a sequel to Glen Notes and Dispatches

When the Great War ended, Shirley, Carl, and Una built a precarious happiness in a New World that wasn't meant for any of them.

Now, another war is starting.

Shirley cannot stay out of the fight; Carl must face dangers at home; Una must decipher God's plan for her. Facing monsters of all shapes and kinds, they will fight for their own happiness.

(1919-1942)
August 31, 1939

Shirley Blythe looked up at the sudden sound of many flapping wings. The congregation of seagulls, so placid a moment before, was beating the air, the birds squabbling frantically as they gained enough height to clear the top of the hangar, out of range of the gravel spraying from the skidding wheel of Gilbert Ford's bicycle. Their affronted screeching woke the little grizzle-coated terrier who had been sleeping in the shade of a broad canvas wing. Arthritic joints notwithstanding, Muggins leapt to her feet and bounded toward the boy, voicing her delight in a series of seagull-provoking yips.

"Uncle Shirley!" Gil cried, stumbling over the frame of the falling bike, but keeping his feet. He bent to greet the dog pawing at his knees, then asked, "Is that it?"

Shirley smiled to himself and wiped engine grease onto the rag hanging from the pocket of his cover-alls. "Sure is," he said, patting the pockmarked fuselage of his old Curtiss HS-2L with a nearly-clean hand. "Smoothest water landing you can make without your own feathers."

Gil rolled his eyes. "Not that old rubbish heap! The Cub!"

"Oh!" Shirley said, aping surprise. "You mean that?"
He gestured vaguely toward the edge of the landing strip, where a gleaming, chrome-yellow Piper J-3 Cub shone smugly in the August sunshine. Blunt wings stretched out either side of a rounded cabin, embellished along the sides with black racing stripes that ended in tiny zigzags of lightning. Perhaps these were meant to imply speed or agility. Paired with the Cub's eggy silhouette, the bolts conveyed only nervous energy. With a red nub in the middle of the propellor on its snub little nose, the Cub looked like nothing so much as a cartoon rabbit, poised to fly under the magical power of its fuzzy yellow ears.

"That," Gil scoffed. "Of course that!"

"Well then why did you ask?"

Gil ignored this and made for the Cub, eating up the distance with long, brisk strides that challenged Muggins to keep pace.

"Oh!" he moaned, reaching out a tentative hand to stroke the sunshine struts. "Hello, gorgeous."

"It's been here all summer," Shirley said, following his nephew unhurriedly. "Unlike some."

Gil groaned. "Dad made me work in his office. Two whole months! He said he wants me to learn about Business."

Shirley chuckled softly at the capital letter in the boy's tone. Ken Ford could try to make his golden-haired, spirited son into a Man of World, but first he'd have to get him to sit still for five minutes together. The only place Shirley had ever seen Gil completely attentive was in a cockpit. Two full months in Ken's office must have had him climbing the walls.

At the moment, Gil was fairly vibrating with excitement.

"Can I fly it? Please, Uncle Shirley, please?"

"You can fly in it," Shirley said evenly.

Gil's face fell. "Oh, come on. I can fly! You say so all the time. I'm a born pilot!"

"This," Shirley said, resting a strong, brown hand on the cheerful fuselage, "is not a toy."

"And I'm not a child!" Gil protested. "I'll be 19 next month. Oh, please, Uncle Shirley, I'll be careful!"

Shirley shook his head, impervious to his nephew's wheedling appeal. "Today, I fly; you observe. If you pay attention, maybe tomorrow . . ."

"Oh, I will," Gil said, already moving toward the hangar in search of goggles and flight jacket, shedding his rucksack as he went.

When he was far enough away, Shirley allowed himself a smile. It was to good have him back.

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Half an hour later, a forsaken Muggins watched Shirley and Gil lift clear of the runway, climbing up, up into the brilliant blue of a clear summer afternoon. Shirley felt a bit cramped so close to the instruments, with Gil's knobbly knees tucked up nearly under his elbows. Still, the salt breeze blew crisply through the Cub's open cabin, cooled by the sun-dazzled waves of Four Winds harbor, mirroring the limitless possibility of the cloudless sky.
The Cub did not fly fast and it did not fly high. Five minutes after takeoff, they were barely at 500 ft, but that was no matter. No hurry. Shirley had been flying the Cub all summer, giving lessons and tours to the renters and sometimes just leaving the world behind for a while. Every time he went up, alone or not, he heard Walt Whitman singing in his ear:

*From Paumanok starting I fly like a bird,*
*Around and around to soar to sing the idea of all,*
*To the north betaking myself to sing there arctic songs,*
*To Kanada till I absorb Kanada in myself*

What would Whitman think of actual flight? Of this startling yellow absurdity hurtling through the heavens? Of this vast Canada? Shirley Blythe was not much of a one for yawping, but he resolved to sound one over the roofs of the world for good old Walt's sake next time he flew alone.

As the Cub swung out over the shore, Shirley spotted the unmistakable bulk of Bertie Shakespeare Drew's four black percherons, dark manes flying in the wind as they waded through the roiling surf. The storm that had pounded this coast three days past had long ago left the sky traceless, but the sea remembered. Waves crashed against the red cliffs down beyond the rock shore, sending plumes of foamy spray skyward, and even the beach-sea swirled and hissed, lapping at the horses' bellies as they dragged their traps through the swells. A storm like that tore the Irish moss from the underwater rocks and set it bobbing free in the churning sea. Then, the percherons would go to work, dredging it up from the tide in sopping traps so heavy that only the strongest animals could budge them. Bertie Shakespeare and his sons dried the stuff, baled it, and sent it off to a factory on the mainland where it had something improbable to do with canned food. They were beautiful animals, though, and Bertie was rightly proud of them.

Farther out over the harbor now and Shirley relaxed, setting the machine to cruise and looking back over his shoulder to check on Gil. His nephew flashed him a brilliant grin and a thumbs up, evidently unbothered by the cramped quarters. Shirley pulled the Cub into a lazy circle, letting it drift slow and wide over the water.

An energetic tap at his shoulder made Shirley cock his head to listen.

"Look!" Gil shouted over the whir of propellor and the rush of wind. "Carl!"

The boy gestured to starboard, indicating the distinctive green hull of the *Sweet Flag* plowing the waves far below. Homeward bound, by the look of her.

*Good. He shouldn't have gone out yesterday. Sea still unsettled. Blasted birds.*

Shirley nodded back. Then, he dipped the Cub's nose and eased into a slow dive.

It wasn't a machine for aerial acrobatics, but it flew low and slow, perfect for buzzing by to say hello. Down and down, until they were barely 100 feet above the sea when they passed over the *Sweet Flag*. Carl must have waved because Gil was waving back, leaning so far out of the cabin that Shirley had to roll in the other direction to maintain equilibrium.

*I'll call later.*

Shirley turned toward the coast, aiming for the Four Winds light. From there, it was only a quick jaunt over to the mellow green house that Rilla and Ken had bought as a summer place after Cornelia Bryant passed. They might have preferred to take over the old House of Dreams, but that abode was occupied year-round now, a retirement home for the happy couple who had named it nearly fifty years ago. Anne Blythe had teased that Gilbert would never stop working unless he
were physically separated from the Ingleside telephone. Leslie had come back for the party, of course, staying in a comfortable hotel with Persis' family, but with Owen gone, she had been happy to turn the keys over to her old friends. Provided, she said, that they looked after the roses.

Shirley craned his neck as they passed over the House of Dreams. Yes, there was Mother, the bright circle of her broad straw hat unmistakable amidst the green and partifloral of her beloved garden. She looked up at the Cub's whine and there went Gil again, insisting on testing the limits of balance.

Over the red harbor roads and toward the Glen. Past Ingleside, where the Blythe girls had already hung buntings and canopies for tomorrow's anniversary party. Rilla and Ken Ford had been married twenty years and planned to mark the occasion with a grand gathering of family, friends, and neighbors.

Wasn't once enough?

Well, that was a problem for tomorrow. For now, the Cub soared out over Rainbow Valley, over the manse, over the village. Farther on, its shadow fell over the neighborless little gray house on the Lowbridge Road before turning toward fields and woods and marshy places where reeds grew in thick, whispering stands. Home was down there somewhere, but they had broken free of its gravity, tethered only by the promise of a warm supper when sunset had put an edge on the nipping wind. But for now, the Cub sailed on, toward an indistinct horizon where the blue of sea and the blue of sky mingled, indistinguishable from one another.

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"Can I really fly it tomorrow?" Gil asked, knees bouncing so that they rattled the teacups on Shirley's kitchen table.

Shirley scooped a short stack of letters out of spilling range and onto a nearby chair. The mail was the only thing out of place in the one-room apartment: clean-swept and sparsely furnished, the single bookshelf bearing one green volume and a regimented row of back issues of *Aerial Age Weekly*, the neat bed with corners tight enough to please both Susan and the RAF.

"That depends," Shirley answered, reaching down to scratch Muggins' ears as she sat beside him. "Tell me, what's a good cruising speed for that machine?"

"75 miles per hour," Gil answered without hesitation.

"And how high would you take it?"

"Oh, not over 1,000 feet. Though I notice you kept us very low today."

Shirley nodded. "And your RPMs at cruising would be . . ."

Gil squinted. "2150?"

"And on takeoff . . ."

"Lift the tail first. I know! I was listening!"


"I can fly it?"
"Tomorrow morning. Before the party. Be here at 8."

Gil's face split in the sort of grin native to toothpaste advertisements. He took another piece of shortbread from the plate in the center of the table and crammed it into his mouth.

Shirley buried his nose in his teacup to keep from grinning back. Gilbert Ford was entirely too pleased with himself already and it wouldn't do to praise him, even if Shirley had been the fawning sort.

"I read in the paper that the RAF is doing air defense tests," Gil said through a mouthful of crumbs. "Thousands of planes flying over Britain, just getting ready."

Shirley did not reply, glad of the shielding cup.

"Do you think there'll be another war, Uncle Shirley?"

"I hope not," Shirley replied. There was no ignoring the headlines, nor the none-too-reassuring reassurances broadcast over the radio. This wasn't like last time, when all the world had been ambushed by the guns of August. This time, it stalked them in the open, as a wolfpack circling a limping calf on the tundra, the inexorable noose closing no matter which way they dashed.

Another war.

"What was it like?" Gil asked, shining-eyed and breathless.

What was it like? Even if there were words, they wouldn't make any sense to him.

"I puked a lot."

"What?" Gil recoiled, not having expected any answer, let alone one so incongruous. But how could Shirley tell him anything but the baldest facts?

Shirley shrugged. "Every time I got in a fight — a real fight — I'd puke when it was over."

Gil wrinkled his nose. But it was not every day that Uncle Shirley talked about the War at all, and Gil was not about to give up the opportunity to find out whatever he could.

"I read about you in Flying Aces," he ventured.

Shirley snorted. "Was I Kerry Keene or Phineas Pinkham?"

"No, it was really you!" replied earnest Gil. "They publish real news, too, you know."

"Very old news, if I was in it."

"You were great," Gil breathed, gray-blue eyes alight.

"Was I?"

Gil appeared not to hear him. "They had your picture and everything. Thirty-four kills! You were a top-10 ace!"

"That's top-10 for Canada, not the whole RAF," Shirley demurred.

"Still!" Gil lolled theatrically over the tabletop. "I want to be just like you, Uncle Shirley."
"Don't let your father hear you say that," Shirley muttered.

"What? Why not?"

Shirley was brought up short. He did not often speak impulsively, and had to cast about for an acceptable reply to cover his mistake.

"You know why everyone thinks fighter pilots are young?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

"Because they don't tend to grow very old."

Gil scoffed.

"Your parents have big plans for you," Shirley persisted. "Being like me isn't any part of that."

"But you were so brave."

There it was again. That hero-worship. Flattering, to be sure, but Shirley did not need flattery. And this sort of thinking needed to be quashed without mercy.

Shirley shook his head. "No," he said. "Listen to me, Gil, this is serious. Everyone thinks a great pilot is brave. But they're wrong. A great pilot is meticulous."

He paused, checking to be sure that Gil was paying proper attention. The gray eyes were wide under their fringe of golden lashes; the boy hung on his every word.

Shirley spoke with grave deliberation, as if he could armor his nephew in good advice. "Every time you go up — every single time — you have to be in command of every detail. Aware of everything. Your surroundings. Your equipment. Your own body. You have to take risks, of course, but small ones. Well-considered. If you get reckless in a fight, everyone will talk about how brave you were while they're attending your funeral."

A flicker of fear crossed Gil's face at this last.

Good. He should be scared.

"That goes for ordinary flying, too," Shirley said, sitting back, arms folded casually over his chest. "Don't be brave. Be precise. Every time. Is that clear?"

Gil nodded, swallowing at the same time, so that he resembled a golden prince only recently ransomed from froghood.

"Right. Tomorrow morning then?" Shirley asked, rising to clear away the teacups.

"Tomorrow morning," Gil answered in the soberest tone in his register.

It wouldn't do to send him off hang-dog, though. He was a good kid. And there was no war. Not yet. Maybe he wouldn't need the warning.

Shirley turned back from the dishpan and clapped a broad hand to Gil's shoulder.

"You're a born pilot, Gil. And I'll make sure you're a well-trained one, too."

"Thanks, Uncle Shirley."
The boy bestowed a convulsive hug, just as he had when he was a freckle-faced child, spending his summers flying balsa-wood gliders and begging for a ride in the Curtiss. Shirley held him for a moment, hoping against hope that they would have many a summer yet to let him test his wings.

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When Gil had disappeared through the door with a farewell pat for Muggins and a promise to return at eight o’clock sharp, Shirley turned back to the dish basin. He rinsed the tea things and put away the plate of shortbread. Everything tidy now. Except . . .

Shirley retrieved the pile of mail from the kitchen chair. There was little enough of it — some circulars and bills and a note requesting a bird’s eye tour of the Island. Once, there might have been an unsigned postcard from Berlin or a pristine issue of Der Eigene, useless to Shirley, who couldn’t read a word of German. But it was the thought that counted. The last of those dispatches had arrived years ago — a postcard: You were right. No explanation necessary. At the time, Shirley had thought it was something to celebrate; five years of silence later, he could barely stand to imagine what it might really mean.

Shuffling to the bottom of the pile, Shirley drew out the only letter of any consequence.

Crossing to the telephone, he placed a call to the little gray house on the Lowbridge Road.

"Hello? Una? Yes, I'm fine. How are you? Listen, I saw Carl coming in when I was out over the harbor . . . No, that's alright, I didn't think he'd be home yet. I was just wondering: would it be alright if I came over for supper tonight? There's something I need to talk to him about . . . No, everything's fine . . . Yes . . . That sounds fine . . . Alright. I'll see you at six. Thanks."

Shirley hung up and sought the comfort of the old oak rocking chair that had stood so long by the window seat in the kitchen at Ingleside. Muggins trotted over and laid down before him, resting her graying muzzle on his foot. It was a small weight for so great a comfort, but it did not change the writing on the envelope. Sighing, Shirley ran a thumb over the eagle insignia in the corner:

RCAF: Royal Canadian Air Force.

Notes:

photo credit Esther Bubley, 1943
The buckboard wagon swayed and jolted up the hill from the Kingsport train station, sending luggage sliding precariously toward the tailgate with every bump. Carl made a grab for his rucksack as it lurched away from him, but misjudged the distance and nearly toppled over himself. Pulling the bag into his lap, Carl settled back onto the passenger bench between Jerry and Shirley, considerately giving his brother a generous allotment of the available space.

"It's amazing how much they've rebuilt already," Jerry said, surveying the extended construction zone that was the northern half of Kingsport. Newly widened streets teemed with timber-laden carts and hoarse-voiced drovers shouting to their mules. Laborers passed fresh-milled boards from one hand to another, raising skeletal roof-ribs over the ash-gray boxes that were not yet homes.

"Didn't you say they're using some sort of new material for the houses?" Carl asked Shirley, who was attempting to extricate his own rucksack from under a crate of Jerry's books.

"Yes," Shirley replied, pointing toward a mountain of dull blocks. "Hydrostone. It's a sort of compressed concrete."

"It's supposed to be fireproof, isn't it?" Jerry asked.

"Yes. The houses they build now won't burn like the old ones did," Shirley agreed. "But it's very heavy. Harder to work with than natural materials. See how they've laid out this new road running on a diagonal up from the harbor? The teams couldn't haul their carts on roads that ran straight up the hill like they used to."

"Well, it certainly is a hill," Carl observed. "Glad we don't have to carry our luggage up to the boarding house."

They had arrived by the boat train an hour ago, all of them in a swirl of high spirits. Di and Faith had spent much of the ferry voyage explaining the peculiarities of Aster House's ancient appliances to Una, while Sylvia quizzed Jem on the backstories of the Glen folk she had met at Rilla's wedding. Jerry and Nan had commandeered a table in the canteen where they had wrangled Jerry's schedule into a form that would allow him to spend at least four evenings a week at Aster House, plus Sunday dinner. The latter invitation had been extended to all Blythes and Merediths in the form of a command.

Beyond extracting a promise that yes, of course, they would attend Sunday dinner in perpetuity, no one had paid much mind to Carl or Shirley. They spent the journey on the open expanse of the upper deck, elbows brushing casually as they watched whales and gulls and scudding clouds. When the ferry passed the southern tip of Kingsport on the way into the harbor, Carl had caught a glimpse of the Redmond clock tower over the canopy of lush late-summer foliage and flashed Shirley an unrestrained grin. The next four years were theirs.

At the station, the Aster House girls had clambered into a hired wagon and waved cheerfully, Nan reminding everyone for the dozenth time that they were all expected at two o'clock the following afternoon. Jem and Faith promised they would be there, then scampered off to their little nook under the eaves of an old parceled-out mansion near the medical school. That left Jerry, Carl, and Shirley to see to their own baggage. Shirley, burdened only with a rucksack and duffel, had been
for walking, but Jerry took one look at the hill and hired a cart.

"Where is this boarding house of yours, anyway?" Jerry asked as they clattered past the half-built Hydrostone houses.

"Not too far," Carl shrugged.

At the margins of the construction zone, an open swath of scorched ground showed dead black against the swirl and clamor of the sprouting city. There was still rubble here, pushed into piles and awaiting removal, grim testimony to the inferno of the recent past. Charred roof beams pointed crazily skyward and here and there, a limbless stub of tree remembered what had once been a garden or a sidewalk. Carl knew that sort of hell-blasted tree too well, and turned away, directing his gaze toward the new-laid road ahead.

Soon, the cart reached a street where the houses were more than two years old. This portion of the city had been spared, but not unscathed, and anyone who could afford to move away had done so, either to the southern section of town, near Redmond, or to the modern construction on the blast site. That left north-central Kingsport somewhat shabby: older buildings, many in bad condition and indifferently managed, and too far from Redmond's campus to attract many student boarders. It was perfect.

The boarding house was the sort of place generally inhabited by people who could afford nothing better. Rotten siding dripped with moisture from the un-guttered roof, glassless windows had been boarded over rather than replaced, and an assortment of dilapidated furniture and general debris cluttered the porch. The landlord would not bestir himself for any maintenance issue short of conflagration, and then only for the insurance money; the housekeeper dashed a broom over the common spaces once every other month whether they needed it or not; the cook drove the boarders to seek sustenance elsewhere with her hardtack and rancid butter. The inhabitants were a solitary and incurious lot who tended to remain in residence as briefly as possible.

"Are you sure this the right address?" Jerry asked in dismay as the cart came to halt.

Carl merely shrugged, then hopped over the side of the wagon, rucksack in hand. Shirley was already heaving Carl's trunk out the back.

"The residence halls aren't bad, you know . . ." Jerry said, frowning at the crumbling front steps.

"I'm saving," Carl answered stoutly.

"For what?"

"A boat."

Jerry seemed honestly perplexed. "What do you want a boat for?"

"To watch birds."

This had seemed the safest story. Carl knew that Jerry assumed that anything to do with wildlife would be utterly divorced from discernible logic. And who really cared? They had grown up shabby and spent the last five years living in varying states of filth. If anything, the brief interlude of their time under the influence of Rosemary Meredith's wholesome housekeeping seemed the anomaly, rather than the other way around.

Jerry shrugged. "Have it your way. Maybe ask Jem and Di to bring a round of anti-tetanus to dinner tomorrow."
Carl accepted the joke with a serviceable laugh, but applied himself to unloading his belongings as quickly as possible.

Jerry brightened, obviously having had another thought. Jerry was always having thoughts. It could become a problem.

"Say, don't you have your service gratuity?" he asked. "Isn't that enough for a boat?"

Too much logic was not good for the situation, but Carl saw no clear route out of this investigation.

"Maybe," he conceded. "But there's tuition and housing and clothes . . ."

"You have the clothing allowance, too," Jerry observed. "That's $35 on top of the $420 for your gratuity. And I know Father would pay your tuition — he told me to save my gratuity toward a house. And what about your pension? Haven't they started paying it out yet? You're in for . . . well it must be, let's see, forty percent of $600 is . . ."

Forty percent. That was how the government reckoned the loss of one eye: forty percent of maximum disability. Why forty percent and not fifty? The pension board could tot up lost teeth and mangled ears and trephine holes that were smaller or larger than three square inches of cut away skull, but there was no accounting for its algorithms. A lost nose was reckoned a sixty percent disability and what sort of job you couldn't do without a nose, Carl was not inclined to speculate. But yes, he had his pension. Sixty-six cents a day, in perpetuity, in place of the eye.

Jerry seemed likely to persist in his financial musings until he could ferret out some kernel of sense, but was interrupted by a welcome salvo from fresh reinforcements.

"Jem got an extra $240 because he's married," Shirley said, heaving a duffel of Carl's clothes over the side of the wagon. "If you had just married Nan in the first place, she'd have gotten separation allowance all this time plus extra gratuity that you could have put toward renting a place."

"Well . . . I . . ." On the defensive now, Jerry did not have so many incisive questions. "I . . . well . . . it's not that simple."

"Isn't it?" Shirley asked, arching a skeptical brow.

"No, it isn't," Jerry said, adopting the condescension so natural to eldest siblings. "You'll understand someday."

Shirley grinned and clapped Jerry roughly on the shoulder with a broad, brown hand. "You're a patient man, Jerry."

"Yes. Well."

