating regret. The all-but-obliterating pain. She saw the consequences of her adultery without shame even as she absorbed in her body the shock of her just loss. She would never see or touch or converse with Douglas again. "I deserve this. Douglas was kind and considerate." She nearly said "tender."

One question at least had been answered. Justice exists.

If "wild" means beyond measure, control or restraint -- she wept wildly.

Chapter 41

At the Center of the Universe

The train jerked and slowed. The passengers began to stir.

Nancy came awake staring straight ahead and said: "This'll kill her. She may not know it but she'll find that her punishment will be more than she can bear."

Keezee was thinking: "Punishment," translating the word in her mind as "Fate." Keezee saw the twist in it, twisting back towards herself.

Nancy said as if to drive her point deeper: "This will break her."

"No, she won't break," Keezee said.

Keezee knew from experience that you can always get away with it -- except sometimes. She stood up and started grabbing their bags from the overhead rack while Nancy was laying plans.

"It's too late tonight," Nancy said, and indeed it was nearly midnight, too late to do anything but search for a hotel. "But one of us better stay with her tomorrow night."

"I will," Keezee volunteered.

"O.K.," Nancy agreed. "I'll cook dinner and make lunches for the boys."

"Yeah, then you go back to our hotel --"

"If we're lucky enough to find a room."

"We'll find a room," Keezee said piling the bags on the seat she had just vacated at Nancy's side.

"O.K.," Nancy agreed again, "then you stay with her tomorrow night and I take the next night."

"And I'll cook. -- Unless -- you know -- she insists on being alone."

"And sends us back where we came from," Nancy completed the thought.

Keezee asked: "Do you think we made a mistake?"

"You were the one pushing it. Are you changing your mind?"

They had heard the news from Keezee's "friend" Hank, but he hadn't seen the message traffic and there was always the chance that it was false. Nancy then asked Bill Fleming to investigate. He confirmed what Hank had reported.

Keezee declared she was not changing her mind. "We're doing the right thing," she affirmed.

"I think it is. We hang around as long as she wants us, one day, one week, or whatever."

"Right, but if we aren't welcome --" Keezee began.

"Of course! Drop it, for God's sake."

And so they dropped it. But Keezee was still thinking: "It is not more than she can bear. You can bear anything." But Keezee didn't really know that, and knew that she didn't. Because she had always slipped through the net. How could she appreciate what it was like to be caught?

Pregnancy out of wedlock was a misfortune never experienced, only feared, by Keezee -- twice to the point of a sweating terror. So when the blood had come she felt as if a benevolent deity had given back her life in its precious original form. It might be said that those fears had so cauterized her spirit that real life sometimes seemed easy.

Now climbing two flights of stairs with Nancy at her side she imagined herself bulging with a massive twenty-pound protrusion of baby and all the rest, and the muscles of her legs lost their strength. She paused, panting, leaning on the bannister.

Nancy read her thought and said: "Can you imagine climbing these stairs a dozen times a day if you were eight months pregnant?"

They continued upward and stood before the door of a third-floor apartment, Number 5. Keezee knocked. There was silence from inside. She checked her watch: ten o'clock in the morning, an hour they had chosen to be certain the boys would not be home.

"She could be napping," Nancy offered and knocked again, louder.

After another pause Nancy asked: "Was there a doorbell down there?"

"Yes," Keezee admitted. "I didn't want to ring it."

"Why-ever not?"

"It would be such an unpleasant sound, the buzz, don't you think?"

“What a silly notion. I’ll go down and ring it.”

“No, it’s my fault,” said Keezee, “I’ll go.” Then she realized she should be the one to be standing here when the door opened. She said: “O.K., you go.”

Keezee listened to the descending footfalls, and at length she heard the buzz from inside the apartment. There was no other sound.

Nancy’s voice rose from below summoning her.

The two conferred by the front door. They had just finished a late breakfast at their hotel and the idea of more food or coffee did not appeal, at least not to Keezee. She knew that if she sat down at a diner she’d start craving coffee. “I won’t sleep for a week,” Keezee complained. “I’m screwy already.”

But for want of a better idea they decided to find a diner and come back in an hour.

“This job is my idea of hell,” Nancy said roughly.

“But we are her friends. We are the ones who --”

“Oh sure! Friends! We deliver the death stroke.”

“This won’t kill her,” Keezee said almost confidently. “She’s a strong woman.”

“She cheats on her husband,” Nancy began setting forth an indictment. “He dies. She gives all to her lover, and --”

“Yesterday,” Keezee interrupted, “you said this would break her. I don’t think so.”

“Then she’s made of some pretty coarse stuff.”

“Not at all. She’s made of the finest.”

“The finest, dear Keezee, do not cheat.”

Keezee said with a sudden flash of anger, “Maybe you should get on a train back to Dayton.”

“Calm down, my pet. We decided we could do some good, and here we are. Don’t be stupid.”

“You should have more confidence and a little more affection.”

“Confidence in Grace?”

“Yes.”

“Do you mean *confidence* or just mush?”

“What?” Keezee demanded.

“The difference between you and me is that I see the world with open eyes. And I tell you the human world does not stand on a foundation of mush -- forgiveness -- slop.”

“We better stop this conversation,” Keezee ventured, “so I don’t have to eat breakfast tomorrow with somebody who hates me.”

“Keezee, for land’s sakes, I don’t hate you. I just think you and our friend upstairs, wherever she is, live in a dream.”

“I hope it’s still O.K. to dream,” said Keezee feeling she had clinched the argument.

