

It was dusk when she left finally, *three hours*, she thought, hurrying down the walk, *with that bastard, that . . . wretch. What an ingrate.* At the same time she felt profoundly wounded by his indifference to her charms, to her pleasure, by the rye without ginger ale, by the shabby emptiness of his house, which he seemed to think was just fine, perfectly suitable. *The nerve.*

Over the years Kate had grown careless about the afternoon men. This one lived along one of several main routes that wound up to British Properties and when Gregor Vanclve had recognized his wife's Oldsmobile, the engine running, he had stopped. There in the back was his blond-haired boy lying on the floor, his knees draped over the axel hump and the Cracker Jacks box clutched to his chest, and he looked simply asleep, but Gregor could not rouse the boy, banging on the glass; no, he seemed terribly soundly asleep, and no one came to the door of the yellow house when he knocked and knocked, behind him the engine still reliably droning along, a good car, the Oldsmobile, solid and safe, the salesman had told them, dependable, he had said, gazing pointedly at Mrs. Vanclve, *you'll never break down in an Oldsmobile*, and Gregor raced home for the extra key, the engine still purring like a black lynx, its breath poison, scentless and unseeable, a dark lynx that had swallowed up his blue-eyed boy. Fumbling the key into the lock, throwing open the door, he snatched his son away and held him up into the driving rain, his brow pale as pale stone but the cheeks flushed bright, a glaucous shadow about the mouth as though moss were already gathering in the stillness, the rain dancing upon his face until at last the eyelids twitched. Not dead, *God zy dank*, not dead. When Brendan had finished emptying his stomach beside his mother's car, Gregor rushed him to the doctor, and it was while the boy was being treated for carbon monoxide poisoning, cradled in the arms of a matronly nurse, breathing from a tank of pure oxygen, that Gregor Vanclve telephoned his attorney. About the same time Kate discovered her car door open,

the engine off, the boy gone. It had all come out in the legal documents, every abject detail.

“You will not leave me, Gregor, oh no, not after all I’ve been through, how long I’ve put up with . . .”

“With what?”

“Your age.”

He seemed to be having a hard time looking at her, perhaps, she decided, because he understood that he would miss her beauty, that he would be giving up a lot if he went ahead with this divorce. Knowing that there would be a row that morning-after, Kate had gone to extra lengths to be particularly arresting—a dark green taffeta dress with a matching, velvet-trimmed bolero, a plumed toque, her hair curled loosely beneath it, a new pair of black kids. Gregor walked over to the picture window and gazed south across the Narrows to Stanley Park and to the hazy band of serration beyond that was downtown Vancouver. The sun was only just established, still laboring up from the rim of the world, but yesterday’s clouds had all but vanished, and he put his palms to the glass as if catching the new light. “This yearning,” he said, “inside you deep, it is impossible.” About his torso a crisp white shirt planed sculpturally, and indeed he seemed like a living statue, someone venerated and prized, backlit by a dazzling world, and for a good long minute she wanted to touch him again, to feel the fabric warm from his body heat, the strong subtle sinews beneath. His jacket, a Crofter-made Harris Tweed still faintly redolent of peat, hung over the back of the wing chair where he sat reading poetry most mornings before work, and if she had had the courage she would have pressed it to her face to feel its soft elegance, to smell its fine quiet history, the smallest bit of which had included her.

Instead, she tugged on the black kid gloves, fanning her fingers to admire their sleek fit, and said, “I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.”

His hands slid from the glass. “Poor love, I know,” he murmured as he picked up his jacket. “This I know.”

“Wait . . .”

He fixed his eyes upon her, eyes she trusted completely, eyes that once held the glow of adoration, extinguished now, the light gone, the love worn out; still, even at what seemed final moments she felt undressed by these eyes as by a confessor who would forgive all. It was in its way a gloriously liberating sensation, and from around a last corner it managed to coax a frail waif of hope.

“You . . . you can’t mean this, Darling.”

He was making his way toward the front door, drawing on his jacket, gathering attaché case, umbrella.

“I’ll change. I will.”

“It is impossible.”

“But you still want me, don’t you?”

Turning, he regarded her as he had that first day when she stood in his office at the Langston Hotel, desiring employment for which she was not in the least qualified. The light was not behind him now, but she felt it peripherally flooding into the room.