Carl hid a bubble of hilarity behind the last of his boxes. Three more years of waiting seemed like lunacy to him, but Jerry always had liked to do things The Right Way.

Back on the solid footing of vast experience, Jerry had found his thinking cap again. " Didn't you get a service gratuity, too, Shirley? Officer and all that? You must be able to afford better than this . . . this . . ." he gestured toward the ramshackle boarding house, unable to find a word for it.

"Ah, but you forget, I'm not a Canadian veteran," Shirley replied. "The Crown doesn't pay anything near what you Canucks are used to. The King handed me a couple of pounds and sent me on my merry way."
"There's a proposal in parliament to top off the gratuities for Canadians who served with other forces," Jerry pointed out. "You'll get the same as the rest of us bachelors."

"I won't hold my breath for the government to give me what you've already got," Shirley said evenly. "In the meantime, a penny saved is a penny earned."

"Well, I hope you're both saving more than a penny living . . . here."

"We are," Carl chirped. "Shouldn't you get going?"

"You don't want help carrying that lot inside?"

"We'll be fine," Shirley assured him.


"Thanks, Nan," Carl grinned.

The driver clucked to his team and Carl waved merrily as Jerry rolled away toward his residence hall.

When he had disappeared from view, Carl felt a gentle nudge at his shoulder.

"I have something for you," Shirley murmured.

"Can it wait until we get upstairs? I don't want to be arrested on my first day here."

Shirley was standing near enough that Carl could feel the soft chuckle rumbling through his chest, escaping as the barest of breaths.

"An actual present," Shirley said, brown eyes twinkling.

Carl beamed. "Let's see it, then."

Shirley undid the flap of his rucksack and drew out a brown paper sack. Heavy, by the way he held it.

Carl held out a hand and snorted at the letters scrawled across the parcel: KIT. Shaking his head, he reached in and drew out something long and solid and cool to the touch, though it raised the temperature of his cheeks a few degrees.

"You got me a deadbolt."

"Should we maybe go upstairs and install it?"

"Well, alright," Carl said, taking a firm hold of his trunk. "But I think I heard a rumor that we are expected at Aster House in less than twenty-four hours."

"Then we'd better get a move on, hadn't we?"

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"Will you let me help you with that now?" Shirley asked after Carl had unknotted his lopsided tie for the third time.
"Fine," Carl huffed, exasperated. How was it that Shirley's tie was always so precisely perfect on the first try? Perhaps it had something to do with the RAF and military discipline, but come to think of it, the same had always been true at Queen's as well.

The echoes of those happy days in Charlottetown vibrated through the stale air of their new accommodations, recalling the boys they had been in the before-time. These digs were not notably similar to the rose-papered room at Mrs. MacDougal's, except that the two of them were there, together, behind a secure lock, with time stretching unbrokenly before them. The floor was pitted and unsettlingly sticky; the little iron potbelly in the corner was grimed with a patina of greasy coal dust many years in the making; the less said about the washroom at the end of the hall, the better. But they had hidden the grubby mattresses beneath crisp Ingleside sheets and retrieved the old tobacco-stripe quilt, and everything else could bide for a time.

Assessing the lamentable situation at Carl's neck, Shirley untied the knot and began from the beginning.

"Who's invited to dinner?" Carl asked as Shirley stood his collar on end.

"The Gagnons, I expect. Other than them, just family, I think. And Sylvia."

"You're not counting her as family?" Carl asked, enjoying the fluttering sensation of fingers busy at his throat.

"Should I?"

"Oh, honestly. Haven't you seen her and Di this whole past week? Bosom friends indeed."

"Really?" Shirley's brows shot up in genuine surprise.

"You just watch them today at dinner and tell me I'm wrong."

"I believe you," Shirley said, bending low over the red silk in his fingers. "I just didn't notice."

"Well, be sure to announce yourself before you turn any sudden corners."

Shirley slid the knot snugly upward and adjusted Carl's collar over it. "Do you think Di knows about us?"

"I think she might suspect. I caught her looking at us a couple of times. We could tell her."

"Best not." Shirley said, stepping back to admire his handiwork. "You know, you could learn to do that yourself with practice."

"Then I wouldn't have the opportunity to thank you for helping me."

You would think that an evening and a night and a morning and part of an afternoon behind the deadbolt would be enough, but it wasn't, not by a long shot. For every kiss that belonged to this moment, there was another missed in the lost years that insisted on proving it had only been delayed.

"We're going to be late," Shirley grinned.

Carl slid a searching finger into the knot of Shirley's tie and tugged it loose. "Yes, I think we are."
Later, they tripped up the path to the little gambrel-roofed cottage, parting the purple sea of eponymous asters. Carl, not quite winded, but pink-faced nonetheless, leaned against the porch rail, composing himself. If he had any hope of interacting with the outside world without collapsing into giggle-drunk fits, he would need to discover some hidden reserve of solemnity, and quickly.

"You alright there?" Shirley asked, poised to knock.

It was no use. Mere eye contact sent Carl spluttering with laughter, hanging his head over the side of the porch as he attempted to get ahold of himself.

"Sorry," he gasped. "I'll be fine. Just go ahead and knock."

Instead, Shirley retreated from the door to loom just a hair's breadth too close for propriety, inclining his head to murmur, "You're sure?"

So close, he was overwhelming. It didn't matter that Carl had spent the last hour immersed in him, and many hours before that besides, nor that he would submerge again as soon as they had paid satisfactory tribute to the pleasantries of civilization. Carl looked up over the neatly knotted tie to see subtle amusement ripple across Shirley's face and pool in the deep brown eyes. At a distance of inches, it took conscious effort for Carl to overcome the pull of his gravity, postponing the moment when he could bury his face once more in the scent of fresh bread baked into Shirley's very skin.

"How long do we have to stay?"

"You need food," Shirley smirked. "Probably sleep at some point as well."

"That may be so, but I don't see what company has to do with it."

Shirley clucked his tongue in a decidedly Susanish admonition. "I thought you liked the family."

"Oh, they aren't going anywhere."

They said no more then, and if anyone at Aster House noticed that Carl was was rather quick to laugh, or that his grin was particularly bright, well, who among them wasn't glowing with the thrill of this next great adventure?

"You're happy," Una said, laying her hand lightly on Carl's arm as they set out the well-loved Ladies of Llangollen china that Sylvia had bought second-hand in the days of letters and basketball.

Carl set down the last of the blue Staffordshire, face alight as he looked past Una, through the open doors of the dining room and toward the hearth. Jerry, sitting cross-legged on the braided rug, was supposed to be practicing his French by teaching young Claude to play draughts, but his attention insisted on wandering toward the sofa, where Nan and Marie were cooing over baby Annette and enumerating her infinite sweetances. In the corner, Jem and Emile occupied the armchairs, punctuating their do-you-remembers with shouts of laughter that did not seem to disturb Faith as she dozed against Jem's knee. Di and Sylvia had dragooned Shirley into carrying platters from the kitchen, their own animated chatter adding a constant patter to the chorus. Stepping toward the dining room with his burden of roast chicken, Shirley caught Carl's eye and held it.

"Yes," Carl said. "We are."
The First Redmond Year Opens

September-October 1919

Shirley Blythe folded himself into the last seat in the back row of the lecture hall, long legs bumping the underside of the tablet arm. He felt secure here, where he could survey the room from behind and above without being observed himself. No one would take any notice of him as long as he kept close to the wall and applied himself to his note-taking.

Shirley flipped open the textbook — Bonola's *Non-Euclidean Geometry* — and admired the diagrams of curves and waves. One in particular caught his eye: the Leaf of Möbius. A simple, familiar rectangle, if given just half a twist and adhered to itself, became unorientable. Outside became inside and inside outside. *Thus on Möbius' Leaf the distinction between the two faces becomes impossible.* Shirley tore a strip of paper from his notebook and found that it was so.

Other students filed into the hall, settling into the red velveteen seats, finding pencils, whispering among themselves. Fresh-scrubbed and expectant, they filled the tiered classroom with their anticipation. Shirley knew no one and no one knew him, which suited him fine.

At precisely two o'clock, the professor strode in through the side door and took his place at the podium. He was a prosperous-looking man, red-faced with an old-fashioned walrus mustache and an expansive middle that strained the capacity of his tweed waistcoat.

"I am Professor Lloyd," he announced, "and this is the introductory course in Advanced Geometry. We have a new world to build and need engineers to build it. If you manage to pass this course, you will be well on your way to success in the profession."

Prof. Lloyd clapped his hands to punctuate this address, but did not seem to pause for breath. His words ran together in an undifferentiated ribbon like the dots and dashes of a telegraph receiver, threatening to devolve into senseless noise if the listener did not keep up.

"I will now call the names of those enrolled in the course; if you do not hear your name, be sure to visit the registrar's office immediately following class. Ainsley, Robert!"

There was a beat of silence as the students realized that Prof. Lloyd had shifted from monologue to something more participatory.

"Ainsley!"

"Uh . . . present?"

Prof. Lloyd merely grunted.

"Barnes, Mildred!"

"Present."

"Baston, Maurice!"

"Present."
"Blythe, Shirley!"

"Present."

Professor Lloyd stopped. He looked over the top of his horn-rimmed glasses, pausing for the first time since entering the room. "Shirley Blythe?"

"Umm . . . yes, sir," Shirley replied, sitting straighter in his seat.

"Shirley Blythe of the RAF?"

Every face in the hall was turned toward Shirley now, goggling up at the back corner. Shirley gulped. "Not presently, sir."

Any discomfort on Shirley's part was utterly lost on Professor Lloyd, who puffed his chest enough to endanger his buttons. "Well, now. Shirley Blythe of the RAF in my course!" he exclaimed. "I've read all about you in the papers, son. One of our most decorated flying aces. Must have had forty kills by the end! And a Distinguished Flying Cross to boot, isn't that right? Shirley Blythe! Shall I call you Flight Commander?"

"Just Blythe, sir," Shirley mumbled.

"Just so. Well, thank you for your service, Mr. Blythe."

"Umm . . . thank you, sir."

"Fancy that!" Professor Lloyd chortled into his podium. "Shirley Blythe! I'll be! Oh, I must tell Jeffries about this. Now, where was I. Oh, yes. Cathcart, Elizabeth!"

***

An hour later, Shirley burst through the doors of the engineering college and out into the September sunshine. A tide of students swept him onto the quad, where he spotted Carl standing under a nearby elm, studying something creeping along its trunk.

"Look at this," Carl said by way of greeting. "It's a brown bark carpet moth. Absolutely seamless camouflage."

"Lucky bastard," Shirley muttered.

Carl turned and looked at Shirley for the first time. "You alright? How was the first lecture?"

"The professor's an aviation enthusiast."

Carl grimaced. "Did he say something?"

Shirley did not answer right away. Instead, he looked around at the other students loitering in the slanting afternoon sunshine of approaching autumn. Most were gathered in groups of two or three, chatting merrily with friends old and new, but it could not be denied that more than a few glances drifted Shirley-ward.

"They're staring at me."

Carl followed his gaze. "Mostly the girls, I'd say," he shrugged. "And I doubt they needed some professor's help to notice you."
"He did go on a bit," Shirley grumbled miserably. "Exaggerated, too. I never had forty victories. And that goddamn DFC . . ."

"I don't think those girls care all that much about your war record."

"Don't they?"

Carl nodded toward a trio of blossom-bright co-eds walking from the opposite direction, familiar looks of interest on their pretty faces.

"Were those three in your lecture?"

Shirley looked, scowling.

"I don't think so."

"See? Noticed you all on their own, haven't they?"

Shirley sighed. "Can we get out of here? Please?"

Carl did not move. A slow smile spread across his face as he watched the approaching trio whisper to one another.

"I've never seen a school of piranhas in the wild before. Fascinating!"

"I'm leaving."

"How long do you think it would take them to strip you to the bone?"

"Oh, stop enjoying yourself so much."

Carl grinned and wiggled his fingertips cheerily at the giggling co-eds as they passed.

Shirley caught his arm and forced it down to his side. "You'll pay for that."

"In that case, I'll do it again," Carl said, blinking with every pretense of innocence.

It was awfully difficult not to kiss him then, but Shirley was not heir and master of the Blythe self-control for nothing.

"I just wish I had a less distinctive name," he said, releasing Carl's arm before he did anything foolish. "If I were John Blythe, no would remember my name from the papers. And even if they did, they wouldn't know for sure it was me. John Blythe. Perfectly sensible name."

Carl shrugged. "So change it."

"Change it?"


Shirley scoffed. "You can't just change your name."

"Can't you?"

"No."

Carl cocked his head theatrically. "What's my name?"
"What?" Shirley squinted. He was utterly at sea for a long moment before realization dawned and he smiled for the first time that afternoon. "Oh. Do you mean Thomas?"

"I think I'm insulted that you have to think so hard to remember my name," Carl replied, attempting to affect offense and landing somewhere just short of hilarity.

"Sorry," Shirley chuckled in spite of himself, shoulders relaxing. "I just never think of you as Thomas."

"But I am. See? You can go by any name you like."

Shirley shook his head. "Nah. That's just the point, isn't it? I don't think I could get used to calling you Thomas even if I tried. And you could never call me John."

"I'll call you whatever you like," Carl said with an impish smirk that made Shirley shove his hands deep into his pockets for safekeeping.

"You don't have a three o'clock class, do you?" he asked lightly.

Carl grinned. "No. I'm done for the day."

"Good. Me, too."

"Then I suppose we should get started on our studying, shouldn't we?"

"Maybe somewhere with fewer people around?"

"Like the library?"

Shirley's smile tended toward laughter. "No, not the library."

"Like . . . Aster House?"

"No, not Aster House either."

"Home then?"

"Home."

***

A few weeks later, a crisp afternoon found Shirley lounging under a copper-gold elm on the quad across from the biology department. Non-Euclidean Geometry lay open on his knee, russet cover concordant with the wooly sweaters and tweed jackets of a picturesque collegiate autumn.

It had been a long week and Shirley was eager to get home and let his guard down for a while — no pressure to perform, nor evade, nor speak any more than he wished. That thrice-damned Lloyd called on him during every single lecture, no matter how he tried to hide. Carl had suggested that he start giving incorrect answers on purpose, but Shirley doubted it would help. The man would probably just invite him in for extra tutoring.

Carl would be finishing his lab soon and they would walk home together. Maybe they'd go downtown for supper at one of the hotels, or perhaps they'd just stay in and worry about food tomorrow. The more geometry Shirley could absorb now, the less he'd have to work this weekend, leaving him free to pursue more pleasant diversions.
Thus absorbed, Shirley was surprised when someone leaned against the tree beside him, so close he could feel a brush of shoulder against his own. Not Carl, that much was unmistakable — the stranger was too large and moved with casual abandon, nothing like Carl's careful tread. Besides, he had not stopped to greet the squirrels.

Shirley looked up from his book and beheld a man he had seen several times before, though they had never spoken, let alone made an acquaintance so familiar that he should be at liberty to take a seat at Shirley's side, near enough that the sandalwood scent of his cologne overtook the more familiar odors of autumn. He was a tall, black-haired man with light brown eyes turned golden by the raking afternoon sun. His hair was pomaded into artfully careless waves over his forehead and his finely tailored suit may as well have been cut from bank statements. In his hands, he spun a boater hat of light-colored straw, bearing a ribbon of Redmond white-and-scarlet shot through with gold.

"Why, hello there!" the man said with a vulpine smile. "I saw you sitting here all alone and that will never do. I'm Wilkie. Wilkie Marshall."

Shirley was wary, but he had manners, even if Wilkie Marshall didn't, so he shook the hand that was offered to him. "I'm Shirley Blythe."

"I know who you are," Wilkie drawled. "You're a freshman, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Wilkie reclined against the tree, at an elaborate and affected ease. "Excellent. A fine time in any young man's life, freshman year. Lots of opportunities. Tell me, do you study any Greek?"

It was an odd enough question that Shirley squinted at him, discovering a glimmer of wry challenge in the flashing eyes.

"Greek?"

"Sure. Love those Greeks. Got up to all sorts of fun, didn't they?"

Shirley blinked. *He couldn't possibly be asking . . .*

In confirmation, Wilkie nudged Shirley's knee with his own and grinned, letting the touch linger. Shirley swallowed. Quite apart from anything else, putting such a bold question to a stranger was more than a little reckless.

Across the quad, Carl emerged from the biology building with a rosy, blonde-curled girl at his side. Shirley watched as they laughed over some shared joke in parting. Carl waved a merry goodbye, then paused beneath an oak to offer some peanuts to the inhabitants.

They had been careful — *very careful* — but perhaps it was impossible to hide from people who knew what to look for.

"Thanks," Shirley said, jerking his leg away from Wilkie's, "but I'm not interested." He flicked another glance at Carl. The direction of Shirley's attention was not lost on his new acquaintance, who turned an expert eye to appraise Carl up and down.

"I thought as much," Wilkie said, grin redoubled. "I've seen you two around and I'm almost never wrong. Well, listen, if you and Patroclus over there are looking for somewhere to let your hair down, a few of us are having a little party tomorrow evening. Friends only." He held out a thick,
cream-colored calling card with an address penciled on the back.

Shirley stared at it a moment. He had a notion that friends like Wilkie Marshall were liable to be more trouble than he cared to court. But he was intrigued nevertheless.

* A few of us. Friends only. *

"Shouldn't that be *philoi*?" Shirley asked, one brown brow raised.

Wilkie laughed, an unexpectedly sweet sound. "Ooo, and clever, too. Better and better."

Wondering whether he were as crazy as his new friend, Shirley stretched out a hand and accepted the card.

"Tomorrow night at nine. Just tell the man at the door you're a *philos* of mine." Wilkie slapped Shirley jovially on the thigh as he stood, making him jump. "See you there, Achilles."

With that, he glided away, giving Shirley no opportunity to reply.

Carl arrived in the next heartbeat, staring curiously after the dark-haired stranger sauntering across the quad, boater perched at a jaunty angle.

"What was that all about?"

Shirley flicked the invitation through his fingers, back and forth, considering. Perhaps he ought to throw it away.

"I'm not entirely sure," he mused. "But I guess we'll find out tomorrow night."
"I see your dollar . . . and raise you three." Wilkie Marshall plinked his chips ostentatiously onto the growing pile from an unnecessary height, letting each slide down the side of the small fortune and onto the makeshift table.

The room smelled of sawdust. It was so new it was still a construction site, having walls and a roof, but no way of telling whether it might someday become a restaurant or a workshop or a dry goods store. The windows were glassless blanks of plywood, the concrete under-floor was scuffed and scratched, and a length of unconnected gas tubing hung from what would someday be a light fixture. Shirley suspected that Wilkie had slipped the foreman a generous bribe to see that the not-completely-finished building stood vacant tonight. Susan would have said he had gumption, though Shirley hoped she would never have the chance.

Tonight, the unfinished room was imperfectly lit with kerosene lanterns and crowded with a score or more of Wilkie's philoi. Most stood chatting in small groups, drinks held casually or faux-casually as they caught up with old friends and sized up new prospects. Others had retreated in pairs to lanternless corners or gravitated toward the jury-rigged bar under the shuttered windows. The poker table consisted of a few thick boards balanced across a pair of sawhorses with crates for chairs. The chips were real enough, though — thick, heavy clay that nestled in the grooves of the mahogany box Wilkie had produced from his leather messenger bag. The stakes were real, too.

"Too rich for my blood," declared a blond man whom Wilkie had introduced dismissively as "the Swede." He folded his hand and placed the cards beside the dwindling remains of his own stake. The others had bowed out long ago, folding or busting and going off into the party to pursue other sorts of fun, leaving only these three. It was Wilkie's deal and his game.

"Raise you another three," said Shirley, tossing a few of the chips he had accumulated over the course of the night.

"Five."

"Ten."

"Oh, come now," Wilkie smirked. "You can't possibly be serious. If you could only see what I've got in the pocket, you'd run screaming for the hills."

Shirley raised an eloquent brow, surveying Wilkie with a cool look that would have served as ample warning to a man who believed in such things.

"Fine, fine. Have it your way, Blythe. Call. Let's see yours."

Shirley laid down his cards one at a time. Six of clubs. Six of hearts. Jack of diamonds, jack of spades and . . .

"Full house!" whistled the Swede. "Jacks over sixes."

"Let's see yours, Wilkie," Shirley said, brown eyes a-twinkle.

Wilkie tapped his hand smartly on the table, squaring the edges of the cards and dropping them
"Beginner's luck," he scoffed.

That succeeded in drawing a small smile from Shirley, though hardly the sort of smile Wilkie had been angling for all night. It was not often that men treated Wilkie Marshall's attention as something to be merely tolerated, and he had become increasingly restive as the evening wore on.

"I have a feeling my luck will hold," Shirley said, collecting his winnings.

"Another hand, then."

Shirley looked up over Wilkie's shoulder, through the dim room and the convivial crowd, toward the spot where Carl was cheerfully losing yet another round of darts to Harold Noyes and Anthony Marckworth. He seemed in no way displeased by this fact, groaning theatrically as each of Anthony's well-aimed missiles drove another nail into his coffin and grinning gleefully whenever he managed to hit the board himself. By now, Carl was at least four gin rickeys deep and down to his drawers, the red tie knotted loosely around his neck, and a single sock. He couldn't afford to lose many more rounds.

"Some other time, maybe."

The Swede counted Shirley's chips and cashed him out, handing over a stack of bills that would easily cover a year's room and board for him and Carl both. Shirley nodded his acknowledgments and departed from the table, leaving a pensive Wilkie to watch him go.

At the dartboard, Carl greeted Shirley, beaming. "I have no depth perception!" he announced cheerily, the apples of his cheeks ripe and glowing.

"Nor liver capacity, apparently," Shirley said fondly.

"Nope! Wanna play?"

"I think perhaps I'd better get you home."

"Oh, psssshhhh," Carl said, attempting to swat Shirley's arm and missing.

Shirley nodded his thanks as he accepted Carl's crumpled shirt from a grinning Harold, who had preferred to give up his own trousers before relinquishing his mink stole.

"Isn't one eye supposed to be good for darts?" Shirley asked, coaxing Carl's arms into the sleeves, not bothering to search for the undershirt that must be around here somewhere.

"Is it? Well then, perhaps I'm very good!"

"I'd say not."

"Oh, you don't know the first thing about it!" Carl declared. "It's very simple, really. You see, there's the red bit in the middle and round the sides you have those rectangle-thingies . . ."