“Actually,” Nancy claimed, “it isn’t, not if your dreams wreck your family.”

“So I think the world is mush? Or the foundation or whatever you were trying to say.”

“Not *trying*, I said it quite clearly. Probe to the center and you won’t find mush but steel.”

“Therefore stainless?”

“Quite the contrary. Spotted all over with stains.”

“So you must hate me and Grace. But somebody told you to love your enemies so here you are in Pittsburgh keeping company with two wicked women. I’m here to help a friend and you’re here to feel self-righteous.”

“Thank you so much, my friend. Now let’s go. I’m starving.”

“We just had breakfast.”

“Yes but arguing with fools makes me ravenous.”

Keezee decided to pretend she hadn’t heard this. She pushed the door and led the way down the sidewalk. Her head was aching and her stomach sour. She asked the first passer-by where she could find a diner, went off in the indicated direction and listened for footsteps pursuing her. Hearing Nancy gaining on her she stopped and turned.

“I didn’t mean fools,” Nancy declared without explicitly apologizing.

“And I don’t mean what I’m thinking,” Keezee retorted.

But Nancy had something else to say. “What I meant was that all this was bound to happen.”

Keezee asked, “All this what?”

“Everything except Douglas,” Nancy explained. “That was against the odds. But the lover -- a near-certainty. She gets herself pregnant, and now she’s stranded.”

“It was not a near-certainty at all,” Keezee protested with a tinge of fear in her voice.

“Have it your way. Suppose he came home covered with medals and married her. And so the stepfather and the boys sink into a state of perpetual war, which drives her crazy, and pretty soon the lovers are devouring each other, the fruit of the forbidden tree more or less. See my point? Where you say ‘oh maybe everything’ll be OK’ I say -- steel.”

Knowing that her best answer would be her own life of getting away with it, yet fearing that boasting would be bad luck, Keezee decided to let Nancy live in that horrid world to which she seemed so strangely attached. She imagined her own flyboy Hank cruising over Germany and shuddered.

All this time they were walking through glaring late-May sunshine diffused through mist and smoke, so that the light stung the eyes from all directions.

They came to a silver-sided diner dressed up like a railroad car. There were three or four customers at the counter and a group of four chattering factory women at a booth -- then a row of empty booths all along the front, under the windows, and at the far end, one person sitting alone.

This was Grace Stanley -- bent over a book and holding a white china cup, evidently forgotten, in her free hand.

Going nearer Keezee could not see her face, only the abundant, wavy, auburn-to-black hair parted down one side and drawn over the crown. Keezee stopped, and she felt the presence of Nancy beside her, also standing still. “Let her stay,” Keezee thought -- stay in the imaginary world she inhabited while reading. Nancy took a step forward, and Grace looked up.

Keezee saw a vigorous, more rounded face with a beauty in it that to Keezee denoted a woman in the final weeks of pregnancy -- a light complexion flushed in the cheeks, dark, striking eyebrows arching over brown eyes that, for a second, seemed to struggle with the question of who these women were, confronting her and coming so close.

Keezee felt an almost painful affection for Grace, and she discovered in a leap of understanding that what she most admired in her friend was the plunge she had taken into her love for Blake Allen.

Keezee saw in her face, at first, disbelief, then a quick and surer recognition, then a flush of happiness tinged still with surprise. Grace rose and stepped sideways out of the booth. She let out a sob of gratitude and embraced Keezee -- a hug in which Keezee was astonished at the protrusion of Grace’s belly -- an intensely physical presence between the two women. Grace was whispering her thanks, pressing her face against Keezee’s and imparting a rocking motion to the

embrace. Her face was wet with tears. This moisture and the sobs -- the belly -- Grace's joy -- all combined to alarm Keezee --: this joy must turn to sorrow. The surprise was real but the joy was false.

The truth stood right there in the person of Nancy. Grace extricated herself and reached out to Nancy, but she halted when she saw the other's face. If Nancy's hair had turned to snakes the effect on Grace would have been the same. In fear, almost as it seemed in horror, Grace turned to Keezee. All Keezee could do was to meet her interrogating eyes with complete honesty. The longer she held Grace in a stare of stark truth the less necessary it was that she say anything. Keezee saw the knowledge spread over Grace's features. She saw a tremor shake her lips. The joy was gone from her eyes.

Nancy said, "I think we better go," and reached down and took the check from the table. She turned toward the cashier's place and took two steps while Keezee lifted Grace's coat from the unused seat in the booth and spread it out, looking with sorrow into Grace's intelligent eyes. Neither woman spoke. Keezee heard the register cough in Nancy's money. She enfolded Grace in her coat. Turning her body toward the aisle, Grace did not take her eyes off Keezee. Was there any hope in those eyes? Keezee thought there was not.

Keezee picked up the book from the table. She offered her arm. Carrying the book, supporting Grace, Keezee imagined herself a chaplain leading a convict to be hanged. She looked toward Grace but all she could see was a severe, fixed profile.

When Keezee broke their half-embrace to open the door they did exchange a glance. Keezee saw dry eyes directed at her as if to give her a chance to change everything. Keezee could change nothing. All she could do was to move her head in one motion to the side, as if to say "No."

Keezee took her arm again while they waited on the sidewalk for Nancy. Then the three women commenced walking toward Grace's apartment, Grace in the middle holding each friend by the arm.

The sidewalk was wide enough, and so they proceeded. Keezee looked aside at Grace, at the profile slightly bent. She felt Grace's hand grasping her arm firmly, steadily.

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