“You still want me,” she repeated, only this time she was aware of a desperate fury. Her hands were shaking, her breath came fast. “Say it. Because I won’t let you beat me to the punch, do you hear, I simply won’t let this happen, not after all I’ve put up with, all I’ve given you.” She paused, watching him watch her, and suddenly she felt like some kind of specimen, a newly discovered animal displayed in an overly lit room. “You know, Gregor, I was the one who wanted a divorce, not you. I resisted it for your sake, because I knew you still wanted me. You do, don’t you? Just say it,” she screamed, the tears coming in a rush now, “say it once! That’s all you have to do, damn it to hell, is want me, still want me . . .”

“Want you?” He gave a sad sort of laugh that instantly disintegrated. “Poor Kate, but I have had you quite enough.”

Eight months later in January 1957 the Vancleves were divorced, the court granting Brendan’s father custody, in part because of the damning incident in the automobile, and in part because (curiously) the mother made no petition and put forth not a single claim

with regard to her son. She wrote in her statement that the divorce would leave her destitute and that she could not afford to properly care for the boy, though the record indicates that Vancleve settled a handsome sum upon his young wife, including a monthly stipend that would continue two full years. Until all of the legal matters had been concluded Kate stayed in their home up on Chartwell, occupying her first quarters, the sickroom where Father Deneau had come to visit her, where Gregor brought her meals and her mail after the suicide attempt. He had saved her once, but he could not save her twice. When the last documents were signed Kate let a two-room suite in North Van on the edge of the somewhat seedy commercial district. She hung a brown woolen blanket over its sole window and lay in bed surrounded by magazines, eating jelly on bread, Neapolitan ice cream, Spam and Beefaroni, licorice candies. When every one of the dishes she owned had been used and not washed, she ate off long-playing records, then the glossy covers of the magazines, and finally, straight from the food packages. She bought a television and put it atop the dinette table and let it run from test pattern to test pattern, the light flickering over there in the corner, the sound down low, voices smothered. Sometimes she draped an old tea towel over the screen and watched the obscured lives struggle on beneath a print of faded violets. Her father loved violets . . . *Hugh Fergal Riley*, her mind whispered—she was always buying up things with violets on them.

It came as a mild surprise that she missed Gregor, his silent restraint, which always seemed to tell her that he considered himself remarkably lucky simply to be with her and wouldn't bother her with any of the rest, no matter his rightful claim, his abilities or inabilities. Her new situation inexorably led her to wonder if there had been anything wrong with Gregor's competence in the bedroom, or if at some unnoticed point in their six years together he had frankly had his fill. The idea provoked a crazy sorrow so deep inside her that it scared her almost as much as late night thoughts of death, which, if she followed them too far down the path before

sleep could snatch her safely away, stirred up a terrible and viperous panic.

She even missed the boy, “our adorable little house dog,” was how she often referred to him. She missed his crawling about on his knees, pretending to be her puppy, and his small dotting hand on the back of her head as he brushed out her hair at the end of the day. It had been an accident, after all; she hadn’t meant to be gone so long. The boy was fine, just fine — *everyone seemed to forget that, even Miriam — what a pious witch. And as for Raimer and the others, well, my goodness, what was she supposed to have done? Twenty-five and married and no young life, no one to love her in a normal, natural way, how God meant it should be, and all sorts of proposals, people had no idea how much temptation she resisted all the time, it was unfair to judge her like other women, why, she was positively swamped with letters and calls from fellows, and easily a dozen proposals, two of them “standing.” It wasn’t her fault that she was pretty, that there was something about her, a magnetism that excited men, even women. If people could just consider all the temptation she was exposed to, all the times she had resisted, the additions and subtractions, if they could just take into account her loyalty to the marriage, and her not wanting to abandon Gregor Vancleve at his age, then they would see that she was a good girl at heart, just a good girl trying to make the best of things.*

Joe Willoughby had consented to a lengthy leave, but when at last Kate showed up for work in late February he extended it by another month, directing Phyllis to explain to (the now) Miss Riley that “in business a worthy appearance is key” and that “her seniority alone required that she admit no personal matters in her comportment and in her wardrobe,” and that “a flowered housedress” would not do, “not at all” and neither would “unclothed legs.” Kate told Phyllis that she could not fit into any of her separates, her tweedy ensembles, she had gained some weight, it seemed, and that nylons were tight and uncomfortable, and after months of padding about barefoot the snappy, two-toned, sling-back pumps made her feet hurt,

and that at any rate she couldn't bear to run into Gregor who still banked in the West Van branch, and how was it that Joe Willoughby could insult her after all she had been through? So she quit. Went back to her flat, wrote her mother, turned out the lights.