Shirley bit the inside of his lip to keep from interrupting this recitation with a kiss. He worked the buttons one by one as Carl nattered on knowledgeably about the pointy bits and the mysteries of scoring. Blue eye bright as a chickadee, and just as voluble, curious, friendly. Shirley wanted to pour a handful of sunflower seeds into his own palm and entice Carl to perch on his fingertips.

". . . and that's why you must absolutely keep your tie until the very last," Carl finished expertly.
"I did wonder about that," Shirley conceded.

"You don't like it?" Carl asked, holding the end of his tie up to his nose and examining it minutely.

"I didn't say that."

Carl looked up, blinking in what might have passed for flirtation had it not been so adorably sleepy. "Do you like it, then?"

"Let's get you home," Shirley murmured, hurrying to fix the last of Carl's buttons.

"Yes, please."

"You could use some sleep."

"Oh, bother sleep."

"Probably several glasses of water."

"You know," Carl said solemnly, "when a person is in-tox-i-ca-ted, you must always stay with them the whole night and never leave, not even for a minute."

"Is that so?"

"It is. Very so."

Shirley chuckled. "Well, perhaps I'll call Una over to nurse you back to health, then."

"Una!" Carl spluttered. "You would expose a lady to such a dis-disreputable sight? Have you no chivalry, sir?"

"Ah, well," Shirley said, settling the tie back under Carl's collar. "I suppose I will have to fall on that sword myself."

"Yes, please." Carl rose up on his toes suddenly, planting a soft, imprecise kiss that made Shirley's knees buckle.

"Enjoying the party, Meredith?" a wry voice asked from the periphery of Shirley's vision.

Carl broke the kiss and straightened his back, attempting to muster his dignity, somewhat hindered by his continued lack of trousers and the single orphan sock.

"Yes. Very much. Thank you for inviting us, Wilkie."

"My pleasure. You'll have to come again. Blythe owes me another round of poker." Wilkie smiled silkily at Shirley, who could not protest. "You know, before the war, we used to have music at these little shindigs. Perhaps next time I can arrange for some? And dancing?"

Whatever semblance of dignity Carl had gathered dissolved into undisguised delight. "Ooooo, dancing! Yes, let's!"

"Excellent," Wilkie smirked. Turning to take his leave, he nodded to Shirley over his shoulder. "Next time."

"Next time," Shirley agreed.
"That will be fun, won't it?" Carl hiccuped.

"Let's get you home, Kit."

"Yesss."

With a wave to Harold and Anthony, Carl took a purposeful step toward the door.

Shirley called him back. "Haven't you forgotten something?"

"No. Have I?"

Shirley held up a forlorn pair of trousers.

"Oh, you can keep those. I'm sure I won't be needing them."

"To walk home?"

"You think I need more clothes?"

Shirley couldn't help laughing at the old joke. He had felt bold enough the first time he had said it, that very first night at Queen's, but it had mellowed since, becoming a staple of the peculiar patois that develops between any couple.

"In general, no," he smiled. "For the next fifteen minutes, yes."

"You have no sense of adventure," Carl sniffed.

***

Carl chattered all the way home through the moon-bright streets of new-built Kingsport. Luckily, few people were abroad when late turned to early, and many of them were drunk as well. Shirley shushed Carl several times, to no effect, and resolved that he must just get him back to the boarding house as quickly as possible. Progress was interrupted only once, when Carl slipped a hand into Shirley's and traced an arc over the back of his thumb, demolishing the Blythe self-control for one dizzy moment that propelled them both into the shelter of a shadowed alley for the breathless pleasure of a stolen kiss.

Past the front door of the boarding house, Carl stumbled up the narrow, greasy staircases, Shirley following along behind to make sure he didn't tumble to a broken neck. On the third floor, they reached their room: home, or as near as they could make it. The ceiling leaked, of course, and the walls bowed rather alarmingly, but they had done what they could do to make it comfortable. Shirley had spent much of the first week caulking and patching the drafty windows while Carl scoured the shabby table that served as a shared desk. The narrow beds were made up with Susan-approved linens. The room had no modern conveniences, not even piped gas, let alone electric lights, but the kerosene lamps were clean, filled, and neatly trimmed. A second-hand teakettle graced the scrubbed stove in the corner, and one of Aster House's superfluous braided rugs warmed the floor. True, there were still mice, but these tended to find their way into Carl's pockets so he could release them in the park.

Shirley lit one of the lamps and settled Carl onto his bed, helping him ease out of shoes and trousers and shirt.

"You just stay here," Shirley ordered.
"Stay with me," Carl pleaded. "It's a rule."

"I'll be right back," Shirley said, brandishing the pitcher from the washbasin. "I'm going to get some water."

"Wait! You forgot something."

"What?"

"Come here. Closer."

When Shirley obeyed, Carl caught him by his own unrumpled tie and pulled him in to deliver the second half of the kiss that Wilkie had so rudely interrupted not a quarter-hour ago. His lips were warm and pliable, and he giggled at the success of his own joke.

"I'll be back in a minute," Shirley promised, rising. "But you need some water."

"Shirley?" Carl called faintly from the depths of the pillows. "I'll be right here."

"I know."

When Shirley returned, the pitcher cool and sloshing in his hands, Carl was sound asleep, snoring with the vigor of the well and truly zozzled. As quietly as he could, Shirley pushed his own bed up against Carl's and secured the frames, head and foot, with the belts they had used ever since Shirley had woken one night with a thud, having fallen through the fissure to Carl's unstoppered amusement.

Satisfied that the bedframes would hold, Shirley slipped out of his own clothes, snuffed the lamp, and slid beneath the old tobacco-stripe quilt. He propped himself against the rickety headboard and gathered Carl to rest in the hollow between shoulder and chest. Carl really shouldn't lie flat, at least not for a few hours, and he did need to be watched. If it was too dark to count every hair on his head or every errant freckle on his sun-kissed cheeks, it was not too dark to number every warm, swelling breath, regular as the lapping of waves on the sand shore.
To Make a Home

October 1919

The textbook was called *To Make a Home: Basic Principles of Household Science* by Mrs. C.B. Pemberton. It was a very impressive book. In addition to being oversize, it had a crisp black cover and multiple appendices filled with graphs, tables, and diagrams. It did not fit on any shelf at Aster House, being better suited to the cavernous Household Science laboratory where rows of metal-topped tables stared down a phalanx of gleaming ranges that had never known a kitchen. Una was forced to consult *To Make a Home* when she was writing essays or practicing recipes, but when it was not in use, she kept it tucked safely under her desk.

Una did not precisely dislike her Household Science course, but it fit badly, like Sunday shoes stretched to one more winter. She had known this immediately upon reading the first sentence of the first chapter of *To Make a Home*. Without preamble, it explained that, "The value of a fuel is estimated by determining the amount of moisture, of volatile matter, and of fixed carbon and sulphur it contains."* What followed in the hundreds of close-printed pages was a bewildering compilation of facts and warnings under headings like "Production of Soluble Carbohydrates in Bread Making," "Salubrious Furnishings," and "Meat: Its Uses and Abuses."

Over the past month, Una had been instructed in the preparation of meals that were not only pleasing to the eye and to the palate, but which provided a scientifically balanced ratio of proteins, carbohydrates, and fats. Her teacher, Mrs. Langevin, had drilled the class in the most modern doctrines of hygienic sanitation and optimal caloric density. Whether Una had actually learned any practical skills that she had not already mastered under Rosemary Meredith's gentle tutelage was doubtful, but her vocabulary for describing all manner of cookery and cleaning-craft was certainly becoming more formidable.

Despite this, Una felt that coming to Kingsport had been good for her education. Not the Household Science course, perhaps, but she did not spend all her time under the too-bright lights of Mrs. Langevin's classroom. It was Aster House and its people that were worth studying. Scientific formulas were well and good, but they could not account for the thousand tiny acts of comfort and connection that made the place a home. Una studied that lesson on Friday evenings, when Faith visited so that Una could help her sew tiny tucks into gossamer gowns while Jem and Di wrangled the week's histology notes into order. She saw it when Sylvia sighed in relief to find tea and sandwiches waiting for her after a long shift at the hospital, or when Jerry swept through the front door without knocking, bursting with some fresh knowledge that simply must be shared over supper. She had even learned to recognize it when Nan issued unnecessarily detailed marching orders to the week's marketing party in pursuit of the Platonic ideal of Sunday Dinner.

At the moment, Una was relieved that class was over for the week, Mrs. Langevin having dismissed them with strict orders to return on Monday having read the chapter on the "Care and Cleaning of Lighting Fixtures: Kerosene, Gas, Electric." *To Make a Home* might lie heavy and inert in Una's arms, but the blustery afternoon was crisp and golden and she was on her way home to Aster House, to a cozy tea that would make the studying bearable.

Cutting across Redmond's windswept quad for a shortcut, Una heard someone call her name. She ducked the brim of her hat against a slanting sunbeam to find out the source: Carl, radiant as he had been all fall, though who was this with him?

"Una! Had a good week?" Carl asked, bounding along the path to her side. Then, nodding at the
girl who had kept pace with him, he said, "This is Nellie Fletcher."

As slight as Una herself, but sturdier in her movements, Nellie had wide blue eyes and an abundance of honey-blonde curls that bounced as she shook Una's tentative hand.

"Pleasure to meet you," she said, dimpling. "You're the sister taking the Household Science course, aren't you?"

Una nodded politely, blinking an inquiry at Carl.

"Oh! Nellie's my lab partner," he explained. "I was just walking her home. Can we walk you, as well?"

Una demurred, insisting that no, really, that was alright and she was nearly home anyway and no need to take the trouble.

"Nonsense," Carl said, plucking *To Make a Home* from her hands and adding it to the two biology textbooks he already carried. "It's no trouble at all. Nellie's just around the corner from Aster House."

"In that case," Una relented, "you must both stop in for tea."

***

The blue-black Ladies of Llangollen rode their porcelain mounts down the pastoral curve of a Welsh hillside, tailcoats and top hats crisp against the floral border of Aster House's dessert plates. Una cut a slice of Sylvia's cherry nutcake and laid it over their merry jaunt.

"What a pretty house you have!" Nellie exclaimed, accepting the nutcake and tea with enthusiasm. "Are you the one making all that lovely lace?"

Una followed Nellie's gaze to the little square table that held Nan's bobbins, frozen in the midst of outlining a large and intricate chrysanthemum.

"No. That will be Nan. My sister-in-law. She has a talent for it."

"It's beautiful," Nellie agreed, then frowned. "Sister-in-law? I didn't realize you had a married brother."

"No," Carl said, sipping his own tea. "We have two brothers: Jerry is a senior here and Bruce is only eleven. But our sister, Faith, is married to Jem Blythe, who is Jerry's best friend and Nan's brother, and Nan is engaged to Jerry."

Nellie laughed outright. "You may need to parse that for me."


His recapitulation of the family bramble was interrupted by the door, which banged open without ceremony to admit a windblown and pink-cheeked Di. She tossed her satchel onto the stairs and shed her forest-green cardigan, shaking out the short, red curls she freed from her cloche.

"A tea party!" she said, sinking into the sofa with a sigh. "Excellent idea. Pour me a cup, will you, Una? If I never see another ulcerated liver in my life . . ."

Una cleared her throat as she passed a brimming teacup.
"Oh, sorry," Di said in Nellie's direction. "You get rather used to the medical talk around here, I'm afraid."

"I don't mind," said Nellie brightly. "I'm Nellie Fletcher."


Di perked up. "Biology? Wonderful! Is old Whiskers Wickman putting you through your paces? I'm Di Blythe, by the way. I'm a second-year at the medical school."

"Do you like it?" Nellie asked. "Medical school, I mean."

"It's wonderful. Well, I could do without the ulcerated livers. And why they always seem to schedule cadaver dissections just before mealtimes . . ."

Una coughed again, but Nellie laughed.

"That's alright. You won't find me squeamish. When I was a little girl, I used to go out hunting owl pellets just so that I could reassemble the tiny skeletons in my room. Our housekeeper refused to clean there; she called it The Catacombs."

Carl grinned. "Jerry would never share a bed with me. Too many snakes and toads and beetles crawling out of my pockets unexpectedly."

Di cast an interested eye over Nellie, tending toward approval. "Do you have medical aspirations then, Nellie?"

"Oh, no," Nellie smiled. "I'm a naturalist."

"And a cracking good artist," Carl added. "You should just see the watercolors she did for our botany project. I want to frame them instead of turning them in."

Nellie glowed pink under this praise, fair lashes lowered in a demure pose that did not conceal her justified pride in her talents.

"You must let us see some of your work sometime," Una said.

Further conversation was again interrupted by the door crashing open, assisted by the wind. A swirling flurry of autumn leaves accompanied Jerry into the front hall.

"You're early," Di called to him.

Jerry stepped into the sitting room, removing his hat, but not his coat. "Am I? Sorry. Nan's not home yet?"

"No," Di said. "She was going to stop at the greengrocer on Park Street on the way home. You might be able to catch her there."

Jerry's hat was back on his head before Di had finished speaking. "I'll do that! Oh, hello, Carl. Una. Miss."

When he had swept out again, leaving even more leaves in his wake, Una turned back to Nellie. "That was Jerry. Our brother."

"The one engaged to Nan?"
"That's right," Carl answered. "And Di here is Nan's twin sister."

Nellie giggled. "Perhaps I should fetch my notebook to sketch all this out."

"No, it's very simple," Carl said. "There are the Merediths and the Blythes. Jem Blythe is married to my sister Faith. Nan Blythe is going to marry my brother Jerry. Una lives here at Aster House with Nan and Di and their friend Sylvia . . ."

"And Carl lives with Shirley," Di finished for him.

"Shirley Blythe is Di's brother," Una clarified, seeing Nellie's startlement. "It was their mother's maiden name."

"Oh, that reminds me," Di said, rising from the sofa. "Carl, Susan's sent another care package for Shirley. Will you bring it to him? She'll never get over that first one being stolen from your boarding house. She mentions it in every letter."

"Who's Susan?" Nellie asked, once again enchanted with the game.

"The Blythes' housekeeper," Una explained. "Shirley has been her special favorite ever since he was a baby."

"You'd do well to take better care of her little boy, Carl," Di said, returning from the hall, "or she's liable to show up on your doorstep and give you what for."

Carl nodded meekly, accepting the paper-wrapped parcel that Di had extricated from the hall table. A blotchy flush had overtaken his cheeks and Una was dismayed to note Di peering at him with some interest.

Nellie laughed prettily. "You Merediths and Blythes are hopelessly entangled, aren't you?"

"Yes," Di answered slowly, her eyes gone a soft and starry gray. "Beyond all reckoning, I'd say."

***

When Carl and Nellie had taken their leave, with Nellie promising to return soon because they were practically neighbors after all and of course she'd love to paint the asters while they were still in bloom, Una sought sanctuary in the kitchen. Di had offered to help wash up, but Una ducked and apologized, piling the Ladies of Llangollen higgledy-piggledy into the dishpan in a manner sure to give Mrs. Langevin palpitations.

When Di had left her to her suds, Una allowed herself a sigh. She did not dislike Nellie Fletcher. Quite the opposite. She was afraid she had not seen the last of her.

The front door clattered — really they must do something about those hinges — and impassioned voices in the hall announced the return of Jerry and Nan.

Una no longer found their sparring as upsetting as she had the first time she had heard them really lay into one another. It had been a few weeks after Jerry's homecoming in January and Una, carrying fresh towels upstairs to the manse linen closet, had been alarmed by the sound of pitched battle coming from the sitting room.

". . . certainly you don't mean to say . . ."

". . . you would take that view of the matter . . ."
Una had shrunk back, not wanting to eavesdrop, but wondering how many more broken hearts she could juggle.

"The whole system of coverture was entirely at odds with individual liberties!" Nan fumed, her voice rising with every word.

"But contemporaries didn't see it that way!" Jerry shot back, exasperated. "The Enlightenment thinkers only ever intended individual liberties to be enjoyed by men!"

"That is an admirably succinct summary of *my point!*"

Oh, well that was alright, then. Una could not fathom the appeal of re-litigating every stale controversy of the past millennium, but when Rosemary had called them all to tea an hour later, both Nan and Jerry were glowing, and not with rage. They spent the meal with their hands linked under the table, hopelessly indifferent to anyone but one another.

Now Nan swept into the kitchen through the door Jerry held for her, letting neither his gallantry nor the overstuffed basket of vegetables on her arm deter her from her argument.

"...may be true, but Bell's for giving women the vote. I can't see how any other issue matters. It's disgraceful that the Island doesn't let women vote in provincial elections when nearly every other province does."

She set her basket on the chopping block and punctuated her sentences by slapping kale and turnips onto the knife-scarred surface.

"But surely you can see that Arsenault was good for the Island," Jerry protested. "He was for modernizing — even lifted some of the auto restrictions..."

"I'd rather have the vote than roads clogged with automobiles! Nasty, noisy things..."

Una did not interrupt them. She merely rinsed her hands and stepped between them as if she only meant to retrieve the kale.

"Can I help?" Jerry asked brightly.

Una sent him to retrieve the soup pot, marveling at the way he hummed on his way to the pantry and at the shining satisfaction on Nan's face as she got down to the business of dicing turnips. When he returned, Jerry built up the fire in the stove, wondering for the dozenth time whether they ought to write the property manager about installing a modern gas range. The whole city ran on gas nowadays, not just the rebuilt sections; even the Redmond residence halls had gas lines in the rooms for lighting.

"But who would come over to split kindling for us if we had a gas range?" Nan asked, conveniently eliding the fact that any masculine presence at Aster House was a very recent development and they hadn't frozen yet, not even when blasts and blizzards had sent winter howling in through the very walls.

Jerry shrugged. "No one. That's the point."

"Exactly," Nan agreed.

When turnips and leeks and stew meat had begun to simmer and Nan had moved on to mixing up biscuits, Jerry munched the end of a carrot and asked, "Who was the little blonde with you at tea, Una? A friend from class?"
Una stirred the stew unnecessarily, wondering whether they oughtn't add a handful of barley to thicken it.

"Not from my class, no," she answered eventually. "She's Carl's lab partner. Nellie Fletcher."

Jerry leaned back against the cabinets, arms crossed across his swelling chest. "Carl's? And meeting the family already?"

"No," Una said, the warmth of the stove nothing to her blazing face. "Nothing like that. I met them on my way home and invited them in to tea."

"Is she pretty?" Nan asked, rolling her dough.

"Yes," Jerry said. "She is. And a biology student?"

"I think they are only friends," Una said miserably.

Nan sank the biscuit-cutter into the dough, flicking her wrist, her neat hands flitting hither and thither as the baking sheet filled with orderly rows of precise circles. "Well, we'll see if we can't do something about that," she said.

"Matchmaking now, are you?" Jerry asked, grinning.

"It's hardly matchmaking if they've already found one another," Nan said, sliding the biscuits into the oven and dusting her hands. "Besides, my father always says it's only happy women who matchmake."

Jerry caught her by the apron and reeled her in, risking flour smears for the kiss she planted on his smiling lips. "Then match away, love."

***

When Di and Sylvia had cleared the table and Nan and Jerry had settled in for an evening of essay-grading and note-taking, Una ascended the stairs to the blue-and-white bedroom that had once been Faith's. It was a simple room, made up prettily with muslin curtains and a cathedral window quilt Una had pieced in shades of cornflower and violet. A deep window seat looked out over Aster House's front yard where the fading farewell-summers were nodding their adieus to the silver moon.

Una meant to light the lamp and pull To Make a Home from its exile beneath the desk, but she did not. Instead, her eye drifted inexorably toward the the crimson volume on the bookshelf, a splash of shocking red against the cooler wall. She did not take it down every night, not anymore. But grief was greedy this evening, and would not be denied.

Pale in the chilly glow of the autumn moon, Una curled herself into the window seat and let The Faerie Queene fall open to the woodcut she knew so well. A glade. A lounging lady whose long white dress rippled like a river across the daisy-strewn grass. The Red-Crosse Knight, kneeling in his armor. She kept her letter under their unwavering gaze, hoping they would guard it from the ravages of time.

The paper was already fragile with much reading, had probably been fragile since the moment it had been written more than three years ago.

*We're going over the top tomorrow, Rilla-my-Rilla.*
It wasn't even addressed to her. Still, Una traced the script with a fingertip, placing her hand over the page where Walter's had once been.

*I'm not afraid*, he had written. *I've helped to make Canada safe for the poets of the future — for the workers of the future — ay, and the dreamers, too. He had written of the golden harvest they would reap, not in a year or two, as some foolishly think, but a generation later, when the seed sown now shall have had time to germinate and grow.*

Then more of the happiness he foretold for Rilla, the promise and fulfillment of the coming years:

*I've a premonition about you, Rilla, as well as about myself. I think Ken will go back to you — and that there are long years of happiness for you by-and-by. And you will tell your children of the Idea we fought and died for — teach them that it must be lived for as well as died for, else the price paid for it will have been given for naught. This will be part of your work, Rilla. And if you — all you girls back in the homeland — do it, then we who don't come back will know that you have not 'broken faith' with us."

They were starting in on it. Rilla and Faith married and Nan dreaming her dreams in bobbin lace. Not Di, perhaps, but didn't she spend every free hour in the obstetrical ward, bringing forth new life in her own way? Soon the generation of the golden harvest would be squalling into the world and kicking its pudgy heels against the draped folds of christening gowns. Rilla and Ken and Faith and Jem and Nan and Jerry would do just what Walter asked, telling their children the stories of those who had fought, that they had died to make the world safe for the generations they would never see. Their homes would be temples to Walter's Idea: Peace, and Safety, and above all Beauty in a world sanctified by Sacrifice and Love. They would not break faith.

Una folded the letter and leaned her forehead against the ice-bright pane. She did not need to consult the book on her knee to hear the echo of the verse Walter had read to her the day they sat together on Hezekiah Pollock's tombstone:

*The day is spent, and cometh drowsy night,*  
*When every creature shrowded is in sleepe;*  
*Sad Una downe her laies in wearie plight,*  
*And at her feet the Lyon watch doth keepe:*  
*Instead of rest, she does lament, and weep*  
*For the late losse of her deare loved knight,*  
*And sighes, and grones, and evermore does steepe*  
*Her tender breast in bitter tears all night,*  
*All night she thinks too long, and often lookes for light.*

Notes:

*This is the first sentence of the first chapter of Juniata L. Shepperd's, *Handbook of Household Science* (1902)*

**In September 1919, John Howatt Bell became premier of Prince Edward Island at the head of a Liberal government, replacing the Conservatives headed by Aubin-Edmond Arsenault. Bell presided over the passage of suffrage for women in 1922 (PEI was the last province to grant women the right to vote in provincial elections, with the exception of Quebec (1940)).

