

XVIII

But where was he going?

One day a few years ago, he'd been about to ask Lucy to marry him. He'd made up his mind to do it. But it was the wrong time. Her mother had just died. And when he said something preliminary to asking her, for after all those years they'd been together he couldn't just blurt it out, she pretended not to have heard. So he let it go, thinking perhaps they were better off as they were, thinking (he was ashamed to admit) he could do better.

The morning of her birthday -- he couldn't stand the thought of her alone on her birthday -- he decided he would go to her and tell her everything. But he hadn't, he lost his nerve at the last minute. Instead he had gone

to Elizabeth with flowers meant for Lucy in his hand. And the present he'd got her -- it was a gold bangle, she liked things like that -- was still in his closet for he had nothing else to do with it. One didn't, of course, give Elizabeth presents. Well, it was hopeless, Lucy would never forgive him now. But he had to try, didn't he? He'd have to do whatever it took.

He'd have to crawl.

* * *

"Here's looking at you, kid."

Lucy raised the wine glass, toasted herself, smiled sadly and drank. Was there anybody so brave, anybody so noble, anybody who could wring your heart as Bogart did, walking off into the mist? But there was a tear -- no tears tonight, no tears please, we don't cry anymore. What you need (she told herself) is more wine. There.

She collapsed into a chair. One glass of wine was enough to send her head spinning. But tonight it was consolation. She had been planning to go to Casablanca with Ellen. Ellen hadn't seen it yet. But Ellen got a cold at the last minute, or so she said. Probably she'd met a soldier and decided to go out with him instead. Ellen was not too dependable.

"Here's looking at you, kid," Lucy murmured to nobody in particular, as she drank more wine. God, it was cheap awful stuff but a glass warmed you up nicely, set your heart at ease. It was almost spring now and to live through the spring with your heart broken was hard. She'd do it though. ("A kiss is just a kiss, a smile is just a smile.")

Springs past they always went to the zoo. He liked the elephants, the hippos, anything big. She liked the penguins because they were cute, like little men, and the snakes. The snakes were beautiful. She could never believe they were real animals, that inside their intricately patterned skins, like elegant belts, they were alive. What did snakes think about?

She could go to the zoo alone if she wanted to.

If she drank too much wine she would ^{get} angry and then she would get depressed. She would think, "He didn't even come on my birthday."

In spite of it all, in spite of the weeks without a word ("as time goes by. . . .") she hadn't believed he wouldn't come on her birthday. But he hadn't. So there she was, all dressed up and alone in her apartment on her birthday. It wasn't decent what she was thinking, the rage she felt.

But she shook herself, like a dog just come in front the rain, and she put on her coat and went to the movies. That was the first time she saw Casablanca.

("Here's looking at you, kid," said Humphrey Bogart, and his mournful eyes plunged to the depths of Ingrid Bergman's soul and found nothing there.)

My God, Lucy had thought, stumbling out of the theatre two hours later, teary-eyed and shaken, where have I been all of my life?

Life, so tightly drawn, had gone no farther than Bill -- everything was Bill, Bill, Bill, it was all Bill. She'd missed everything because of Bill and he hadn't even come on her birthday.

She began to look around, to see other people, and Bill began fading from her mind, fading, fading -- oh that she could stamp him out, pull him out by the roots and tear him into a million pieces and throw them to the winds. But then would a million Bills spring up where each piece fell -- none of them, not one of them coming on her birthday?

Yes, she'd have just a drop more wine. Ellen worked at her office but they'd never been friends before. That was all Bill's fault too. (Everything was Bill's fault.) She'd kept her life empty for fear that if she put something

in it it might go in just the particular space, just the particular time that Bill wanted. But he hadn't come on her birthday and now she had some friends of her own. Girls she went to the movies with, borrowed books from. She read a lot -- mostly mysteries. In some of them a woman who had been scorned took a small black gun and shot her lover dead.

For awhile she never stopped reading, finishing one book and picking up the next, reading late into the night until the words blurred together but still she kept on, turning the pages automatically, no longer understanding the words. The next night she always had to start a few pages before the place she'd put her bookmark. Finally she would fall asleep with the light on, the clock saying three or four, and she had to be at work at eight. The tiredness she got, the better. It left no time for thought.

But night after night, she dreamt that Bill came back, that he said, "Lucy, forgive me, take me back, you know I love you," and smiled so tenderly, so sweetly, so hopefully that it broke her heart all over again. But it was not that simple. She had her pride. Coldly she put him off. "Oh, you think it's that easy do you?" she'd say. But he persisted. How young and handsome he was in the dream, and so tender. "You know I love you," he said again, and

she could see that he meant it, this time he really meant it. Finally they fell into a sweet embrace, and night after night that's when she woke. And her happiness evaporated into the cold grey morning. He had not come back, he had not said that, he had not come on her birthday.