In March a letter from Fiona arrived, postmarked #239 Hotel York, York Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

My Dear Kate

Your letter received, and so very sorry to get the news, I just don't know what to say I never thought he would do such a thing, it must be very hard on you, you must make the best of things. There are many girls in the world have had a worse deal and thank god he will support you for a while. I wish I was real near you and could try to cheer you up, pop in and have a wee chat. I wonder what brought on the change of mind. Would you consider coming back home, or even to Winnipeg and I could see you now and then? Kate, I am very heart broken that you are so far from me and never thought such a thing would happen. I do wish I could help in some way. Well dear, I want to tell you to chin up and think of all our blessings so many people have troubles too, but in spite of it all we have to carry on and hold our heads high and play the game of feeling fine.

I myself not too well with sore throat and headache and not sleeping very well my nerves are not good either. I hope you folks did not get the mumps, I have never had them, neither have you so maybe you are safe. The boys never had them either. The Drs. and I are looking after myself, I'm back to eating good food, no more starvation for me. They said they might put me in a mental if I didn't eat. The pain killing pills cost a fortune, so it will take good common sense to keep my money from wasting away. The whole thing boils down to starvation diet. You can't run a car without gas. Still, wish I'd had the guts to have done it 3 years ago, finish things, if you take my meaning. I'd like to see all my relatives real quick.

We have a bunch of queer women here now, I've no notion of wanting their company. I used to go out and have some eats and a beer with Mrs. Dodds, but she has a new steady and eats out all the time. He sure keeps himself neat, but is a real crank, bangs the elevator door every time I don't want to hear it. She don't ask me to go with her anymore I sure would. She bought me some chops today. Norma Roswell took her dress-making sign down they say she did not have a license. And her with new glasses to pay for. My grandma in Ireland bathed her eyes two or three times with tea, also my mother, and never wore glasses. As I write this I have my feet in a pail of water with Epsom salts in it, two toenails and a third are in growing the pain is near to unbearable. I pray that I get well again. I may have to make a change, Kate, as I do not like the new neighbors, they have come from Puerto Rico. I am rather nervous everything is changed now and they brag that they are going to Rule the world. They are filthy and curse and swear and they are very rough. I do not open my door to anyone and carry my umbrella at all times and I've made up my mind anyone who tries to get my purse will get a good crack of the umbrella. Well, I'm my own boss so will give the change some thought. The Hotel is under new management, he is quite handsome.

How is the wee tot? You are a smart girl not to put the burden on yourself as he has the money, you with a new husband to attract. I always wanted more kiddies but you had to be the famous one anyone saw that. Well then time went on and Dad had to go to Rochester came home in a month after removal of the kidney. And then there were the other trips to the Mayo Clinic, but I had no regrets, as I sure did my utmost to make him happy and comfortable in his time of suffering. I know this that I will never get so nice care. I had to go and get the coffin all fixed up, then on the Sunday was the funeral my son Colin looked sad and said it should have been him. Colin was the good one John too busy to write so I better just forget about it.

There is no heat on half the time so would have had to move long ago if I didn't have the heater you folks sent Xmas, I haven't told anyone I have it we are not supposed to have hot-plates either, so put it on and don't answer the door and keep it locked. Well, Kate, will soon be my birthday, so don't go getting me anything, only if you feel you want to get something a couple of pair of nylons would be alright size 10. I will be 67 and no one to turn to, the boys are married and no room for me.

Well dear I'll close for now I am very lonely and blue. I'll have a cup of tea and a smoke.

Bye now

Loads of love,

Mother

ps The world is in a terrible state and could smash up any moment, so I have decided to live one day at a time.

Kate would not have a phone put in, so Miriam left several calls with the manager downstairs, all of them unanswered. One night Phyllis tried to persuade her to come out for dinner, but Kate would not release the lock and in the end, Phyllis slid two notes under the door, one from Pdraig Delaney in accounting and the other from Scottie.