***Anne of Ingleside*, Chapter 15

****Rilla of Ingleside*, Chapter 23: "And So, Goodnight"
*****Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590), canto XV
"Every great naturalist is first and foremost a keen observer," intoned Professor Wickman, tapping his fleshy fingers against the great glass bell on his demonstration table. Carl was finding it difficult to attend to Professor Wickman's instructions, lost in contemplating the man's resemblance to a harbor seal, slick and whiskery and bull-necked.

"Contrary to popular opinion," Wickman continued, "observation is an active, rather than a passive pursuit. Therefore, your assignment over the next week will be an exercise in active observation. That is to say, drawing."

The word roused Carl, who flashed a grin at Nellie, seated beside him at the workbench. She had a genuine talent, honed by instruction and practice, certainly, but infused with an instinctive appreciation for line and shading that Carl suspected could never really be taught.

"Glad I have you," he whispered. "My drawings are rubbish."

Nellie returned a pleased smile, but shushed gently, lest they miss more of the directions.

". . . forces us to look closely, to count, to measure, to be utterly precise . . ."

Carl cast his eye around the lab, wondering what they would be asked to draw. A fern, perhaps, or a shell? Professor Wickman had not issued them any materials; perhaps they would be allowed to go out into the world and choose their own subjects. There was a wonderful colony of wasps in the pointed arch of the door leading to the osteological collections, and if Carl did not quite feel adequate to the challenge of limning the intricacies of iridescent wings, Nellie surely was. Perhaps he could have a go at drawing the nest.

". . . due on Friday. You will be asked to submit two drawings: one dorsal view of the complete animal and one ventral view with the belly split to reveal all internal organs . . ."

Wait, what were they drawing?

The students began to shuffle through their bags, responding to some instruction that Carl had obviously missed.

"Didn't you bring your sketchbook, Carl?" Nellie asked, laying hers on the bench beside pencils and charcoal.

"What? Oh, yes. It's in my . . ."

But Carl's attention was riveted to the cart that Professor Wickman's laboratory assistant was wheeling down the aisle, pausing at each workbench to deliver a tray with a glass bell like the one at the front of the room.

"Now then," Professor Wickman called over the din, "each pair will receive a single frog. In order to anesthetize your animal prior to dissection, you will soak a rag in sulphuric ether and place it under the bell. We use ether instead of chloroform because it renders the specimen pliable, rather than rigid. It also allows us to observe the action of the still-beating heart during dissection . . ."
A shiny aluminum tray clicked down on the bench in front of Carl, making him jump backward. Under the bell, a beautiful, tawny leopard frog sat hunched against the stark metal floor, every subtlety of its intricate anatomy a profound contrast to the clean, clinical lines of the lab equipment.

"Here's your ether," the lab assistant said, holding out a brown bottle.

Carl willed himself to stretch out his hand, but without success. He merely stared from the frog to the assistant and back again until Nellie leaned over him and took the bottle.

"Are you alright, Carl?" she asked, setting the ether beside a metal tray of scalpels and probes and wicked-looking pins.

"What? Yes. I'm fine. Sorry, I think I missed what we're supposed to do first?"

Nellie drew a kerchief out of her satchel and wound it around her fair curls. "Masks first," she said, "unless you fancy inhaling ether."

"Good thinking," Carl agreed, though he made no move to tie his own mask.

"After that, we soak the cotton and put it under the bell, then prepare our colors and pencils while we wait for . . . Carl?"

Carl heard the edge of concern in her voice, but could not parse her words. He blinked slowly at the frog and the frog blinked back, its wide eyes gleaming black and gold against its glistening skin, mottled in shades of green and brown and feldgrau.

"I . . . I . . ."

Carl had meant to say that of course he was fine, but he was already stumbling back away from the lab bench. He collided with another table, setting the glassware and instruments ringing, but kept his feet.

"Carl?"

If Carl could hear Nellie's appeal, he showed no sign. Instead, he staggered for the door, wrenched it open, and disappeared into the hall.

When the doorbell rang at Aster House, Una was wrist-deep in tourtière filling. Mrs. Langevin had directed each student in the Household Science course to practice one dish she had never made before, and Una was thankful for the opportunity to enliven their inevitable potatoes with a novel preparation. Stretching a single pound of cheap ground pork into dinner for five was also deeply satisfying.

Una washed her hands in haste and was still drying them on her apron when she opened the door to let a harried Nellie Fletcher over the threshold.

"Is Carl here?" Nellie asked, omitting unnecessary pleasantries.

"Carl?" Una asked blankly. "No. Should he be?"

Nellie held up a satchel and plaid wool coat that Una recognized at once. "We were in biology lab," Nellie explained, "something happened, I don't know what, but he ran out of the room and left his things behind. I thought he would come back, but he didn't. I checked everywhere we've ever
studied together and I didn't know where else to look. I don't know where he lives, so I thought perhaps I should bring this to you . . ."

"He ran out?" Una echoed. "In the middle of class?"

"Yes," Nellie said. "We hadn't even started properly and he just stood up and left. He . . . he didn't look well."

Una was halfway to the door, reaching to take her own jacket from the hall peg. "He didn't say where he was going?"

"No. He didn't say anything at all."

"And he didn't come back?"

"I waited an hour. Maybe I should have gone after him straight away. But I thought . . ."

Una held up a placating hand. "Thank you for coming to tell me, Nellie. I'll take things from here."

"Not alone you won't," Nellie declared. "I'm coming with you."

There was no time to argue. Una nodded assent and the two girls swept out of Aster House, headed north.

***

A block from Carl's boarding house, salvation materialized in the form of Shirley Blythe. Una had not thought she would ever be as glad to see him as she had been on the day he stepped off the train at the Glen St. Mary station, blinking in confusion at the crowd of well-wishers gathered to welcome him home. But with Carl in the wind and the prospect of arriving at his disreputable boarding house with petal-pink Nellie Fletcher in tow, Lady Una herself could not have been more thankful for the opportune appearance of her faithful lion.

Shirley was walking briskly, red scarf flying out behind his charcoal coat like a pennant, but he turned when she called his name.

"Una?" he said, crossing the street with a look of wary concern.

"Shirley! Have you seen Carl this afternoon?"

He shook his head, puzzlement written plain across his features. "Is something wrong?"

"No. I don't know. Maybe. Why don't you tell him . . ." Una had been about to turn the story over to her companion, but Shirley's guarded glance toward the interloper told her that introductions were in order.

"Forgive me," she said. "Shirley Blythe, this is Nellie Fletcher, Carl's lab partner. Nellie, Shirley."

Nellie extended a dimpled hand in greeting. "Pleasure. I've heard a lot about you."

"Likewise," Shirley said, not quite relaxing. "Sorry, I just hadn't put a face to the name. Something's wrong?"

"Carl took ill during our lab," Nellie said, holding up admiringly under the sudden intensity of Shirley's undivided attention. "He ran out. I couldn't find him, so I went to Aster House for Una. We thought he might have gone home?"
"No. I've just come from there," Shirley frowned. "He was ill?"

"Something like. He went all maggot-white and left in a hurry. He never came back. I looked, but . . ."

Shirley cut her off. "What were you doing? When he left?"

Nellie faltered. "Um . . . nothing, really. We hadn't even started yet. We were supposed to be sketching our frogs, but we hadn't even killed ours yet . . ."

Shirley's eyes flew wide. "They wanted him to kill a frog?"

"Yes. Well, anesthetize it. For dissection."

Shirley muttered something that Una pretended not to hear. Without explanation, he turned to go, not along his original heading, but south toward Redmond. Una and Nellie fluttered along behind, struggling to keep pace.

At the turn for Aster House, Shirley halted abruptly.

"Go on home, Una. Take Nellie with you."

"We . . . want . . . to help," Una puffed.

"You can. Carl might go to Aster House. You'll be there if he does."

This made sense. And yet, as Una met Shirley's resolute gaze, she felt quite certain that it wasn't Aster House that Carl would reach for in his distress.

"Alright," she said. "You'll come for us if you don't find him?"

Shirley gave a curt nod. "I'll let you know either way."

Without another word, he strode off, seeming to know exactly where he was going.

Una threaded her arm through Nellie's and suggested that perhaps they should go put some water on for tea, just in case Carl did turn up.

It was not difficult to find Carl. Not if you knew him.

Shirley loped past the Redmond quad with its captive trees and through the pruned promenades of residential Kingsport until he reached the rambling park on the city's southern shore. There were lawns here, and mannerly paths, and wrought-iron benches hunkering down against the chill winds of November. But beyond the cultivated walks were half-wild evergreen groves and underbrush and a mirrored, reed-lined pond.

The water was placid today, reflecting both the featureless gray sky of oncoming winter and the sere, frost-dried husks of last summer's marsh grass. In the morning, there might have been a film of ice crusting its margins. But it was afternoon now, and the indistinct light of an implied sun would keep the pond-edge clear for a few hours more.

Shirley skirted the edge of the marsh, scanning the dismal stalks until he spied a patch of warmer golden-brown. Approaching, he shrugged off his coat and placed it over Carl's hunched shoulders. Carl did not flinch, but neither did he move his gaze from the placid waters of the pond. Even when Shirley sat down on the matted fronds beside him, it was a long while before he spoke.
"Do you remember the time I brought a frog to Sunday School?" Carl murmured. "It hopped out of my pocket while old Jane Drew was hearing lessons. *I popped it right back in again. It didn't hurt anybody — a poor little frog!* I guess you wouldn't remember, though. We weren't friends then."

"I do remember," Shirley said, leaning back on his palms. "We heard about it down in the primer class. You were quite a hero to us."

"Really?"

"Sure. We all figured we'd be spanked within an inch of our lives if we ever pulled a stunt like that. Even Susan wouldn't have been able to excuse it."

A grudging acknowledgement twitched across Carl's face, fading before it could coalesce. "I didn't know any better. It was just a friend to me."

They slipped back into parallel silence, so still for so long that a wandering shorebird with a long, curved bill passed directly in front of them, startling when it realized that they were not part of the landscape. Wary, it beat mottled wings in an awkward takeoff, fighting for altitude before lurching away toward the shore with a plaintive, warbling cry.

Sensing a chance, Shirley asked, "What kind of bird was that?"

"Curlew."

"Not the most graceful flier is it?"

"They get by."

Shirley groped for some way to widen this sliver of conversation, but Carl spared him the trouble.

"I'm never going a naturalist," he said bleakly. "I'm not even going to pass freshman biology if I can't . . . can't . . . prepare specimens."

Shirley scrutinized the pale face, with its mouth tucked in at the corners and dark lashes lowered like a portcullis. "You shouldn't have to."

"But I do. And I just . . . can't."

Carl bit down on the last word, jaw clenched against a tremor. But what was the use of that facade, here at the pond-side?

Shirley stretched out a long, strong arm and wrapped it around his own coat, pulling Carl's rounded form toward him.

"You don't have to kill anything. Never again."

It was too much and not enough; too soon and far, far too late.

***

At dusk, Shirley knocked on the door at Aster House. Di answered, frowning when she saw that he was alone.

"It's alright," Shirley said. "He's at home. I just wanted to tell Una so she wouldn't worry."

"Shirley?" Una appeared at Di's side, with Nellie hovering behind.
"Come inside," Di said, swinging the door open and steering Shirley by the elbow. He did not resist, but said, "I can't stay. I just wanted to keep you all from worrying."

Di looked him up and down with a thoroughness Shirley recognized as diagnostic, but she seemed satisfied. Shirley thought she was on the point of asking him a question, but Nellie preempted her, bounding over to the armchair where Carl's coat and schoolbag rested in a tidy heap.

"You must bring Carl his coat," she said. "He left so suddenly."

"Thanks," Shirley said, accepting both coat and satchel. "And thanks for fetching Una earlier."

"He's not awfully sick, is he?" Nellie implored.

Shirley reached for an expression he sincerely hoped would read as a smile. "No. He's fine. Just resting."

"Well, tell him from me not to worry a bit about the lab work. Tell him I outlined the sketches already and he can just copy from mine if he wants."

"Thanks, Nellie."

Shirley turned to go, nearly knocking a basket from Una's hands.

"Take this, too," she said, dark blue eyes more resolute than wistful for once. "Supper."

Under normal circumstances, Shirley might have protested that they were fine and could take care of themselves, but the stress of the afternoon, the sliver of flint in Una's gaze, and the aroma of warm biscuits rising from the basket combined to dissolve his objections.

"Thanks."

Arms full, Shirley nodded his goodbyes to the room and followed Di to the door and through it. He was surprised when she pulled it snugly shut behind her.

"Do you want me to come with you?" she asked, the tilt of her head absurdly like Dad's, for all she resembled Mother otherwise.

Shirley had never seen Di in doctor mode, but it was unmistakable. He might have smiled under other circumstances. "He's alright. Just upset. He'll be fine."

Di rested a slim white hand on Shirley's forearm. Her gray eyes were serious, but soft with tender concern. "It's sometimes very difficult," she said, voice barely above a whisper, "to care for someone you love when they're ill. You'll fetch me if you need help?"

Shirley tried to answer, but words had deserted him, traitorous as ever.

"Day or night, Shirley," Di pressed, never breaking eye contact. "It's no trouble."

Shirley's mouth clacked dry, but he could not even formulate an evasion. Useless anyway, it seemed. He couldn't imagine that Una had betrayed them, but the alternative seemed somehow worse. If Di and Wilkie could both tell at a glance, and now others knew as well — Harold, and Anthony, and the Swede . . . Shirley didn't even know the man's real name. That suddenly seemed a ridiculous dereliction. Too many people, too many variables . . .

Di withdrew her hand and Shirley found his tongue at last, his voice an arid croak. "Is it so
Di smiled a warm, fond smile flavored with a hint of delight and a pinch of sympathy. "No, honey. You're alright."

"You won't . . . tell?"

She gripped his arm again, tightly enough that Shirley could feel each finger through the thick wool of his coat.

"Never. You listen to me, Shirley Blythe: if you ever need anything — anything — money, a place to stay, an alibi . . ."

Shirley was not quite sure if the sound he made was a chuckle or a sob, but it was a relief either way. He dropped his encumbrances onto the porch floor and pulled his sister into a deep, strong hug.

"Anything," she repeated from the depths of his coat. "I'm at your service. Sylvia, too."

Shirley dropped a kiss on her curly red head before he released her. "You should go inside," he said thickly. "It's freezing out here."

"Alright," she agreed, standing on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "But only because it's your supper getting cold, not me."

"Thanks, Di."

"Shirley?"

"What?"

Di grinned, wrinkling her shapely nose. "I'm so happy for you!"

Shirley blinked. Slowly, his own smile unfurled across his face until he matched her expression. "Thanks," he said, a bit uncertainly. "I'm happy for you, too."

Di laughed and gave him a little shove, by which Shirley understood that he was dismissed. Di did not go inside, but watched as Shirley took up his burdens again and walked out into the gathering night. Shirley felt her gaze upon him and thought how odd it was to find comfort in being seen.

Notes:

*Rainbow Valley, Chapter 23: "The Good-Conduct Club"
On Christmas Eve, Shirley sat at the oak table in the big kitchen at Ingleside, peeling potatoes. He had not asked Susan whether he could help, knowing that she would refuse. Instead, he had merely plucked a knife from the block and settled into the chair across from hers, giving her no time to object.

Shirley had cheated Susan last summer in his starvation, always running off with his fishing tackle at dawn and only occasionally surfacing for meals. Susan had never complained. She had packed picnics and laid out fresh clothes and gloated over him when he deigned to show up for supper.

Things were different now.

Shirley came to this holiday already replete. For the first time since Carl had graduated from Queen's, Shirley was not searching out hidden places or existing between stolen moments. They had to be apart for these few weeks, yes, but it was a finite separation, like a satisfying day's work with the promise of home and hearth at the end. Carl had promised he would send Una to Ingleside if he had an attack or a nightmare, but so far, so good. Thus, Shirley found himself able to enjoy Ingleside and the people in it more than he had in many years. It was as if in being full himself, he suddenly had excess to bestow on others.

Susan was the primary beneficiary of this abundance, but not the only one. Shirley helped Nan tune the piano and hiked off with Jem to cut holly and evergreen boughs. When Anne could not find the brass candlesticks she wanted for the bayberry tapers, Shirley searched from cellar to garret until he found them hidden in a box of unused picture frames in the spare room closet. No one could remember when Shirley had last played a game of chess with Gilbert, but they went 3-3 in the week before Christmas. Shirley even coaxed Jims, visiting for the holiday, to let Rilla have a nap one afternoon, swinging the shrieking child onto his shoulders and tramping off to the Glen Pond to challenge Carl and Bruce to a hockey match. No one had bothered to teach Jims how to skate before, which was a crying shame for a five-year-old, but by the end of the afternoon he was wobbling creditably under his own power. He even managed to slap a shot at Carl, who bungled the save with broad theatricality, collapsing to the ice lamenting his failure, much to Jims' delight. When they climbed back up the hill to Ingleside, hale and crimson-cheeked in the purple dim of a December evening, Anne was startled to find that her youngest son had inherited the Blythe grin after all.

Now Shirley sat across from Susan, dismantling the potato pile one peel at a time. He watched her covertly, comforted to find that she seemed largely unchanged. The spiky knot of gray hair was just the same as ever, the work-worn hands were just as steady, the questions just as shrewd.

"You're getting along in your studies?" Susan asked, her knife flashing eel-like through the mud-brown potato skins.

"I'm keeping up," Shirley assured her.

"And the courses? They're not too difficult?"

Shirley reached for another potato. "They aren't easy. But I enjoy them, and I'm getting good marks."
Susan, who had only a vague idea of what engineering entailed, grunted her satisfaction. "What will you do after college?" she asked. "Build bridges and roads?"


"Aeronautics? So you're going to build aeroplanes, as well as fly them?"

"Maybe. But that's a long way off. For now, I'm just getting to grips with the basics. I have courses in physics and free-hand drawing and analytical geometry . . ."

"Geometry?" This from Anne, who had just entered the kitchen bearing the remains of Jim's tea. "He must have gotten that from you, Susan, never me."

"Indeed not, Mrs. Doctor Dear," Susan scoffed. "I have no head for mathematics."

"But you do," Shirley protested. "Baking is math and materials science, with a little chemistry thrown in. It's quite like engineering, really. I'm sure anyone who could have built Rilla's wedding cake from scratch could build the Eiffel Tower."

"Well, it's true enough that not everyone has a hand for baking, especially wedding cakes" Susan said, endeavoring to affect modesty when she was beaming from the tips of her fingers to the top of her bun. "Still, I never had any fancy schooling and I'm sure I couldn't understand half of what you're learning nowadays, even if you explained it to me a hundred times over. I am an old maid, not an engineer."

Shirley stopped his peeling, looking over the pile of potatoes with an expression of gentle fondness. "You're sufficient as you are, Susan."

At the sink, Anne turned to study her son. It was not so unusual for the denizens of Ingleside to sprinkle their conversation with poetry, but most quotations announced themselves in rhythm or rhyme. Not Whitman, though. Susan had not even noticed the reference, though perhaps she would not have scolded her little brown boy for speaking in poetry even if she had.

"Do they keep you awfully busy with mathematics, darling?" Anne asked cautiously. "Or do you have time for other subjects?"

"I do have some electives," Shirley confirmed, returning to his work. "All the engineers have to take Military Science, but I'm exempt because I outrank the instructor and that would never do. We have a choice between French and German . . ."

"German!" Susan exclaimed, hacking off a slice of peel with quite a lot of potato still stuck to it. "Do they mean to make a Hun of you at college?"

"German science is very important," Shirley explained. "Just ask Dad. They're quite advanced in physics, medicine, manufacturing . . ."

Susan harrumphed. "Much good may it do them."

"Don't fret, Susan. I'm studying French."

Anne tied her own apron and began to cut the peeled potatoes, plunking them into a stock pot for boiling. "It sounds as if you have rather a lot of coursework," she said. "I hope you make some time for a bit of fun as well."
Shirley hummed something like assent, but Susan spared him the necessity of replying in detail. "Not too much fun, mind," she said, knife biting deeply into her potato. "Girls these days talk something scandalous. I overheard Amy Taylor talking to her chum at Carter Flagg's store the other day, saying she meant to make up for lost time now that the boys were all home. I imagine the Kingsport girls have much the same idea, and that you may tie to."

"And why shouldn't they, Susan?" Anne asked. "I think all our young folks are entitled to a little happiness."

"Indeed they are. But from what I hear, co-eds these days are apt to do nothing but flirt."

"They must study a little," Anne said with a smile.

"Precious little," sniffed Susan.*

Shirley, devoutly thankful that his thoughts were his own, placated Susan with a warm smile. "I can promise you, Susan, I'm quite devoted to my studies."

St. Elizabeth's Anglican Church in Lowbridge was a treasurebox: fieldstone walls set with gem-bright windows, mosaic floors in ochre and cream with flashes of mother-of-pearl, cherry-wood pews carved with deep moulding and rose roundels. Every wall was stenciled with scrolled psalms in gold and crimson, and geometric patterns interrupted only by bronze memorial plaques, themselves richly embellished. Una loved the apse best of all, the exposed beams of its rounded peak interspersed with a stained-glass choir of pre-Raphaelite angels, all flowing robes and unbound hair in jewel tones so rich you could nearly taste them.

It had scared her at first. The differences between St. Elizabeth's and the Glen St. Mary Presbyterian Church were not merely aesthetic. Wasn't it frightfully wicked to expend so much energy on material splendor? After all, what did anyone need other than the Word and divine Grace?