"We'll always have Paris," she told herself though it was not true. They hadn't had Paris. They hadn't had anything.

Too much wine would give her a headache tomorrow. She had got through the winter but how would she survive the spring? She had always felt that spring deserved, that spring demanded Love.

Never mind, never mind ("It's still the same old story") she had her friends, so many books, so many movies. Perhaps when the war was over, she would move away, would live somewhere else. There was no longer any point in being in Washington. Every building, every street corner, every park and monument reminded her of Bill for they'd done so many things together for so many years.

They'd gone to the dedication of the Jefferson Memorial, they'd heard Marian Anderson sing at the Lincoln Memorial, they'd walked in Rock Creek Park and on the towpath, they'd looked at the pictures in the new National Gallery on the mall where years ago the old railroad station used to be,

they'd gone to the Easter egg roll at the White House where little colored children mixed with little white children and suffered no visible ill effects (despite the dangers involved in letting the "alleys" mix with the "avenues"). They'd gone to the Cherry Blossom festivals before the war, and to concerts at the Library of Congress and, of course, always and in every season, they'd gone to the zoo.

But she had lived in Washington all of her life and she was tired of it. It was time to move on.

Mom had always wanted to live somewhere warmer. She had talked of moving to California long after it was obvious that she wouldn't ever again do any moving beyond the confines of her bed. In California it was spring all year round and it never rained.

Perhaps she would do that when the war was over. She had two aunts there, Mom's sisters. They were old now but still hearty -- not like Mom. Poor Mom. Well, she had always said that she was the runt of the litter.

Lucy took a drop more wine ("looking at you, kid"). She wasn't going to cry over Mom now. She'd done her crying for Mom.

The aunts, Aunt Martha and Aunt Louisa, had lived in a rowhouse near Dupont Circle for many years. They considered

themselves to be among Washington's cave dwellers, holding themselves aloof from what they fancied were society's overtures. In fact they were somewhat justified in their pretensions. The family had come upon its present obscurity fairly recently.

Their father, Lucy's grandfather, had once been mentioned as a possible commissioner of Washington. It had come to nothing but that was the kind of family they had been before they had dwindled.

Early on Lucy got sick of hearing how much they had dwindled: she hadn't married, she'd become a secretary, she knew the wrong kinds of people -- or no people at all. But it wasn't her fault. It was her mother's fault. Her mother had married badly and at a late age, in spite of or perhaps because of her father's disapproval -- not that he wouldn't have disapproved of anyone she or her sisters had married, he was that sort of man. Lucy's father claimed to be "in railroads." But, it later came out, his only connection with railroads was his use of that form of transportation to convey him out of town, one step ahead of his creditors.

Lucy was two at the time. Her mother was not the forgiving sort. None of the family were. She refused to have anything further to do with her -- almost immediately --

penitent husband, wouldn't even see him when he appeared at regular intervals to beg to be taken back. When Lucy was twelve he was killed -- appropriately enough, it was discreetly said -- in a train wreck. Only Lucy shed tears for him and that was because, her aunts had sternly told her at the time, she had never known the man.

Her aunts were stern about everything. They believed in keeping their emotions -- and everybody else's -- under firm control. And while it was taken for granted that the aunts were devoted to each other -- they had lived together their entire lives -- you would never have guessed it when you saw them together. If Aunt Martha said, "It's cold in here," Aunt Louisa would snap back, "It is not." But if a third person came along and innocently remarked, "It's cold in here" or "It's hot in here," both aunts would cry out joyfully, triumphantly, "It is not!" Perhaps they really liked to agree but couldn't bring themselves to do it unless they were disagreeing with someone else.

This had gone on for years when suddenly they up and decided to move to San Francisco. How they were able to agree remained a mystery. (Maybe someone else had suggested to one of them that moving to San Francisco would be a bad idea.) Anyway off they went and not too long after that,

one of them (Lucy could never remember which one) had gotten married. They must have been in their late fifties at the time. Now the two sisters and the (it was hard not to say "their") husband lived together. The poor husband must lead a grim life, Lucy thought, never venturing an opinion without both ladies shouting, "It is not!"

But it did give you hope, didn't it? Heading West at the age of fifty-five, marrying, changing your life completely. If they could do it at their age, Lucy could do it at hers. And after the war there would be prosperity. There would be jobs everywhere. A good secretary would have no trouble finding a job. So there was no reason to stay in Washington waiting for the phone to ring and when it did it was never him anyway, not even on her birthday.

No, not even on her birthday. You couldn't forgive something like that except in your sweet dreams.