Paddy Delaney had been with the Royal Bank for almost twenty years and knew how to keep just the right distance, to do a fine job but not an ambitious job, not one that might bump him into responsibilities that latched on at the end of each day, never to let go. He'd come over from the *auld sod*, as he liked to call it, Oughterard, County Galway, a Hurling star in his youth. Paddy's sense of the West Vancouver Branch of the Royal Bank had everything to do with his nostalgia for his Hurling team, supporting "our local lads," doing one's bit. She knew there could be nothing genuinely personal inside the small envelope addressed to Miss Kate Riley, that it would consist of something that he or any one of the teammates might say when a lad—or lassie—went off. For Kate's Irish heritage

inspired him, and she in turn had always liked the reminder that there was a deep vein of Rileys over there, and that if things ever got bad for her here in Canada, she might always go back, way back, to her *true* home in Carrick-on-Shannon where Hugh Fergal Riley had been born.

Inside Paddy's envelope she found a neatly typed poem:

See Katy, begorra and why are yez leaving us
Can't yez be see'n that the thought it is grieving us?
Sure and we've all got to liking your ways—
And even if sometimes you seemed in a daze
As if quite unconscious of labor and summaries,
But thought—so yez did—of your lipstick and flummeries
Yet still you've been part of the banking—and so
Your leaving is really upsetting poor Joe;
Bedad and his appetite's starting to fail
It won't be so long 'til he's thin as a rail.

But never you worry, young Katy colleen,
Just laugh and be happy—but sometimes between,
Think back to the Royal and your first little job
And shed a small tear drop and sob a wee sob.

It was signed Paddy, and there was a postscript:

ps A boil on the elbow would be hard to beat,
But you could do better with one on the seat.

She gazed at the light straining through the brown blanket still draped over her window, and felt a smile tug into shape. It was so ridiculous, so unrelated to anything, the boil on the seat, old Joe who didn't give a tinker's damn, *oh, she knew that*, yet Paddy's lyric had invoked that haloing impression of an all-forgiving Home over there, of her father's boundless devotion to her, and somehow it

served to wrench her from the deep mire in which she had sunk since Gregor's rejection. She read the poem again, then picked up the second note from Scottie:

Dear Kate—

Listen, George's orders have materialized. His new destination is New Orleans. He hasn't received them officially but it's pretty definite. I'm leaving here May 1st, and have already given notice at the bank. I told them that I had a friend who might be interested in a position, but didn't give them your name or tell them where you were. All I told him was that you had about 5 years experience and could assume a head bookkeeper's job. This is a good time for you to get out of Van. The States are wide open. Think about it and let me know.

We were at the Magic Inn last Sat nite with a bunch from the bank. We had some good dancers in the crowd so I had a marvelous time. George did too. M.W. was there, natch. I think the wife is headed out of the picture.

Mardi Gras day is simply out of this world I hear. One of the fellows here now had a ball there while he was stationed in N.O. I'm really looking forward to it. You have a standing invite when we get settled. I'd love to have you even if you didn't feel like doing anything. Phyl says you're holed up in some dive. Don't throw it in like this, Riley, pull yourself together and come down here. You can have the apartment too. Write.

Love,
Scottie

In one of the glossy magazines strewn about the bed Kate found a diet plan. She cut out pictures of movie stars, Elizabeth Taylor, Kim Novak, Shelley Winters, and taped them to the front of the icebox. A month passed before she removed the tea towel from the bathroom mirror and resumed daily makeup applications. A month and fifteen pounds. In a three-day fury of action she cleaned the flat,

washed and pressed what of her clothing permitted, took the rest to the dry cleaners, and gave notice. Since she had stopped combing her hair weeks earlier, tying a scarf around her head whenever she needed to make a foray to the store, now she had to wash it, and wash it again, then spend hours gently working apart the mats; in the end some of them had to be cut out by the hair stylist.

“There was a death in the family,” Kate explained to the woman, because that was exactly how it felt—that someone had died. “I have been in mourning.”

“Of course, dearie, of course. We’ll get you all prettied up again, you’ll see. Ready to face the world.”

Then Kate Riley of Netherfield, Saskatchewan became an American citizen, a landed immigrant, and took over the Head Bookkeeper’s position at the Central Branch of the National Bank of Commerce in Seattle where, as it turned out, the Magic Inn maintained its accounts, a little secret Scottie meant as a pleasant parting surprise.