But from the day she had stepped over the threshold and into the candle-lit sanctuary, St. Elizabeth's had enveloped Una as only the soul's own home could. She had attended St. Elizabeth's a few times with Rosemary over the years, but she had only started coming on her own during the winter of 1916. When Rainbow Valley had grown cold, and her lonely vigils under the Tree Lovers began to turn her fingers blue despite mittens and muffs, she had sought refuge here. She could have gone to sit in the Presbyterian church, she supposed. But its stark lines and simple geometry did nothing to satisfy her, to say nothing of the awful new memorial tablet on the wall above the Blythe pew, Sacred to the Memory of Walter Cuthbert Blythe. He had no other monument, no known grave. Perhaps someday she could face that grim cenotaph with equanimity. But not yet.

On this Christmas Eve, Una arrived at St. Elizabeth's long before the service started. She had been away for months, yearning for this place, though she felt as if she oughtn't. In Kingsport, Una attended All Saints Cathedral every Sunday, but she still wasn't quite sure what to make of it. The soaring ceilings and white pointed arches always made her feel insignificant, but in an oddly pleasant way. Sometimes, when she lifted her eyes up and up and up, a little shiver of sublimity transported her out of ordinary space. All Saints sounded lovely, too. Una liked especially when the men's choir sang, accompanied by the magnificent Casavant organ with a voice like the sea. After years of listening to members of the Glen St. Mary Ladies' Aid warble through the psalms with more enthusiasm than grace, a chorus of Alleluias ringing through the arcades of All Saints resounded like a heavenly host.

On the other hand, All Saints was cold. The interior was restrained, with unembellished white
arches and tiers of glass windows that were mostly clear. Plain wooden benches set across the nave would have been at home in any meetinghouse, and were even plainer than the box pews of her father's church. If the Cathedral sometimes made Una feel tiny in a glorious, exalted sort of way, it could also make her feel tiny in a puny, lonely sort of way.

Not like St. Elizabeth's. Una had feared that it would have lost its magic, but that worry had dissolved the instant she arrived. Everything was just exactly the right size, and if the acoustics were perhaps less sublime, Una was happy to trade them for this snug security.

Now, she sat under the stained glass window depicting St. Elizabeth of Hungary, crowned and regal, her skirt held out before her like a basket, bursting with her miraculous roses in vivid red and white. Father Kirkland had told Una the story of the roses, how Elizabeth's family did not approve of her charity toward the poor and outcast, so that she had to smuggle bread out of the castle to feed the hungry. When her husband passed her on the road and demanded to know what she concealed beneath her skirts, Elizabeth had cast off the covering to find the loaves miraculously transformed into roses.

Una sat a long while under St. Elizabeth's beneficent gaze, holding each of her own secret burdens before her for a moment and feeling them lighten as if shared. It shouldn't work this way. She should be able to trust in God alone and not need any sort of intercession. She knew that an infinite Power must be infinitely little as well as infinitely great, but Una still liked the idea of saints more than she thought she ought to. **God was God, but St. Elizabeth was a friend.** Absorbed in her meditations, Una did not hear Rosemary approaching her pew, and jumped when she sat down beside her.

"I thought I might find you here," Rosemary smiled. "How is St. Elizabeth today?"

"Quiet."

"That's a relief, I'm sure."

Una returned Rosemary's smile. It was.

"I always liked this pew," Rosemary said, sliding her hand across the gleaming wood. "It was my mother's favorite. After my brother died, she would come here to pray. So I always feel close to her here."

Una nodded, but did not reply. She felt an odd blockage; she could always tell Rosemary things, but she had fallen out of practice.

Rosemary knew her well enough to see that something had gone unsaid. "I remember you once told me that you used to read your mother's recipes," she said gently.

"Yes," Una said. "But not since you came to us."

"Do you have a place where you remember her?"

Una considered this. She had often wondered what it would be like to visit Maywater and Mother's little grave there. A foolish thought — she could never ask Father to make such a journey. Besides, the place should not matter.

"I used to go into the spare room closet and touch her wedding dress," Una admitted. "But only when life was too hard."
"Did that help?"

"A bit."

Rosemary nodded. "I used to come here quite a lot. Especially after I lost Martin."

Her tone had not varied and she gave no indication that she had said anything of consequence, but Una's heart leapt. They had talked of many things over the years, but never of this. Rosemary had opened a door and Una was grateful for the invitation, but she felt she must decline it.

"The place shouldn't matter," she said, knowing that this was not really what Rosemary had meant. "God is everywhere, so everywhere is sacred. The place — the things— shouldn't matter."

"Do they?"

Una was reluctant but honest. "Yes."

"I remember when you gave Bruce your christening gown. That mattered, too."

"Yes."

"There's nothing wrong with having sacred things, Una."

Una bit her lip. "It just seems . . . blasphemous. To love things."

"I don't know if love can really be blasphemous," Rosemary said judiciously. "As long as it is sincere, and not idolatrous. Love is God's presence, isn't it? If you feel love in a particular place, perhaps God is speaking to you there."

"How can you tell?" Una asked. "How can you tell that it's God speaking and not just your own weakness wanting things?"

It was a serious question and Rosemary answered it seriously. "I've found that God speaks to us in our own languages," she said. "He speaks to your father in books, because He knows that that's where he can hear Him. He speaks to Carl in little creatures. I think, perhaps, that He spoke to Walter in poems, or maybe in flowers."

"Both, I think," Una murmured, so low that Rosemary could barely hear her.

"Is it so strange that He should speak to you in beautiful houses?"

Una frowned. "Houses?"

"This is God's house, isn't it? A bare, plain meetinghouse is excellent for focusing your mind on a text with nothing to distract you. Here . . . " Rosemary gestured to the sanctuary around her, the mosaics of lilies and golden roses, the stenciled walls, and woodwork polished to a living sheen, the very air a kaleidoscope of color from the opalescent windows, " . . . every inch of this house has been wrought with care and love. Every tiny tile has been laid deliberately, even the ones under the pews where we never see them."

As Rosemary spoke, two women approached the altar and knelt at the chancel rail. When they had prayed, they disappeared into the sacristy, returning with their arms full of cloth. Working together in perfect silence, they draped the altar in white and gold, smoothing and straightening every wrinkle. Una watched them dip and weave, dancing reverently back and forth as they prepared for the service. When the linens were finished, the women set the altar with white tapers in high silver
candlesticks and arranged evergreen wreaths and poinsettias before it. They prayed once more, kneeling together, and departed as silently as they had arrived.

Una sat for a long moment, contemplating the altar.

"When I was a little girl," she said, "I used to brush Father's best suit on Saturdays. When I could find the clothes-brush, that is.***

"I'm sure you did a lovely job, dearest."

"No," Una said, smiling regretfully. "I didn't. I once sewed on a button with coarse white thread. I didn't know any better, but Mary Vance — that is, Mary Douglas — says people talked about it for years."

"I suppose you did need a little guidance in the particulars," Rosemary smiled. "But you gave all you had. That's what God asks of us."

Una frowned, considering her next words carefully. "Rosemary?"

"Yes, dearest?"

"Do you think Father would be awfully cross if I joined St. Elizabeth's? As a real member? To take communion and everything?"

Rosemary took Una's hand in her own. "You know he wouldn't be."

"But it might embarrass him," Una said, flushing. "People would talk . . ."

"Let them."

"I couldn't do anything that's likely hurt him in the congregation . . ."

"Una," Rosemary said, gently, but firmly. "Your father won't care about anything except your happiness. If you feel that St. Elizabeth's is the right congregation for you, he'll be pleased and never even notice if anyone objects."

"But Miss Cornelia . . ."

"Will keep a civil tongue in her head."

Una doubted the probability of this, but was heartened by Rosemary's support.

"I think," she said, "I think I may talk to Father Kirkland about it. Before I go back to Kingsport."

Rosemary beamed. "I think he's been waiting for you."

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Notes:

*Anne of the Island*, chapter 2, "Garlands of Autumn"

**Rilla of Ingleside**, chapter 19, "They Shall Not Pass"

***Rainbow Valley*, Chapter 4, "The Manse Children"
On Christmas Day, Ingleside teemed with merry guests. No fewer than three fat geese graced the dining table, which groaned with the bounty of Susan's tireless labor. Despite the December chill, someone had cracked the windows to relieve the heat of the overstuffed room where Blythes, Merediths, and their various associates tucked into butter-roasted squash, cranberry sauce, and biscuits so high and light they seemed to evaporate.

Una Meredith sat somewhere south of the mashed potatoes, letting the chatter of the crowd wash over her. At one end of the long table, Dr. Blythe was laughing into a napkin, red in the face at a story Di was telling with elaborate hand gestures. At the other, Uncle Norman and Nan were engaged in a fierce debate on a topic Una could not quite discern, with Aunt Ellen and Jerry interjecting at intervals. Directly across from Una, Mary Douglas was leaning over Ken Ford to give some sage advice to Rilla, who was attempting to convince Jims to eat something other than bread.

"Will you please pass the gravy?" asked Bruce at Una's elbow.

Una obliged, feeling a wistful tug to see him grown so poised. She had only been away for four months, but they had been enough to make her notice that Bruce's face was no longer quite so round as it once had been and that his sturdy limbs had grown noticeably long. His letters were no longer the childish scrawls he had sent off to Carl and Jerry and Faith during the war, but proper missives in which earnestness and still-uncertain spelling inspired many a fond re-reading at Aster House.

Bruce poured a generous helping of gravy over his heaped plate, earning himself a chuckle from Jem beside him.

"Eat all that and you'll be as tall as I am by New Year's," Jem smiled, nudging Bruce in the ribs.

"I don't think so," Bruce said, blinking soberly. "Carl and Jerry aren't any taller than Father and I don't expect I will be either."

"You never know," Jem said, mirroring Bruce's solemnity. "I'm as tall as my father, but Shirley's got us both beat. You never can tell about younger brothers."

Una smiled to see Bruce consider this pronouncement with the seriousness due any pearl of Jem's wisdom. He was still a little boy after all, hanging on his hero's every word, his adult height still hypothetical.

Turning to her left, Una was equally pleased to find her other younger brother industriously devouring a pile of green beans. She noticed that Carl had not taken a serving of goose, filing the information away in her catalog of family preferences.

Sometime after the plates had been passed for seconds, a chime of silver against glass interrupted the half-dozen simultaneous conversations. All attention focused on Dr. Blythe, standing at the head of the table, smiling with his whole posture.

"I wanted to thank you all for celebrating with us today," he began. "I can't think of any better Christmas gift than to have you all here. To see you all in the bloom of health and youth and vigor,
resuming your studies and beginning families of your own . . ." he paused and grinned at Mrs. Blythe beside him "... it's everything we ever wanted for you all."

"Hear! Hear!" bellowed Uncle Norman, drawing a sprinkle of laughter from the assembly.

Dr. Blythe cleared his throat. "Of course, our joy will always be tempered by the chair that must remain forever vacant. But I hope . . . we hope . . . that all of you, and your sons and daughters down through the generations, will keep faith, and will live your lives in love and peace. That is what Walter fought for . . ."

At this, Dr. Blythe faltered, and Una felt her heart lurch to see his handsome face fall and stutter and fall again.

In the lapse, Jem rose to his feet. "To Walter," he said, holding his own glass steady before him.

"To Walter," the company echoed.

Una's lips shaped the words, but she could put no force behind them.

"To Walter," Dr. Blythe repeated, his own hand gone to Mrs. Blythe's. "And to all of you. May God bless you and keep you safe always, and bring you all back to this table next year."

"I suspect we may need a few more chairs by then," Uncle Norman chortled, "though how we'll fit them in, heaven only knows."

Dr. Blythe grinned, his hazel eyes shining. "I tell you, Norman, it's the best problem to have."

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Later, when those who could extricate themselves from their seats had cleared the dishes and Susan had carried in a plum pudding that was the last word in puddings, a simultaneous lapse in several conversations highlighted Miss Cornelia's piercing indictment.

"... got what he deserved, if you ask me."

"Now, now, Cornelia," Rosemary said. "It wouldn't do to be uncharitable, even in his case."

Una looked down the table to find her father looking distinctly uncomfortable, while Miss Cornelia's eye gleamed with righteous certainty.

"Who's gotten what he deserved?" asked Jem, seemingly eager to hear the latest Glen news.

"Josiah Pryor," said Miss Cornelia. "Surely you've heard what he was like during the war."

"Well, I haven't," piped up Jim Anderson, balancing little Jims on his lap.

"Nor I," agreed Jerry. "I seem to remember something about a war wedding . . ."

"That was Miranda Pryor," Rilla explained. "She wanted to marry Joe Milgrave, but Whiskers-on-the-Moon wouldn't allow it, on account of Joe being a soldier and Mr. Pryor being an avowed pacifist."

"Weren't there two war weddings in that family?" Dr. Blythe asked through a grin at Susan. "One successful and the other only narrowly averted?"

"Narrow fiddlesticks," Susan shot back hotly. "I have never been so insulted in my life as when that
that pacifist marched into my own kitchen and thought I'd be pleased to have him as a guest, let alone a husband!"

There was laughter around the table, but Una hunched her shoulders. She did not much like talking about Mr. Pryor or his fate, let alone hearing others laugh over it, and was anxious for them to move on to another subject. Unfortunately, the company had gotten its teeth into the topic and seemed unlikely to relinquish such a juicy morsel until it was bled dry.

"You must heard of the union prayer meeting, Mr. Anderson," said Miss Cornelia. "In the spring of 1916?"

"I don't believe I have."

"Oh, not again," protested Mrs. Blythe, and for half a heartbeat, Una thought that they might desist. But the tepid plea went unheeded by the general assembly and Mrs. Blythe seemed resigned to hearing the story once more.

*Every village has its own little unwritten history, handed down from lip to lip through the generations, of tragic, comic, and dramatic events. They are told at weddings and festivals, and rehearsed around winter firesides. And in these oral annals of Glen St. Mary the tale of the union prayer-meeting held at the Methodist Church was destined to fill an imperishable place.*

"The county battalion had finished training in Charlottetown that winter," Dr. Blythe explained, leaning avidly over his pudding to begin the story. "And all the Four Winds boys were home on their last leave."

"It was Mr. Arnold's idea," Miss Cornelia cut in. "He thought we ought to have a union prayer meeting — Presbyterians and Methodists together — to send them off."

"I agreed to it," Father mumbled, sounding nearly as miserable as Una felt. "I thought there couldn't be any harm in it."

Uncle Norman shook his shaggy red head. "It wasn't your fault, John. No one blames you. It was me that caused the ruckus. And you can blame me all you like, because I'd do it all over again in a heartbeat."

"I've missed something," Jerry said. "Why was a pacifist at a khaki prayer meeting?"

"Why indeed!" Susan agreed. "Why indeed! The minute I saw that man coming into the Church, looking like that, I felt that mischief was brewing."

Dr. Blythe smiled indulgently at Jerry. "Your father had asked the congregation to make a good showing. Even Miss Cornelia was in attendance, and we knew things must have come to a pretty pass when she deigned to darken the door of the Methodist church."

"It was only a prayer meeting," that good lady interjected, "not a Sunday service. Besides, it seemed there was no sense in hating Methodists when there was a Kaiser or a Hindenburg in the world."

"Right you are," Dr. Blythe agreed. "In any case, the meeting was very well attended. And wouldn't you know who was sitting right up front in his crisp black suit and his best white tie but old Josiah Pryor."

"Looking more sanctimonious than ever," Susan grumbled.
"Well, after Mr. Meredith and Mr. Arnold had both given fine addresses, Mr. Arnold asked Pryor to lead the gathering in prayer."

"No gumption," Miss Cornelia muttered darkly. "No gumption at all."

Dr. Blythe did not contradict her. "So Mr. Pryor stood up before God and the Glen and said, Let us pray, and proceeded to lay out the most infuriating prayer anyone ever heard. He prayed that the unholy war might cease . . ."

Susan chimed in: "That the deluded armies being driven to slaughter on the Western front might have their eyes opened to their iniquity and repent while yet there was time . . ."

Miss Cornelia took up the standard: "That the poor young men present in khaki, who had been hounded into a path of murder and militarism, should yet be rescued . . ."

"Well I tell you," said Dr. Blythe, eyes twinkling, "the whole room was in complete shock. Of course, no one likes to make a scene in church, no matter the provocation. Lucky for us, Norman here is a heathen."

"Too right," agreed Uncle Norman. "I couldn't let him go on like that, could I? Yammering and yodeling and yawping sedition and treason? It was an insult to every man in the Commonwealth!"

Dr. Blythe fidgeted with anticipation. "So Norman stands up like a thundercloud and shouts . . ."

Norman Douglas obliged, making the Ingleside dining room ring with the echo of his immortal words: "Stop — stop — STOP that abominable prayer!"

Laughter swept the room. Una reached instinctively for Carl's hand beneath the tablecloth, only to find that he was simultaneously reaching for hers. She glanced at Carl out of the corner of her eye, trying to read the expression muffled by his eyepatch, and caught Shirley doing the same, a little frown etched into the corner of his mouth.

"I tried to stop him," Aunt Ellen gasped through tears of glee.

Dr. Blythe was grinning. "You did try, Ellen! And so did John. But no use. Norman just bounded up to the front and caught up fat, pompous little Whiskers-on-the-moon by his collar and started shaking him like a huge mastiff might shake an overgrown puppy."

Carl clenched Una's hand, but there was nothing she could do but hold tight as the storytellers shouted out their favorite of Uncle Norman's epithets.

"You malignant carrion!"

"You pig-headed varmint!"

"You putrid pup!"

"You pestilential parasite!"

"You indecent reptile!"

"You Hunnish scum!"

"You whited sepulcher!"

This last from Uncle Norman himself, who brought down the house with his reenactment. Laughter
ran round and round the table, doubling over on itself as people began to laugh at the laughter itself. Even Father chuckled, infected by the uproar.

Una did not laugh. Neither did Carl, who had gone white to the lips. If she closed her eyes, Una could still see Mr. Pryor, frightened, humiliated, and alone. Not even Una had stood by him, to her everlasting shame.

When the merriment had subsided into sighs, Mrs. Blythe spoke over the residual mirth. "Really, now," she scolded, though her face was soft with affection, "I was not present at that prayer meeting, but I have heard enough about it over the years. And it seems to me that the proper thing to do would have been to let Mr. Pryor alone and let John have a word with him afterward."

Dr. Blythe nodded. "Yes. That would have been the proper procedure. Norman, your performance was utterly improper and scandalous and outrageous; but by George," he threw back his head and chuckled, "by George, Anne-girl, it was satisfying."

This sent the table off into another round of guffawing. It was a full minute before Shirley spoke from Carl's other side, his voice not noticeably ruffled by recent hilarity. If others at the table missed the tension in his face, Una did not. "What became of Mr. Pryor?" Shirley asked. "You said he got what he deserved?"

"Yes, dearie," Miss Cornelia sniffed, wiping a tear with her handkerchief. "The man had a paralytic stroke just after the Armistice."

"I'm not saying it was a judgment on him," Susan added, "because I am not in the counsels of the Almighty, but one can have one's own thoughts about that."

On Boxing Day, Carl curled up before the fire in the manse sitting room, a new book spread on his lap and one of Cecilia Meredith's crocheted afghans tucked around his legs. Una had offered to stay with him, but he knew she was anxious to get over to St. Elizabeth's. She had attended Father's Christmas Day service out of a sense of duty, but she had a meeting with Father Kirkland today and Carl wouldn't have her miss it on his account. Besides, all he needed was a bit of rest. In truth, it did him good to see her drive off, tucked cozily into the sleigh with Rosemary, the blue coat and the red vivid against the snowdrifts.

Shirley had come and gone as well, bringing a spice cake — from Susan, he said — as if the manse needed more baked goods. Carl had offered his most convincing reassurances, though he could not hide the dark smudge of sleeplessness around his eye. Shirley was not deceived, but went away reluctantly at dusk, having long overstayed a casual visit.

Now Carl had a warm fire and a free evening and the book: Walden by Henry David Thoreau. It was a Christmas gift from Nellie: Merry Christmas to my favorite lab partner. Yours truly, Nellie, 1919. Carl had only had it in his possession for a week, but he was already going back to sections for second and third readings. In particular, the chapters on Thoreau's practice as a naturalist had caught Carl's attention.

As for fowling, during the last years that I carried a gun my excuse was that I was studying ornithology, and sought only new or rare birds. But I confess that I am now inclined to think that there is a finer way of studying ornithology than this. It requires so much closer attention to the habits of the birds, that, if for that reason only, I have been willing to omit the gun.**

Here was an ethic of naturalism that Carl could wrap his mind around, one that required attention to animal behavior rather than killing and classifying specimens. He had passed the introductory
biology course after all, his written work being exemplary and Nellie being generous to a fault in letting him study the anatomy of frogs and rats from her excellent drawings. Nellie was, in the parlance of Glen St. Mary, a brick.

She was also a fan of Thoreau and had been shocked when Carl told her he did not know *Walden*. Thus the Christmas gift. Carl had heard of Thoreau in passing, but had not given him much thought, having gotten the impression that he was some sort of eccentric hermit. But there was much more to *Walden* than that. Thoreau was not a recluse — *I had three chairs in my house: one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society* — but preferred to live with as few encumbrances as possible, as close to the animals of Walden Pond as he could manage. Carl had chuckled over some of the passages, wondering what Una would make of Thoreau's indictment of conventional domestic arrangements:

> And oh, the housekeeping! to keep bright the devil's doorknobs, and scour his tubs this bright day! Better not keep a house. Say some hollow tree; and then for morning calls and dinner parties! Only a wood-pecker tapping.

Well, Carl thought, a rustic cabin at the pondside might not be for him either, but there was something to all this. He was not entirely sure exactly what it was, but it went deeper than ornithology.

No one born on the Island could be a stranger to Temperance, but Carl had never before encountered an ethical objection to animal food. He doubted whether he could ever ascribe to Thoreau's asceticism, but Carl found himself reading and re-reading the passages on a more innocent and wholesome diet. He resolved to ask Shirley whether this reverberation was what he felt over his Whitman.

A soft sound at the sitting room door made Carl look up from his book to find a dark, glossy head peeking cautiously around the jamb.

"Bruce?"

"I thought you might be asleep," Bruce said, shuffling over the threshold.

Carl smiled. "I'm not. Come sit with me."

He untucked the afghan, holding it open to admit his brother. Bruce wriggled in eagerly, nestling himself in the cocoon of Carl's warmth.

"What are you reading?" Bruce asked.

Carl settled the blanket over both of them and balanced the book between. "It's called *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau."