All those years he had always been there. He had always brought flowers. He was there when Mom died. Lucy had cried and cried. He held her in his arms. "There, there, honey, we knew it was coming," he said, holding her tight. He had done everything, all the arrangements, everything. The next day (he'd stayed with her, he hadn't gone to work) he'd said they should go out, take a walk. It was in the

dead of winter, ice everywhere and frozen grey snow. They walked all the way to the White House and all she could think of was how Mom had hated Roosevelt -- "Roosevelt" she called him. She, Lucy, had always liked him, always fell sway to his magnetism. Somehow she felt that if only she had been able to make Mom like Roosevelt, or at least not hate him so much, she would have felt better now. Once she'd even had a dream that she'd come home and found Mom working on a puzzle. Mom had looked up and said quite mildly, "Roosevelt and I are making a puzzle." Lucy (inwardly rejoicing) said cautiously, "That's nice, Mom." Mom suffered so over hating Roosevelt that their rapprochement lifted a great weight from Lucy's heart, relieved a great worry. But it was just a dream. Mom died still hating him, still outraged.

Now that it was too late, Lucy looked at the White House and felt nothing. They turned to go back. Then Bill said something but a trolley went rumbling over his words. She caught only, "We can't go on like this." She bent forward to hear what he had said. (Why couldn't they?)

She said, "What? What? I didn't hear you?"

"Never mind," he said. "It was nothing." She didn't have the energy to press him. She never heard the rest of what he was saying. He might have been saying it was all over;

he might have been saying they should get married. Whatever it was, nothing had happened. They had gone on exactly like before -- until now, that is.

She couldn't help wondering ("here's looking at you" -- but no, three glasses was really too much), she couldn't help wondering if all those things were true that they told you when you were growing up, the aunts, the grandmother, your own mother, while you paid no attention and went on casting long looks of longing at that boy with the red hair at school (what was his name? Jimmy Something?) and generally doing everything you could to find out what sex was all about; and you never believed them when they said that boys don't marry the girls they sleep with. Of course she'd never slept with anyone but Bill (the red-headed boy had been completely oblivious) but she had certainly slept with Bill. If she hadn't -- if she hadn't, he might have married her.

Yes, now she believed that -- now, when it was too late. She believed it all.

Perhaps she would have just one more glass of wine. ("A glass is just a glass.") Yes, if she hadn't slept with him, today she'd be Mrs. William Tyler Jamison the Third. She could call up Garfinckels and say, "This is Mrs. William

Tyler Jamison the Third. Will you please send round eight place settings of our silver pattern? Thank you so much."

But she had slept with him. Yes, she'd given in, surrendered up all her bargaining power before he'd had a chance to fall in love with her (but long after she'd fallen in love with him). He'd wanted somebody who would warm his bed for him and she'd done that all right. She'd set it on fire. He couldn't do better than that, could he? Still, he hadn't come on her birthday so maybe he had done better, maybe he had.

She deserved it for being such a fool. Besides she no longer cared, she no longer thought of him, she no longer loved him.

How she once had loved him, how she would always have loved him, forgiven him all if he had only come on her birthday!

Lucy stood up but the room wobble-wobbled so she fell back into the chair again. Where had she thought she was going anyway?

What hurt was the lack of a parting scene. It was as if she had stood there at the train station in the rain, waiting, waiting, and there was not even so much as a brief note to break her heart. Even Bogart got a note to

tell him to give up, to forget (although of course he didn't). But she got nothing. No parting scene, no mist for one or the other to walk off into. Nothing. He hadn't come on her birthday nor for weeks before nor for weeks after.

It was a good thing she no longer loved him except in her dreams. But dreams were slow to catch up to reality. The dreams took all those used up, discarded emotions and pasted them together to torment her with. In her sleep she forgot how little she cared, she forgot that a kiss is just a kiss, that she would never forgive him for not coming on her birthday. And when she woke it was the happiness left over from the dream that hurt, not the dream itself.

She would go to San Francisco and live with her aunts and their husband. She would become a movie star. She was prettier now than she had been. Her hair was longer. She looked better. Getting rid of Bill had been good for her. She no longer worried about him and his stupid heart, how he had passed out once and fell like a stone. (He'd said it was the heat but she didn't believe it.) He was a load off her mind. She was a free woman.

She would go to San Francisco when the war was over. She would take the train. (After all, railroading was in her blood no matter what her mother had said.) She would live

with her aunts and take their husband's side against them. They would like that. They had that sort of sense of humor. Marrying at sixty you would have to.

She would find a husband -- perhaps a movie star. Yes, a sad and haunted movie star who was different from all the others, who had looked all his life for the one woman who would understand. She, she was that woman. She understood. Yes, she thought, here I am, my movie star with those odd movie-star-ugly looks, those sad wise eyes, let me ease your pain. Let me understand you.