"What is it about?"

"Many things," Carl replied. "Thoreau went off to live by himself in the woods on the shore of Walden Pond. He wrote about his life there."

"He lived all by himself?"

"Well, people came to visit him. He wasn't alone. And he had the animals, of course. Shall I read you some?***

Bruce snuggled down, resting his head on Carl's shoulder. It was a childish pose for eleven, but
Carl had not been home for eight or nine or ten, and eleven was not so very old after all.

Carl scanned the pages, looking for a passage Bruce would like. When he found it, he grinned and cleared his throat:

_One day when I went out to my wood–pile, or rather my pile of stumps, I observed two large ants, the one red, the other much larger, nearly half an inch long, and black, fiercely contending with one another. Having once got hold they never let go, but struggled and wrestled and rolled on the chips incessantly. Looking farther, I was surprised to find that the chips were covered with such combatants, that it was not a duellum, but a bellum, a war between two races of ants, the red always pitted against the black, and frequently two red ones to one black. The legions of these Myrmidons covered all the hills and vales in my wood–yard, and the ground was already strewn with the dead and dying, both red and black._

"What's a myrmidon?" Bruce asked.

Carl considered for a moment. "Have you heard of the Trojan War? In ancient Greece? You won't study the _Iliad_ and the _Aeneid_ until you go to Queen's, but maybe you've heard of Agamemnon and Hector and Helen of Troy?"

Bruce scrunched up his face, thinking. "Is that when they had the giant horse all full of soldiers?"

"Exactly. Well, in the Trojan War, one of the Greek heroes was named Achilles."

"Oh, I've heard of him," Bruce said with enthusiasm. "The only way to hurt him was in his heel."

That was not, in fact, the only way to hurt Achilles, but Carl nodded and kept on with the story.

"Achilles was a prince and a general. His soldiers were called the Myrmidons because the god Zeus had created their nation from a colony of ants, and the Greek word for ant is _myrmex._"

"You remember all that from Queen's?"

"I remember the parts about ants."

"So the Myrmidons were ant soldiers?"

Carl laughed. "No, they were men. It's mythology, remember? The Myrmidons were excellent soldiers. The best. Although," Carl paused, "in nature, soldier ants are all female. I don't suppose Homer knew that, though."

Bruce turned back to _Walden_, more interested in the ant battle than the biology lesson. "How did it turn out?"

_On every side they were engaged in deadly combat, yet without any noise that I could hear, and human soldiers never fought so resolutely . . . They fought with more pertinacity than bulldogs. Neither manifested the least disposition to retreat. It was evident that their battle–cry was "Conquer or die." In the meanwhile there came along a single red ant on the hillside of this valley, evidently full of excitement, who either had despatched his foe, or had not yet taken part in the battle; probably the latter, for he had lost none of his limbs; whose mother had charged him to return with his shield or upon it. Or perchance he was some Achilles, who had nourished his wrath apart, and had now come to avenge or rescue his Patroclus._

"What's a patroclus?"
The question echoed. For a moment, Carl could see quite clearly the names in neat, white chalk on the blackboard at Queen's, just as he had first seen them, and felt the same wariness.

Bruce bent over the page, pointing to the passage. "It says that the red ant was like Achilles coming to avenge or rescue his Patroclus."

No sense in dissembling. Bruce would be off to Queen's himself in a few short years. Carl took a steadying breath and gave the answer his Classics teacher had given. "Patroclus was Achilles' lifelong companion and dearest friend."

"Was he a soldier, too?"

"Yes."

"Was Achilles able to rescue him?"

Ah, poor wretch, even Achilles, for all his valour, availed thee not . . .

"No."

Bruce frowned. "Well, did he avenge him at least?"

It was a famous story. Part of the canon everyone studied in school. Carl chose his words carefully.

"Yes, he did. After Hector, the prince of Troy, killed Patroclus, Achilles was very terrible in his grief. He killed Hector."

Carl did not tell the rest of the story: how Achilles had fallen on Patroclus's lifeless body and refused to relinquish it, forbidding the cremation and shearing his own hair in anguish. He did not tell how Achilles had impaled noble Hector through the neck and taunted him as he died — I would carve your flesh and eat it raw for what you have done to me — and then dragged his corpse behind his chariot round and round the walls of Troy to shame Hector and all his family. He did not tell of Achilles' berserk rage in the battles that followed, nor of his murder of the boy-prince Troilus at the altar of Apollo, daring the gods to strike him down for his sacrilege, nor of his final wish, to be buried with Patroclus, their ashes mingled, commemorated in a single tomb.

"Did the Greeks win the war?" Bruce asked.

"Yes," Carl said faintly. "But at an awful cost."

"Was it as bad as our war?"

Carl swallowed. "I think every war is probably bad for the people who fight it. Their war was so terrible that the poets made it into a story that we still read thousands of years later. I don't know if our war will be remembered like that."

Bruce frowned thoughtfully over the page. "I don't ever want to be a soldier," he said quietly.

Carl laid his cheek against the dark head. "You won't be."

"I could be," Bruce said earnestly. "I'll have to if there is another war when I'm grown up. I'd have to fight or else be a coward."

Carl reached across the afghan and took Bruce's hand in his own. "You know, Henry David Thoreau was a conscientious objector. He didn't believe in wars or slavery. He refused to pay his taxes to support things he didn't believe in, and went to jail over it."
Bruce considered this. "Is a conscientious objector like a pacifist?"

"Yes. Like a pacifist."

"I don't want to be a pacifist," Bruce said stoutly. "They're . . . unmanly."

"Who told you that?" Carl asked, though he knew there was probably no shortage of sources for such a calumny.

"Everyone says so. Pacifists are cowards and traitors and ought to be run out of town. The boys used to brag about breaking Mr. Pryor's windows. Father asked them to stop, but everyone hated Mr. Pryor just the same."

Carl pressed his lips into a thin line. "I'll tell you what, Bruce," he said, "if there's another war when you grow up, I'll be a pacifist with you."

"Will you?" Bruce brightened, then burrowed down deeper into Carl's shoulder. "That's good. Nobody could ever say that you were a coward."

Carl's face twitched, but he did not contradict him.

After a silence, Bruce asked, "Will you read more?"

Carl stretched an arm around his brother's shoulder and held him close. "Of course. Let's skip around a bit, though. There's a funny part about a loon that liked to play hide-and-seek on the pond."

Notes:

*Rilla of Ingleside*, chapter 20, "Norman Douglas Speaks Out in Meeting"
The italics in this scene are quotations from that chapter and from chapter 34, "Mr. Hyde Goes to His Own Place and Susan Takes a Honeymoon."

**Henry David Thoreau, Walden** (1854). Most of these quotations are from the chapters "Higher Laws" and "Brute Neighbors."

***Thoreau's mother, Cynthia Thoreau, supported his excursion in material ways (like doing her son's laundry and cooking for him), but there's not really any way for Carl to know that since Thoreau did not mention her labor in Walden.***

***Iliad*, Book 16, 835.
Nan had given the strictest instructions: under no circumstances was the marketing party allowed to return with a rump roast weighing under four pounds. Five would be better. And potatoes and carrots if they could find any passable, but for goodness' sake not another turnip. They were all sick to death of the horrid things and if Aster House had to endure them during the week, at least they could look forward to serving their guests something better on Sundays.

This early in the year, the grocers' outdoor displays were still filled with root vegetables, but a few early peas and beans showed vivid green amid the browns and ochres. Una filled a paper sack with pods too flat to be called peas, translucent flesh promising the first tang of returning spring. Aster House's own garden was still struggling into existence. Jem and Jerry had tilled the soil weeks ago, laughing over their pitchforks and flinging clods of dirt at one another. Una and Nan had set out the rows between classes and grading, both of them insisting that Faith not be allowed to help, despite her protestations. With Easter over and the infant maple leaves turning from chartreuse to a proper green, tender shoots had begun to show in the torn earth. Soon, they would have runner beans and baby lettuces to brighten their table.

"Peas already?" Carl inquired, appearing at Una's shoulder and pinching a pod from the top of her open sack.

"They mean to be," Una replied, folding the paper over itself protectively. Honestly, she hadn't even paid for them yet.

Carl munched without concern. "Where's Faith?"

"Jem took her over to the park," Una said as she dug through a pile of half-withered carrots, hoping to find some that would meet Nan's aesthetic standards. "She turned awfully green when we walked past the fishmonger."

"I'm amazed she can still walk at all," Carl grinned.

Behind him, a cart horse whinnied, the nervous trill cutting off Carl's smile. He winced, shying away from the flashing teeth and tossing head.

"Did you have any luck at the butcher?" Una asked.

"What? Oh. Yes, we did." Carl waved to Shirley, who had paused at the display of electrical light fixtures in the window of a dry goods store across the street. He carried a brown paper parcel cradled in the crook of his arm — a good size, Una thought.
Shirley skirted a newsboy and stepped past the unsettled cart horse to join them, brandishing his bounty.

"This roast is six pounds if it's an ounce, and don't let Nan try to tell you any different," Shirley said, taking Una's market basket from her arm and adding the meat to its burden.

"How much was it?" Una asked, reaching for her coin purse.

"Don't worry about it."

"But it's all budgeted out," Una protested. "A roast that size must have cost well over a dollar . . ."

"Well then put a dollar toward something you want," Carl said. "Something toothsome and unnecessary."

Una shook her head, counting out coppers for the grocer before she fell in beside Carl. Park Street was crowded with pedestrians, all of them talking and shouting and brushing past one another in their haste to complete their errands. A ragged girl offered early spring blossoms from a tattered basket; a lone automobile honked its frustration at finding that no one would give it right of way.

"Easy, pal," Carl grumbled toward the car, pressing his palms to his ears.

"That's a Cadillac," Shirley said appreciatively, craning his neck for a longer look as they passed. "Don't see many of them around here."

"Do you keep track of all the autos in Kingsport?" Carl groused.

"Only the notable ones."

"And that one is notable?"

"It's a Model 57 Phaeton," Shirley explained, beginning to enumerate the automobile's specifications in what Una could only assume was some sort of alien tongue.

"Alright, alright. It's a flashy machine," Carl conceded. "Don't know why it needs a Strombos horn, though."

Shirley's brow knit at that, but he had no opportunity to reply. At that very moment, a blur of frantic dog rounded the corner in front of them at top speed. Barking wildly, the mutt bounded directly into their path. Una and Shirley stopped short to avoid collision, but Carl leapt back a pace with a little yelp of his own. The dog was gone in the blinking of an eye, but Carl stood stock still for a long moment.

"Are you alright?" Una asked, resting her hand on Carl's sleeve.

Carl shuddered back into animation at her touch. "Fine. I'm fine."

They resumed their walk, but chatter ceased. Una attempted to assess Carl out of the corner of her eye, only to meet Shirley doing the same. He gave her a tight smile and said, with every pretense of casualness, "What's left to get, Una?"

"Just eggs, I think," she replied. "If we can find any good ones cheap, that is. The dairy prices are scandalous and half of them blood-rotted."

"You could keep hens at Aster House," Shirley suggested. "We could build you a coop, couldn't we, Carl?"
Carl nodded faintly, but made no other reply.

"That would be kind of you." Una felt that she should take Carl's hand, but she didn't want to fuss over him. They were close to the park now; perhaps Shirley could take him over to rest in the shade while she finished up the shopping.

Una was on the point of suggesting this when it happened.

Nothing very dramatic. Just a fruit-seller shifting a bushel of apples, only to find that the bottom of the basket had come loose. Dozens of apples poured onto the ground, thumping with a soft, rapid *thwackity thwackity thwackity* and rolling over Una's feet.

Carl staggered. His face, pale before, had gone opaque and sweaty. His knees buckled and he clutched at Shirley's arm as he crumpled.

He never hit the ground. Before Una could make any sense of what was happening, Shirley had scooped Carl into his arms without apparent effort and was off running toward the green expanse of the park. He dodged bicycles and pedestrians with such nimble indifference that he might have been swooping through open air, rather than a crowded market street.

Una left the basket of groceries where Shirley had dropped it and tried her best to keep up. The crowd that had melted in front of Shirley's urgency closed around Una, swallowing her in a wall of elbows and cart wheels and bustling skirts.

When she finally caught up with them in the shade of a thick-trunked oak, Una gasped, though not from the stitch in her side.

Carl lay propped against the tree, clusters of white-and-purple crocuses crushed under him. His body had gone rigid along grotesque lines, mouth twisted and gaping like a landed flounder, hands gnarled into barbed claws. Una barley recognized his face, distorted and sagging, with the sheen of a yellow-waxed Edam. He seemed to be fighting to keep his eye open as it rolled and flicked and quivered. Carl's eyepatch had slipped into his hair, and the sight of his uncovered face jolted Una. She had never seen it before and was ashamed of the lurch of revulsion she felt at the glimpse of milky ruin under the lidless maze of scar.

Shirley knelt over Carl, holding him gently around the shoulders and murmuring soft things:

"You're alright, Kit. You're safe. We're in the park in Kingsport, under an oak tree. I'm here. You're safe. Just close your eye. It's alright. You don't have to do anything or say anything. You're safe."

Una stepped to his side. Without turning, Shirley addressed her in an implausibly neutral tone.

"Find Jem." Then it was back to the soothing stream of patter, bathing Carl in gentle waves of reassurance.

Una backed away a few steps, eyes still riveted to the cered round of Carl's face, then turned and fled.

She tore through the park from one known haunt to another. They could not have gone far, no matter how much Faith might protest that she was perfectly well, thank you, and would everyone please just stop fussing?

But Jem and Faith were not at the gazebo and they were not in the shaded spruce grove, nor walking along the promenade. Una was about to double back when she spotted the glint of Jem's hair peeking over a knoll overlooking the harbor. She nearly sobbed in relief.

Back through the park then, with Jem loping along beside her, Faith calling a promise that she
would catch up in her own time.

When they reached the oak, Jem knelt beside Shirley as Una stood back, struggling to catch her breath. She noted that Shirley had pulled the eyepatch back over Carl's scars, not, she suspected, because he was unused to the sight, but because other people were on the way, and he had a care to cover what nakedness he could.

"Has this happened before?" Jem asked.

"Not quite this bad," Shirley replied, voice low and studiously calm as he caressed one of the taloned hands.

"But he's had attacks?"

"Yes. But not . . . his hands . . ."

"It's alright. Tetany. It looks bad, but it's only because he's hyperventilating." Jem pressed his fingers to Carl's wrist, taking his pulse as he surveyed his symptoms. "Carl? I know you can hear me, Carl. It's Jem. You're having an acute anxiety attack. But you are going to be fine. I know it feels like you can't breathe, but there is nothing wrong with your lungs. It will pass in a few minutes. All you have to do is breathe. You're doing great, Carl. Just breathe. In and out. That's the ticket."

Faith waddled up behind Una, panting. "Is he alright?" she hissed.

"I don't know," Una squeaked. "Jem says he is, but he might only be trying to calm him."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. We were just walking through the market. And there was a dog and apples and Carl just fell into a fit . . ."

"That's right," Jem was saying, his voice low and smooth. "Much better. Your heart rate is slowing, Carl. That's very good. Just keep on breathing, nice and slow. Una?"

Una jumped at this summons, springing forward to attend Jem however she could.

"Una, run back to Aster House, will you? Have the girls make up a bed. Warm some blankets."

She nodded and had already turned to go when Carl spoke.

"Wait . . ."

A piteous plea, though Una was not sure if it was meant for her. She sought Carl's face and saw that he did seem to look a little better. His mouth no longer sagged, and the strange waxenness of his skin was beginning to fade back into translucence. With obvious effort, Carl opened his eye and fixed it unmistakably on Shirley.

"Home."

Shirley bent close to catch his words, hand never leaving hand. "Aster House is closer. You can rest there."

Una was relieved to see Carl shake his head, if only because it meant that he could.

"It's no bother, Carl," Jem said with the same kind efficiency that Una remembered hearing in Dr. Blythe's voice the day the Good Conduct Club had starved her into fainting.

"Can we just . . . go home?" This to Shirley, in tones of such naked longing that Una started. An emergency would cover a multitude of sins, but it wouldn't make Jem and Faith unhear anything Carl might say in his distress . . .

"Shhhh," Shirley soothed. He looked to Jem for permission.

Jem frowned. "He seems to be alright. Able to talk. Even his hands are relaxing. I suppose he can go home if he wants to. But I'll come with you."

"No," Shirley said, a bit too quickly. "I mean, there's no need. I can get him home on my own."

"I need to observe him a bit more. Make sure all his vitals get back to normal."

Now it was Shirley who was tense, back stiff, eyes carefully veiled. Una saw a tiny muscle jump in his cheek and knew she must act at once.

"Shirley," she blurted, "give me your key."

"What?"

"Your key," Una repeated, holding out her hand. "I'll run along to your boarding house and make sure . . . tea is ready. I'll make up Carl's bed for him."

Una and Shirley locked eyes, blue and brown, and she saw relief flicker there. He dug in a pocket, pressed the key to her palm.

"Thanks, Una," he said heartily. "It's the third floor . . . end of the hall to your left."

"Will they let you in?" Faith asked skeptically.

Una had never entered the house where Carl and Shirley boarded, but she had heard enough to know that no one was likely to take any notice of who came or went.

"It's an emergency," she said with more resolve than she felt. "If anyone asks, I can explain."

She could, but she hoped fervently that she would not have to. Una walked briskly north from the park, blood thrumming in her ears. She must press on, though her lungs burned and her shins had begun to protest all this hurrying to and fro. Past the grocers and the stationers, past the tailors and the post office, past the brooding hulk of All Saints Cathedral. This last seemed to glower reproachfully, all dark stone and hunched shoulders, making Una long for St Elizabeth and her roses. St. Elizabeth would understand, surely, but not All Saints would.

To steady herself, Una began hum under her breath.

. . . fear not, I am with you, oh be not dismayed, for I am thy God and will still give thee aid . . .

A good hymn, and one of the few she had heard sung in both the Glen St. Mary Presbyterian Church and the Cathedral.

The verses of "How Firm a Foundation" carried her through the center of Kingsport, north and west, to the margins of the blast zone and the derelict building her brother called home.

It terrified Una. Glassless windows dark and empty, sagging steps collapsing on themselves. As for
its unsavory inhabitants . . .

Carl lives here.

The thought brought Una up short. He was an unsavory inhabitant. Someone to be feared and avoided. Her dear, gentle brother, with his love for all creation and his ruined nerves. Was anyone who lived here less precious?

No.

Una might wrinkle her nose at the sour smell in the hall and shy from the cobwebbed walls of the stairwell, but she would not be dismayed. She climbed with purpose, seeking the room at the end of the hall and whatever might be in it that could make Shirley Blythe afraid.

. . . at home or abroad, on the land or the sea, as thy days may demand, so thy succor shall be . . .

Una unlocked the door, took a breath through her mouth, and stepped into the room. The problem was immediately obvious. Una felt her face flush to see the beds pushed together, but there was no time for squeamishness.

Gingerly, Una pulled on the frame of one bed, but found that it did not budge. On closer inspection, she discovered the belts that held them fast, head and foot, and whisked them away. It was no trouble, really. The frames sighed as they eased apart, and scraped against the floor, but the boards were old and marked and dingy enough that it hardly mattered. It was the work of moments to refold the blankets and tuck in the sheets, Una's deft hands lifting and smoothing.

By the time Shirley carried Carl over the threshold with Jem bringing up the rear, tea was steeping on the table, with another kettleful singing on the little corner stove and a woolen blanket warming before the grate. A stack of fresh towels folded to Mrs. Langevin's exacting specifications waited on the washstand, wanting only the hot water to make a welcoming bath. One of the beds was turned down and Carl's pajamas and dressing gown laid out neatly across the foot.

Shirley's eyes fluttered shut in relief, and Una accepted his silent nod of thanks. He laid Carl on the bed and began to wrangle his shoes while Jem checked his pulse and Una poured tea all around.

"I'm sorry," Carl repeated wretchedly. "I feel like such a sap."

"Don't apologize," Shirley said, so tenderly that Una thought the jig must be up after all.

If Jem noticed anything, he did not betray it. "Good," he said. "Your pulse is much better, Carl. Are you feeling better?"

"I'm feeling stupid."

"Don't." It was Jem this time, and Una felt suddenly that she was intruding by listening in on a conversation that she had no part in and never could. "You've got nothing to be ashamed of. We all get anxious sometimes."

"Don't see you collapsing at the market, do I?" Carl muttered.

"Maybe not," Jem said evenly. "But you're not with me in the middle of the night, are you?"

Carl regarded him closely, blue eye keen to suss out whether Jem was merely humoring him. Evidently concluding that he was not, Carl relaxed into the pillows.
"Can you manage some tea?"

Una brought it before Carl could reply, perching on the edge of the bed to help him guide the cup with hands that were still not quite governable.

"He should have a bath," Jem said to Shirley.

"I can do it."

"I'll help you."

"No," Shirley said, resolute. "You should walk Una home."

Jem pursed his lips, obviously seeing the sense in that. Of course, women bathed and dressed sick family members all the time, but the emergency of the situation was passing. Jem seemed to waver for a moment, caught between duty to his patient and concern for Una's modesty.

"And you need to make sure Faith got home from the park," Shirley added.

That settled the matter.

"I'll check in tomorrow," Jem said, rising from the bedside.

"No," Carl said. "We'll come for Sunday dinner. Don't worry. We'll be there."

Una set the tea aside and took Carl's hand. "It's alright if you'd rather rest tomorrow. I'll bring you something."

"I'm fine, Una. Please. I feel bad enough already, causing such a fuss."

It was a kindness to let him send her away. Una bent and kissed Carl on the forehead, his skin still chilled and clammy under her lips. A warm wash would do him good.

Taking her leave, Una locked eyes with Shirley, who gave her the barest of nods. Una felt something residual and protective disintegrate. If asked, she would have said that she had already forgiven Shirley for the heartache he had caused at the end of the war, but now it was really true. She knew now that this was not the first time he had talked Carl through an attack; it was not the first time he had seen him without his eyepatch. No promises or vows could have convinced Una to trust Shirley with Carl's heart, but this did. She nodded back, and left her brother in good hands.
"You cannot do it on your own," Di snapped, stamping her foot in frustration. "Your first delivery? You'll kill them both!"

"I will not!" Jem protested.

The Aster House sitting room was large enough to accommodate a dozen well-behaved guests, but seemed far too small for two Blythes bent on shouting one another down. Between the red hair and flushed cheeks and stormy expressions, Una thought they resembled a pair of sparring roosters. She squeezed Faith's hand and attempted to blend into the sofa.

"Now hold on, both of you . . ." Dr. Blythe said, stepping in between his children, only to be assailed simultaneously from both flanks.

"He doesn't have any idea what he's doing, Dad!"

"I took obstetrics this term!"

"Oh, well then you're the expert, aren't you?"

"I don't need any help!"

"You certainly do! I'm not going to let you endanger my best friend just because your ego . . ."

"She's my wife!"

"Dad's delivered thousands of babies! I've delivered dozens! You've never done a delivery on your own, not once!"

"I've assisted! Dad, tell her . . ."

Una looked up at the quiet clink of china close at hand. Sylvia was bending toward the sofa, holding out a tray laden with almond sponge and teacups.

"What do you say, Faith?" she whispered, dark eyes atwinkle. "I'll hold the door and you make a run for it."

"I'm ready to have this baby alone in a potato field," Faith grinned, taking the largest slice of cake. "We might even make it back before they notice I'm gone."

"Una and I will cover for you," Sylvia promised stoutly, offering Una a cup and a wink.

". . . hardly means you're qualified . . ."

". . . do you honestly think . . ."

Faith nudged Una with her elbow. "You'll stay with me, won't you?"

"D-d-during the birth?" Una stammered.
"Of course during the birth," Faith smiled conspiratorially. "I'll need someone to remember I'm there, won't I?"

Una nodded slowly. "If you want me. But wouldn't you rather have Di? She'll know what to do so much better than I will."

"No, silly!" Faith said with a light poke in the ribs. "I want you."

Una blushed into her tea, trying to look anywhere but at the raving Blythes. How could Faith take this all so calmly? The discord was making Una's flesh creep and the saucer rattle in her hand.

"Enough! Both of you!" Dr. Blythe deployed his sternest voice, the one generally used to reprimand naughty dogs who stole from the pantry and burly fishermen who refused to rest long enough to let broken bones set.

Di and Jem quieted, both puffing, identical expressions of stubborn pique on their florid faces.

"Here is what we are going to do," Dr. Blythe explained. "Jem will attend the delivery on his own . . ."

"But Dad . . ."

Dr. Blythe held up a hand to quell Di's complaint, "... and Di and I will sit right outside, ready to assist at a moment's notice."

Faith clutched Una's free hand and struggled to her feet. "And Una will be in the room with me as well," she announced, causing every Blythe head in the room to whip in her direction. "Yes, hello! I've been here the whole time! You all can work out the medical side of things among yourselves, but I'll have Una."

Three pairs of quizzical eyes fixed on Una, who was just then regretting her decision not to join a foreign mission.

"But Faith," Jem said, crossing the room and taking her by the hand. "I can do this on my own. I promise."

"You most certainly can't," Faith snorted. "For one, you aren't the one giving birth. And while I have every confidence in your abilities as a doctor, I'll have Una or I'll have no one at all."

"I'll guard the door for you," Sylvia smirked behind her teacup.

"But . . ."

Faith raised a delicate eyebrow and the matter was settled.

***

On Sunday, Una's eyes were closed, head bowed in prayer as the All Saints congregation shuffled to and from communion, when she felt a gentle touch on her shoulder. Jerry had slipped into the pew beside her, dark eyes flashing.

"It's time."

***

"I told you to let her stay til the end of the service," Faith scolded when Jerry delivered Una to the
apartment on the top floor of a converted mansion near the medical school. "It will be ages and ages yet."

"You never can tell," grinned Jem, the red curls at his temples already slightly damp with sweat, though he hadn't done anything more than roll up his sleeves.

"Oh, I shouldn't have told any of you," Faith snapped. "I'll know better next time."

Dr. Blythe came out of the kitchen, looking nearly as excited as Jem and doing no better at hiding it. "Di's putting the water on. Have you prepped the bed, Jem? Oh, hello, Una. Jerry."

"Not yet," Jem said. "But I have all the linens and the rubber sheet . . ."

"Well, let's get to it," Dr. Blythe said, clapping Jem on the back and steering him toward the bedroom.

"I'll be going, too," said Jerry. "Any updates for the folks at Aster House?"

Faith spread her hands and looked down at her distended belly. "Does it look like there are any updates?"

"Sorry," Jerry grinned. "But they will insist on asking me what they can do to help."

Una was quite sure that Faith was on the point of telling all and sundry to take a long walk off a short pier, so she was surprised when her sister paused in thought. "What do you say, Una," she mused. "Do you fancy some lemon tarts?"

"Lemon tarts?"

"Better yet, monkey-faces. Oooh, or plum puffs! Yes, tell them we require some of Aunt Marilla's plum puffs. Does that sound good to you, Una?"

"I'm not hungry . . ."

"Well of course not, silly. But Nan and Mrs. Blythe will go spare just waiting for news all day. This will give them something to do!"

"But it's Sunday . . ."

"All the more reason for them to keep busy! They can't shop and they won't clean, not on a Sunday, though I suppose Nan could stretch to lace-making. But baking for the whims of a woman in labor? I'm sure there's a Sabbath exemption for that."

"So . . . plum puffs?" Jerry asked.

"Better make it all three," Faith said solemnly.

When Jerry had gone, Faith leaned back into the cushions of the sofa and sighed. Una sat beside her, perched gingerly on the edge."Are you alright, Faith? I do want to help . . ."

"Oh, just entertain me," Faith said airily. "It's barely started. I really shouldn't have said anything until I was further along. Now they won't even let me go downstairs in case I can't get back up again."

"Well . . ." Una cast an eye over the little apartment. It was scrupulously clean thanks to a
visitation from Nan, Sylvia, and Mrs. Blythe that had left every floorboard scrubbed, every curtain laundered, and the pantry set into the sort of order it had never known before. The apartment was small, but escaped feeling cramped due to the abundance of natural light from its many windows. A single main room under eaves of unpredictable height served as both sitting room and dining area, depending on what furniture one focused on. On the side facing the street, a turret of five windows surrounded a little nook that Jem kept as his office, the desk piled high with his textbooks and papers. This was the only untidy surface in the place, which was notably uncluttered thanks to Faith's economical approach to housekeeping.

"The fewer things I have, the fewer things I have to clean," she had explained at a recent Sunday dinner. Carl had laughed and told her of Thoreau and his disdain for the devil's doorknobs.

Despite her best efforts to avoid them, Faith was in for a major incursion of household goods. Susan, Rosemary, and Miss Cornelia had been sewing industriously all spring, their combined efforts packed neatly into a trunk in the corner of the sitting room along with similar tributes from Rilla, Persis, and Mrs. Ford. Una herself had contributed a stack of diapers, all as beautifully hemmed as if they were ornamental cushions, along with an exquisite bonnet and sweater set knit from cashmere yarn so fine the garments ran like quicksilver. There were new towels, new sheets, a bewildering assortment of specialized dishware, pins, creams, and various other impedimenta obscure in origin and implementation. All of this was packed in boxes, anticipating the long-awaited moment when it would be called up to serve the new arrival.

"... I could open the windows?" Una ventured, not being able to ascertain anything else that needed doing.

"Yes, let's," Faith agreed, beginning to hoist herself out of the sofa. "It can get awfully stuffy up . . ."

Suddenly, she darted out a hand and gripped Una's arm.

"Faith?"


Una blanched, the lingering pain in her forearm nothing to the clenching of her own gut.

"You should stay sitting," she squeaked.

"No, I'm fine," Faith said with a breezy tone Una could not fathom. "They've been coming and going all morning. Let's open those windows."

The windows were tricky, with thick layers of paint and uneven sashes making them paradoxically both difficult to open and in need of propping to stay that way. They had only managed to wrestle three into compliance before Faith tensed again, sucking in a long breath between gritted teeth.

"Another contraction?" Di asked, drying her hands on a towel as she emerged from the kitchen. "Getting closer together, aren't they."

Faith nodded, but did not reply.

"That's good!" Di beamed.

"What's good?" Jem asked, materializing at the bedroom door.

"Contractions," Di said briskly, running her towel over a perfectly clean tabletop.
Jem groaned, looking at his watch. "Faith, you're supposed to tell me! How will I know whether they're getting closer together?"

"They are," Faith said dryly.

"No sign of your water breaking, though?" Jem asked, tilting his head as he surveyed his wife, the floor, the sofa . . .

Faith drew in a breath as deep as her constricted lungs would allow. "Here is what you are going to do," she said in a clipped tone that went Dr. Blythe's one better. "Jem, go find a deck of cards. Di, there's a cribbage board on the bookshelf; set it up here. We'll play until I can't anymore, and anyone who says anything obstetrics-adjacent before I say it myself goes directly to Aster House for the duration. Is that understood?"

Thus, Una Meredith found herself holding a hand of cards for the first time in her life, and on a Sunday no less. Dr. Blythe patiently explained the suits and different ways of scoring points, adopting Una as his teammate in an otherwise cutthroat match. Faith took breaks at irregular intervals to grimace through one contraction and another, but said not a single word about them, leaving the entire table breathless.

They played to 61 and then to 121 and then through again. Finally, sometime in the mid-afternoon, when Faith stretched across the table to move her peg, she gave a little oh! and pressed her hand to her belly.

"That will be the water, I expect," she said, and indeed it was.

Una felt a lurch of indistinguishable fear and excitement. Di and Dr. Blythe both set down their cards, but said nothing. Jem was half-standing, hovering over his seat like a sprinter poised for the starting gun.

"Oh, alright," Faith said, throwing up her hands. "It's time."

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"I don't want to lie down!"

"I swear to God, Faith, if you were this unreasonable on the obstetrical ward, they'd have sedated you by now."

"Well thank goodness I'm not on the ob . . ." Faith's words were cut off by another pain.

"Breathe through it, love," Jem said, his voice gone instantly gentle as Faith grasped both his hands. "Breathe. Breathe."

Una stood behind her sister, rubbing her back with firm strokes, praying silently and unceasingly. She did not stop the massage, even when she felt the muscles under her fingers go lax, Faith's shoulder's slumping.

"It feels . . . good . . . to stand," Faith panted. "If I lie down . . . I won't get up."

"You have to lie down at some point," Jem pleaded, wincing as he flexed his left hand.

"Why? Won't a bit of gravity help?"

Una flicked a glance at Jem, who was losing both the animation of frustration and the energy of
"You've been up all night," he said, voice cracking. "You'll need energy when it's time to push."

The muscles under Una's fingers went flat and hard even before Faith moaned. Her voice tracked the contraction, growing in intensity until she growled a guttural snarl at the peak, then subsiding.

"I just want to check you," Jem said softly. "Can you sit for just one minute? You can get up again if you like, I promise."

Leaning on Una for support, Faith lowered herself onto a wooden chair, sitting forward on the seat so Jem could assess her progress. He knelt, felt, cleaned his hands on the towel Una handed him.

"Not long now, I don't think."

"This is a good chair," Faith said vaguely.

Jem grinned and kissed her on the cheek. "See? Let yourself rest between contractions."

"Here comes another . . ."

When it had subsided, Una offered Faith a sip of cold tea, which she accepted gratefully.

"I just feel all . . . sticky." Faith complained, tugging at her night dress. "Trapped. Itchy."

"Would it be alright if we took off your dress?" Una asked "Combed your hair?"

Faith nodded her assent. In the gaps between the next several contractions, Una and Jem relieved Faith of her sweat-damp garments, combed her hair and braided it away from her neck, and sponged down her back with cool water. She sat on the edge of the chair, arching her back to meet each pain, the glowing expanse of her skin slick and golden in the lamplight as if she had swallowed the sun. Jem coaxed and soothed, providing ballast against the waves that seized her and comfort when they subsided. Una knelt at Faith's feet, bathing them in a basin and squeezing her swollen toes gently.

"That's heavenly," Faith moaned, even as another contraction took her.

Jem checked her again and stood up radiant. "I think it's time to meet our little visitor," he grinned.

"You're doing great, Faith," Jem said, sweat pouring from his forehead in rivulets as he knelt on the bed. Una would have offered him a towel, but she was so entwined with Faith, hand to hand and head to head, that she could hardly spare a thought for her brother-in-law, let alone a gesture. He seemed to be getting on alright, though, his energy renewed by the urgency of the moment. "I can see the top of the head. Next contraction, you're going to give it everything you've got, ok? The biggest push in the world. Imagine you're a giantess or an elephant or a speeding train or . . ."

"Oh, shut up, will you?" Faith spat, attempting to kick Jem, who dodged.

"That's the spirit, love. Put all that into the next push, alright?"

Faith merely grunted, but when the next contraction came, she snorted like a dragon and bore down with such ferocity that Una felt her own hand buckle. Faith pushed long and longer, her whole body hard as iron, until all the tension dissolved in a single whoosh as the baby slid free into Jem's waiting hands.
Faith gasped; Una looked, half fearful, but Jem was grinning. The baby had thrown his arms wide and rigid, like a crab fending off a seagull, and after one breathless moment of surprise, opened his mouth and wailed. Una gaped at the child, who seemed both beautiful and grotesque, wet and purple and squashed-faced and absolutely enormous. He squalled lustily in his father's hands, twisting and thrashing in protest of his recent ordeal.


Jem placed the slick newborn on Faith's chest, letting her hold him as all four of them attempted to breathe. Faith clutched her son with one hand and reached for Jem with the other.

"You did it," she gasped.

He laughed, eyes glistening as he bent to kiss her. "Hardly. You did it, love."

"He's alright?" Faith asked, peering down at the baby.

"He certainly is. Perfect. He must weigh ten pounds."

Faith beamed, eyes aglow with the holy passion of motherhood, her joy and Jem's so radiant that Una felt herself an intruder. She would have slipped out the door then and there, but Jem spoke to her unexpectedly, making her jump.

"Una, will you bring a towel? And stay right here with Faith while I take care of the afterbirth."

Una did as she was bid, approaching cautiously and draping the towel over the baby's back with exquisite gentleness as Jem clamped and cut the umbilical cord.

"Say hello to your Auntie Una," Faith said, turning the child so that Una could see his face.

Una bent low over them both and offered her gory nephew a delicate kiss. "He's beautiful, Faith."

"He is, isn't he?"

"Does he had a name?" Una smiled. "Jem Jr.?"

Faith snorted derisively. "As if that one needs to be more pleased with himself."

Jem grinned up from the end of the bed at this invocation. "Quite impossible at the moment," he assured her. "Alright, Faith, I'm going to need you to push one last time. Maybe let Una take little not-Jem for a minute?"

"Here now, laddie," Una crooned, scooping the baby into a warm towel. "Let's get you cleaned up for Mummy."

It was the work of moments to sponge blood and vernix from the wee face, cover the impossibly soft cheeks with kisses, and wrap the sturdy little body in a blanket Una had made for the occasion. The baby snuffled, but seemed to be settling into the new world of air and light, no longer howling in protest. Una noted that he had beautiful little ears that lay flat against his head, and was pleased that she would have something to tell Susan. Una did not swaddle him, knowing that Jem would want to check him over in more detail, but pulled the blanket snug around him for warmth.

Turning back to the bed, Una placed the sighing bundle in her sister's waiting arms and pressed a farewell kiss to the damp curls escaping over her forehead. Faith did not look away from her son's face, but smiled at Una's kiss. When Jem had finished his ministrations and come to sit beside his
wife and child, Una took her leave. As noiselessly as a little gray mouse, she slipped from the room, leaving the new family sobbing together on the bed.

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"Everything alright in there?" Di asked, rising to her feet as Una closed the door softly behind her. Una only nodded, not quite able to speak, but showing a smile through her own tears.

"Nothing wrong with the little one's lungs, is there?" Dr. Blythe grinned, lacing his hands behind his head. "Boy or girl?"

"Boy," Una whispered.

Perhaps it was strange that becoming a grandfather should shave decades off Dr. Blythe, but joy radiated from him in waves and he looked half a boy himself.

"Should we go in to help?" Di asked. "They've both been up all night. They'll need clean sheets, clean clothes . . ."

"In a few minutes," Dr. Blythe nodded, his voice husky even through his smile. "We'll just give them a few minutes together."

"Perhaps tea?" Una said, stepping toward the kitchen.

"Goodness, Una, you sit!" Di said, bounding into the kitchen herself.

Dr. Blythe offered Una a chair, but did not require her to speak, for which she was shamelessly grateful. They sat in silence as a windy golden sunrise peeked in through the curtains. Perhaps not as glorious as triumphant dawn emerging from the depths of the gulf, but quite nice enough to be getting on with.

Di returned with tea and warm scones slathered with more butter and jam than Una ever would have allowed herself. She had just taken her first heavenly bite when the bedroom door clicked open. Three heads turned as one to behold Jem, bearing a swaddled bundle in the crook of his arm and smiling from the tips of his toes to the whorls of his own excellent ears.

"A young gentleman to see you," he said, settling the baby into Dr. Blythe's arms. "May I present Number One: Samuel Meredith Blythe."

Dr. Blythe nodded, holding his son's eye for a long, proud moment before greeting his grandson. "Hello, small Samuel."

"Samuel?" Di asked, copper brows meeting in a V of consternation. "That's not a family name, is it?"

"No," Jem cleared his throat. "He was a very dear friend."

"In France?"

"In Germany."

Dr. Blythe reached for Jem's scar-mapped hand and clasped it convulsively in his own. They worshipped together, exclaiming over Sam's size, noting that he'd be another in the rosy-golden line of Merediths, though Dr. Blythe seemed reluctant to abandon all hope that he might be red-headed after all. Together, they enumerated each of his tiny toes and wee, precious fingers.
Una abandoned her scone, leaving fathers and sons to their hard-won joy. She followed Di to the bedroom, where a quarter hour of brisk tucking, sponging, and plaiting saw Faith returned to drowsy comfort.

"Sleep, dearest," Una crooned, stroking her sister's hair.

"You'll bring Sam?" Faith yawned. "When he's hungry?"

"Of course," Una promised, privately thinking she stood little chance in vying for that particular honor.

She stayed by the bed as Faith dozed, tracing the shining highlights of her hair. In a little while, Una would go with Di to Aster House to summon Mrs. Blythe, would share her bursting joy with Carl and Jerry, would accept congratulations from Shirley and Sylvia and Nan and Emile and Marie, would smile at Claude as he gamboled about singing bé-bé! bé-bé! bé-bé! would ensure that someone went off to send a telegram to the manse. But for now, she would sit with Faith, thanking God that she was delivered safe, wondering how it was possible for her beautiful sister to have grown still more beautiful.
“Now remember this time,” Harry said as he stubbed out his cigarette, “stay up on the balls of your feet. Keep your weight forward. That will make the turns easier.”

Carl nodded, bouncing up onto his toes. There was a lot to remember about the tango — balance forward, crisp movements, tension in the posture — but he had just about gotten it right on the last run-through. All except the turns.

They had drawn the blinds and shoved Harry’s bed over to one side of his room, rolling up the carpet to make space for dancing. It was the last Saturday night of the term and the last chance to practice before Carl headed home for the summer. Carl was awfully glad to be going home to the quiet places by the woods, to fields of clover and timothy, to buzzing bees and the wide open shore. But he would miss these evenings with Harry and Anthony.

Carl adjusted the peacock-blue scarf Harry had looped around his neck. It was prettier than his mink stole and had fewer eyes, so Carl counted himself lucky. He had also accepted a light dusting of rouge from Anthony, who had kissed him on the nose and pronounced him perfect. Carl hadn’t always gone in for drag, not liking to be reminded of the days when the Good Conduct Club had made him wear Una’s dresses as punishment. But a little was alright, among friends.

Over at the desk, Anthony had three glasses set out beside the phonograph and a stainless steel pitcher in which he was concocting a second round of applejack sours. The first was already tickling through Carl’s veins, carrying that pleasantly pliable feeling to every extremity. When Harry clicked across the bare floor to take him in his arms, Carl relaxed into the embrace, smiling into the mink. Then the castanets rattled their introduction and Harry stepped off, leading Carl in a glide as smooth as the little room would allow.

This song was a jaunty, syncopated tune that extolled the many delights of Havana. Flowing booze. Dancing. Freedom.

*Take a friend’s advice,*
*Drinking in a cellar isn’t nice;*
*Anybody who has got the price*
*Should be a Cuban!*

Carl wasn’t quite sure he agreed with the bit about cellars. Plenty of nice things had happened behind locked doors this past year. Were happening right this very minute, in fact.

“Keep your shoulders back,” Harry warned, pressing on Carl’s spine to support his posture. “Now try the kick again. High in the back, then around front.”

Harry’s pumps flashed and Carl did his best to mimic without taking him out at the knees. The second attempt was better and they took the third at speed. It was a marvelous feeling, moving like this, even if the space was too small. Carl had never been permitted to dance back home in Glen St. Mary, but had picked it up easily enough at Queens. Redmond had dances as well, both the public variety and the other sort, when Wilkie Marshall would find them a restaurant or a club to host a private party. Friends only. They had only managed two of those this year, but there would be more next year and Carl would be ready to tango.
He was ready when the turn came, staying up on his toes and following Harry’s lead. It was a quick spin, but Carl kept his balance and came out of it beautifully, flowing right into the next step as if he’d done it a hundred times. Anthony whistled approval and Harry grinned. Then he sent Carl spinning again and a third time and a fourth, faster and faster until it all unraveled and they collapsed onto the bed with shouts of laughter.

“Brava!” Anthony said, handing each of them a glass when they had recovered. “Putting the Castles to shame, you are.”

Carl sipped his cocktail and scooted over to make room for Anthony on the bed. They rested against the wall and dangled their feet over the edge, Carl’s loafers hovering between Anthony’s slippers and Harry’s pumps.

“Is that Cuba song new, Harry?” Carl asked. “I don’t think I’ve heard it before.”

“Yes. Just got it this afternoon.”

“Been to the five and dime again, have you?” Anthony asked archly.

Harry pursed his lips. “Perhaps.”

“And that wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain store manager, would it?”

“Store manager?” Carl hadn’t heard anything at all about a store manager, but judging by the smirk on Anthony’s face and the blooming flush on Harry’s, there was plenty to tell.

“His name is Elbert,” Anthony said. “Or Norbert, maybe. Yes, dear Norbert with the most excellent chin.”

Harry tossed his head. “His name is Herbert, as you know perfectly well. But yes, he does have a lovely chin.”

“And a lovely wife.”

This seemed a minor consideration to Harry, who dismissed it with a wave of his hand. “We’re careful. She’ll never know.”

That seemed unlikely to Carl, but he buried his nose in his drink rather than saying so. Just as well. Anthony was pestering Harry for details, but getting nothing but deflections in return.

“Did I ever tell you about my ten days’ leave in Nice with the café owner?” Harry asked, stroking his mink.

“No again,” Anthony grumbled, but Carl settled in.

“I haven’t heard it.”

Harry was more than happy to remedy the oversight. Carl knew little of either Harry’s war or Anthony’s, except that Harry had been in the Ambulance Corps from soup to nuts and that Anthony had spent three years behind a typewriter at divisional HQ and was vaguely ashamed of it. Not that Carl had told them much either. It didn’t really bear thinking about, not unless he wanted to slip into a fit. But ten days’ leave in Nice ought to be alright.

“He had the darkest eyes you ever saw,” Harry was saying. “I went into the café for a cup of coffee my first night in town and ended up staying for breakfast.”
Carl giggled into his glass while Anthony reminded Harry of details he had relayed in previous tellings. History’s most perfect omelette. A midnight dip in the sea sans vêtement. A sprig of rosemary tucked into the folded laundry Harry carried back to the front.

“He gave me that scarf,” Harry sighed, reaching toward Carl’s chest to twist a blue silk end around his finger.

“What was his name?” Carl asked.

Harry shook his head with a rueful smile. “A girl’s gotta keep something close to the vest, eh?”

“You’re the very soul of discretion,” Anthony teased, but Carl saw the hint of a gleam in Harry’s eye. Some things were too precious to share, even among friends.

“What about you, Carl?” Harry asked. “Any memorable holidays in France?”

Carl blushed and Anthony reached for the pitcher, refilling his glass to the brim.

“I did manage to meet up with Shirley in Paris once,” he admitted.

“What?”

Harry made a show of swooning against Carl’s shoulder. “Did you run across the plaza into one another’s arms?”

“Not quite. The truth is that I didn’t recognize him.”

“What?” Anthony was incredulous. “I’m fairly certain that’s not how it’s supposed to go.”

“Maybe not. But when I joined up, he was still sixteen and skinny as a rail. And then in Paris he . . . wasn’t.”

“Lucky you,” Harry smirked.

Anthony looked thoughtful. “I hadn’t realized you were older.”

“He’s only just turned twenty-one a few weeks ago.”

“Cradle-robber,” Harry laughed, poking Carl in the ribs. “And where is the fair Shirley tonight?”

Carl’s smile retreated, but his voice remained cheerful. “He’s playing poker at Wilkie’s.”

It was impossible to miss the look that Harry and Anthony passed between them, even if one was determinedly applying oneself to a beverage.
“And that’s . . . alright with you?”

“Sure,” Carl chirped.

“If you say so.”

It was fine. Really, it was. Shirley could have friends too, couldn’t he? It’s not like he would want to be here, learning to tango and swapping tales. And Carl had no poker face.

“Oh, don’t mind Anthony,” Harry said, shooting his friend a warning look. “He’s been perfectly demented on the subject of Wilkie lately.”

“Have not!”

“Really? I suppose it was a different Anthony who told me I’d need to see myself home from the last club night and wandered off into the dark with the man himself? Lunacy.”

Anthony lunged, aiming a swat at Harry’s ear, but succeeding only in sending the dregs of Carl’s cocktail splashing onto the stole. Harry shrieked while Carl blotted the wet spots with the trailing edge of his scarf and assured Harry that river-dwelling minks had water-resistant fur. Anthony only cackled.

“See?” Harry huffed. “An absolute madman!”

“Did you really go home with Wilkie?” Carl asked.

“Maybe.”

“And?”

“And it was no one’s finest hour.”

“Serves you right,” said Harry, with an air of superiority. “Only a complete idiot would go after Wilkie just to . . .”

Just to what, Carl never found out, given that there was still a bit of applejack in Anthony’s glass and the poor, suffering mink was assaulted on purpose this time. Harry cursed a blue streak, but Anthony was unmoved.

“Serves you right as well,” he said.

There was an edge in the remark that made Carl wonder what on earth was going on. He had obviously missed something, but that wasn’t unusual. Harry and Anthony had done their freshman year at Redmond before the war and even though they had welcomed Carl into their friendship this year, he still wasn’t fluent in their intimate shorthand. Carl would have expected Harry to be justly furious at the insult to his stole, so he was surprised to see something like sympathy on the round, florid face. There was a silent apology and an equally silent acceptance that made Carl wonder . . .

“You two were never a couple, were you?”

Harry said “very briefly” at the same time Anthony said “a long time ago,” and both of them chuckled.

“It was . . .” Harry began, but trailed off, nose wrinkling as he chased after a diplomatic word.

“A disaster,” Anthony supplied.
“I was going to say catastrophe.”

“But you stayed friends?”

The two men exchanged a look, and Anthony spoke for both of them. “Just because we weren’t compatible as lovers doesn’t mean we didn’t love one another.”

“Besides,” Harry added cheerfully, “who else would put up with either of us?”

Carl grinned. “I think you said his name was Dilbert?”

Harry squealed and bore Carl down into the bed, tickling him viciously while Anthony held him down until they were all quite breathless with laughter.

The lupins were out by the time the North line train carried the Kingsport Contingent home to Glen St. Mary. Sprays of blue transformed the railside ditches into inlets, rippling in the slipstream like waves. There hadn’t been so many when Una was a girl. They were what Carl called an invasive species, and were bad for the local environment for all they were so pretty. Still, they were thriving and Una couldn’t find it in her heart to be sorry over flowers.

Across the swaying compartment, Jem was holding baby Sam up to the window and narrating the scenery to him.

“You know he can’t see distant objects at this age, don’t you?” Di asked, looking up from her reading.

“That’s why I’m explaining things,” Jem said, poking his tongue at his sister like a schoolboy.

Di shook her head and returned to her book, which looked quite as heavy as To Make a Home. In fact, Di had packed so many imposing books that the handle of her bag had given out somewhere between the ferry and the train. Una couldn’t imagine why she needed so many, especially since Di was taking a truncated holiday. The rest of them meant to stay in the Glen all summer, but Di had arranged to shadow a visiting obstetrician who was an expert in some technique Una had deliberated blocked from her hearing. He was due in Kingsport in two weeks and Di planned to return to Aster House by then.

“You could come back early, too,” Di had told Jem more than once over the past month. “Even if you’re planning on a general practice, you can still keep up with the latest procedures.”

Jem had demurred whenever the subject was raised, promising to think it over. Finally, Faith had taken Di aside and impressed upon her that Jem was in need of a proper rest what with one thing and another, and no more was said about cutting his vacation short.

Una looked across the compartment to the spot where Faith dozed on a pillow of Jem’s rolled-up jacket. It had been an awfully long day for all of them, but at least Una and Di had the benefit of a full night’s rest. Sam was not a particularly fretful baby, but he was a baby nevertheless, and Faith often joked about her gratitude to the V.A.D. for training her in advanced napping techniques. Una had done all she could to help these past few weeks, supplying gifts of lunch and clean laundry and an hour’s respite that were more treasured than any frilly gown or silver rattle. It was no hardship.

The fields and marshes fell away in a blur beyond the window, all green and rusty red bordered by the indigo lupins and the lighter blue of the evening sky. When the train crested a rolling rise, there was even a distant glint off the shimmering Gulf that heralded the home stretch.
A scraping sound at the compartment door announced Carl. Di budged over on the bench to give him room and he hung his head over her shoulder to see what she was reading.

“Do I want to know what chorioepithelioma is?” he asked.

“Probably not. How are things going up your end of the car?”

“That depends on how you feel about election reform,” Carl said lightly.

Jem snorted. “You left Shirley alone with them?”

“Hardly,” Carl said. “He went for a walk twenty minutes ago and I doubt anyone will see him again until we reach the station.”

It wouldn’t be long now. The sliver of sea on the horizon was widening into a silver ribbon. When they approached Mowbray Narrows, Una took little Sam so that Jem could jostle Faith awake while Di saw to the baggage in the overhead compartments. The baby grizzled, probably wanting his supper as much as any of them, but Una soothed him with some bouncing and gentle patter. He blinked up at her, eyes still that murky, indistinct color peculiar to newborns, though Una was fairly certain they were too dark to turn out blue or green. Hazel, maybe, like Jem’s, or golden like Faith’s. Or perhaps they would stay gray.

Una studied the little face. She remembered Bruce at this age, all cheeks and chubby fists and shock of black hair. Una had been terrified that she would drop him or suffocate him or break him in some indefinable way. She hadn’t, though she had once accidentally poked him with a pin, which made Bruce cry for two minutes and Una cry for two days. He had grown up strong and healthy, and so would Sam, she prayed.

“I can take him,” Faith said, extending her arms toward Una. “I suppose it might be my last chance before the grandparents whisk him away for the summer.”

“It’s Susan you have to watch out for,” Jem chuckled. “The others are likely to give him back for a feeding at least, but between Shirley and Jims, I don’t think Susan puts much stock in biology.”

The train began to slow and Una nearly pressed her nose to the window in an effort to see the platform. Yes, they were all there, Father and Rosemary and Bruce and the Blythes and Susan and Miss Cornelia and Mary Douglas. Bruce must have spotted Jerry and Carl in their compartment further down the car because he lifted with joy, bouncing and waving as the train came to a stop.

Una hung back to avoid the general jostle. The others clambered down the corridor, wrangling bags and babies and disappearing down the steps into the soft June evening. Una waited until last, or so she thought until a tall figure loomed over her.

“May I carry your bag for you?” Shirley asked.

Una looked up at the placid face and shook her head. “I can manage it, thank you.”

“In that case, after you.”

Una made her way gingerly down the train steps. She had barely alighted when Father appeared at her elbow, taking her bag with no preamble and enfolding her in an embrace with the other arm. Una did not want to monopolize his time, not when he should be off meeting his first grandson, but oh, it was nice to be safe at Father’s side again. Bruce attached himself soon after, spilling out all the plans he’d made for them: strawberry outings and shore picnics and a trip to the Douglasses’ barn to see the tabby cat and her seven kittens. Una smiled and hugged him back and let herself be swept
up in the crowd headed toward home.
Abel Cooper's old barn was set back from the harbor road, sunk in overgrown sweet grass and a blackberry bramble that aspired to guard a fairytale castle when it grew up. The barn was a decrepit, sway-backed thing, so long disused that it no longer even smelled of lanolin. Still, Old Abel could not be persuaded to tear it down. Perhaps he might have been more amenable if the Ladies' Aid had sent anyone other than Mrs. Elder Baxter to beseech him, somehow forgetting that her cousin Sarah had jilted his brother Peter once upon a time and Mrs. Elder Baxter had been heard to laugh over it. So Abel had kept his barn, such as it was, though its unsightly appearance made him uneasy by times. That is until Dr. Blythe's youngest son had come 'round the Cooper place all respectful-like in the summer after the war to ask if Mr. Cooper could be prevailed upon to rent it out for storage. Anything for one of our boys, of course, and the five dollars a month didn't come amiss either.

One morning in early August, Carl Meredith slashed his way through the cloying bracken of late summer, trying not to imagine how many ticks he was collecting as he went. The day was only half-kindled, but it was already muggy enough that bits of blown grass clung to his neck and his shirt showed several damp patches. You could see the harbor from here, calm and glittering a quarter mile distant over salt marsh and dunes and pebbled shore. It looked wonderfully cool and Carl wondered whether swimming mightn't be a better use of the day.

Certain ominous clankings told Carl that Shirley was already hard at work in Abel Cooper's tumble-down barn, as he had been nearly every day since their return to Glen St. Mary. No fishing this holiday, not when the flying boat needed his attention.

Carl had brought Bruce by the barn to help once or twice, but ultimately decided he wasn't going to spend his whole vacation cleaning carburetors and oiling a sluggish valvetrain. Wasn't the point of coming home to lay in a good stock of sunshine and fresh air to carry him through the next term? Carl thought it might even be working. He hadn't had a single attack since coming home to the Glen. Any time he felt his anxiety begin to sizzle, all he had to do was plunge into Rainbow Valley or hike the old paths along the green-shaded brook or seek out the endless, wide-open shore. Then the irritable, crackling tension would dissipate, flowing off into the wide world, leaving his mind clear and calm. He could breathe everywhere here.

Yesterday, Carl had been sitting on Hezekiah Pollock's tombstone in firefly time. Shirley had found him there and asked him to come out to the barn this morning, and to bring along a sweater and his monocular. The sweater meant that Shirley intended to take him up in the Curtiss, which was to be expected if not particularly relished. But the monocular was a mystery and Carl couldn't help feeling a little flutter of excitement as he fought his way to the barn door.

It took a moment for Carl's eye to adjust to the dim interior. The space was dominated by the vast, thin-ribbed wings, their upright struts as tall as Carl himself. It suddenly occurred to Carl to wonder how, exactly, Shirley had gotten the plane into the barn in the first place and how he meant to get it out again.

"Hello?"

The clanking stopped and Shirley popped up from behind the rudder, hammer in hand, face
smeared with grease.

"You made it!"

"'Course I did. Can I help?"

Shirley shook his head. "I'm pretty much done here. Just checking on the tow."

"Tow?"

"It's a sea plane. No wheels. We have to haul it down to the water."

"Haul it?" Carl eyed the hulking machine skeptically. "How much does it weigh?"

Smirking, Shirley patted the Curtiss as if Carl might have hurt its feelings. "Not so very much. Don't worry, though. I hired Bertie Shakespeare Drew to bring his team over, so all we have to do is guide her out of the barn."

"How?"

Shirley had clearly been waiting for Carl to ask this, given the uncharacteristic glee with which he demonstrated the system of levers and winches that opened and shut the huge doors cut into one side of the barn.

"You built that?"

"Well, it was already half-built. I just enlarged it."

"Very impressive," Carl said as he pulled Shirley into a proper greeting.

Not even Carl could deny that it had been a long three weeks in some respects. Fresh air was certainly abundant in Glen St. Mary, but privacy was not. Even in the dim shelter of the shadowed barn, Carl did not allow himself to become too immersed in an overdue kiss. Bertie Shakespeare could come along at any moment.

"Did you bring your sweater?" Shirley asked, wiping a smear of grease from Carl's cheek.

Carl held out the wooly blue garment clinging limply to his sweat-damp forearm. "You've lost your senses. It's sweltering."

"Not thousands of feet in the air it isn't."

Carl shivered a bit despite the heat. It was one thing to say that he trusted Shirley, which he did, of course. But it was quite another to trust the Curtiss, which had, after all, been built by fallible humans and had no natural business leaving the ground.

"Where are we going?" he asked, hoping his momentary trepidation did not show in his face.

"Where do you want to go? We could go up to the Magdalens or over to Cape Breton, or just down to East Point if you'd rather not go too far. Heck, we could go to Miquelon if you like. Take up rum-running."

"We can do that?" Carl asked, surprised. "We wouldn't run out of fuel?"

Shirley slapped the fuselage fondly. "She's got a range of 500 miles. We could fly to Kingsport and back twice without refueling."
"Really?" Kingsport had always seemed a world away, as if the ritual of train and ferry insulated the Island from the outside world. Carl wasn't quite sure he liked the idea that there were only miles in between. "How long would that take?"

"To fly to Kingsport? On a clear day like this?" Shirley squinted up into the sky, considering. "Maybe an hour and a half? Two at most."

Carl was stunned. "You're putting me on."

"She's a bit poky," Shirley conceded. "tops out around 80 miles an hour. Makes me miss the S.E.5as. Now *those* had some pep to them."

"But it takes us a whole day on the train and the ferry."

"Well, we could fly if you didn't have so much luggage."

Carl acknowledged the jibe with a poke to the ribs, but the wheels of his brain were turning.

"You know, you could charge people for that," he said. "Fly to Kingsport in an afternoon. Some of the summer people might hire you. Like a hackney carriage."

Shirley shrugged. "They might. But I'm not hurting for money. And I can think of better places to go."

"Like where?"

"Like wherever you want to go."

Carl smiled and flouted the imminent arrival of Bertie Shakespeare with bold abandon.

"Let's go to the Magdalens," he said a few minutes later. "It's nesting season up at the Bird Rocks."

Shirley produced a chart and they plotted a course together, north over the Gulf of St. Lawrence, past the Magdalens proper and on to the isolated sea cliffs where gannets and kittiwakes nested in their thousands. And then perhaps back to the Magdalens? Île Brion?

Their preparations were interrupted by a snorting and stamping outside the barn. Shirley stepped out into the sunshine to greet Bertie Shakespeare, while Carl admired the pair of gorgeous percherons, their black coats brushed and gleaming, their long manes plaited away from their muscular necks.

A half-hour's hitching and wrangling saw the Curtiss ready for its short journey to the harbor. Shirley tossed a pair of long leather dusters into the cockpit, along with helmets, goggles, and assorted boxes and bags of who knew what. Then they were off, with Bertie guiding his team and Shirley hovering over his machine, alert to any shifting or bumping.

The flying boat glided down the harbour road, white wings stretching wide over the marsh grasses on either side. As it neared the dunes, a crowd of barefoot children from the nearby village at Harbour Head ran to see it pass, shouting to their comrades to come see.

"Mr. Meredith!" shouted a tow-headed boy, waving.

Carl returned the boy's grin. "How are you, Robbie? Getting along in your arithmetic?"

"Naw. But Pop says I have to stay in school another two years before I can go out with the boats."
Other former students crowded around Carl, telling him their news and marveling over the airplane. Carl did his best to answer the barrage of questions:

"Are you going to fly in it, Mr. Meredith?"

"What are the horses' names?"

"Why are you taking it to the shore?"

"I'd be scared to go in an airplane!"

"I wouldn't! It would be grand!"

By the time the percherons had delivered the Curtiss to the water's edge, a bedraggled parade streamed along behind, with children and dogs and not a few of the older fishermen come to see the takeoff.

Carl bid his pupils goodbye and went to garb up for the ascent.

"Quite the fan club you have there," Shirley observed as he fastened his flight jacket.

"Well, I doubt their other teachers have let them bring quite so many snakes to school."

"You're a legend," Shirley said dryly. "Ready?"

Carl blinked up through his goggles, which Shirley seemed to find amusing. "Ready as I'll ever be." Shirley hopped up to hand-start the propeller, which belched black smoke and rattled a bit until it found its rhythm. Carl compressed his lips, but would not disappoint any of his audiences. With a fond farewell to solid ground, he clambered into his seat, waving to the cheering children arrayed on either side. Then Shirley was in his own seat beside Carl, strapping in, easing the plane over the surface of the water faster and faster. As they lifted free, Carl instinctively clamped his hand on Shirley's knee, earning himself a resigned shake of the head.

They soared high and higher until there was nothing but blue below them and blue above them, with more blue fore and aft. Carl gradually loosened his grip and risked a peek over the side. Despite Shirley's earlier quip, they did not seem to be flying very high. The HS-2L was a reconnaissance plane, after all, and built for staying low enough to see something.

Carl did indeed see something: dark shapes lancing through the water. With a lurch in his gut, he thought of U-boats and torpedoes . . . but then one of the shadows broke the water in a glory of surf and spray.

"Whales!" Carl shouted, gesticulating to Shirley. "Whales!

It was useless trying to say much over the constant whirr of the propellor, but Shirley nodded and mimed holding something up to his eye. It took Carl a moment to cotton on, but then he remembered the monocular in his pocket, Shirley's Christmas gift to him. He scrabbled under his duster as Shirley pulled the plane about, trimming altitude until they were less than a thousand feet up.

Pushing back his goggles, Carl held the monocular up to his eye and fixed it on the pod of whales below. There were at least eight of them, and as Carl watched, they breached and rolled, playing or feeding he could not tell. He had seen whales before, but never like this, never so many, nor
making such elaborate displays. Why, he could even see the calves, following alongside their mothers under the surface while the adults leapt over the waves like enormous ballet dancers. They were magnificent.

When they left the whales behind, Carl looked eagerly for more, his smile so constant that the whipping wind dried his teeth and gums, and he had to make a conscious effort to close his mouth. Next time, he thought, he would have to bring a scarf.

They flew for more than an hour, over the Gulf, past the sand bars of the Magdalens and toward the Bird Rocks twenty-five miles further on. A year ago, in the spring of 1919, the province of Québec had officially designated these Rochers aux Oiseaux as wildlife sanctuaries, along with Île Bonaventure and Rocher Percé closer to the mainland. Here, the seabirds of the Gulf of St. Lawrence — petrels and razorbills, murres and guillemots, gannets and kittiwakes — nested and raised their young. Someday there would be more sanctuaries like this, but these were the first in the Canadian Atlantic, the first government efforts to preserve habitat and migratory paths for animals, turning centuries of colonial extraction toward stewardship, one very small step at time.

When at last he spotted the largest of the Bird Rocks thrusting up through the waves, Carl pulled at Shirley's sleeve.

"Not too low!" he shouted, annunciating as clearly as he could. "Not too low!"

After all, he would hate to disturb the birds unnecessarily. Shirley nodded, and did not get too close. Even so, the island was breathtaking. Red sandstone cliffs rose in sheer verticals from the sea, a hundred feet tall and wreathed in clouds of white-winged birds coming and going, bringing food for their young. The island was tiny, only a few hundred feet across, with a flat top boasting a lighthouse and a keeper's cottage.

As they circled, a tiny figure emerged from the cottage and waved. Carl returned the salute, thinking how odd it must be to live on a rock in the middle of the ocean with tens of thousands of squawking birds. He had heard old sailors speak of the Bird Rock lighthouse, how it had saved many a sailor from a watery grave and just as surely doomed many a keeper. Some, they said, had been maimed or killed firing the fog cannon, others had blown off the sides of the island in high winds, and still others had gone mad from loneliness. Accessible only in summer, the Rock was ice-bound in winter. In the year of Carl's birth, the three men of Bird Rock had gone out on the ice to hunt for seals, only to be caught in a storm. Two died; the third walked sixty miles over the frozen sea to Cape Breton, surviving by drinking the warm blood of seals he clubbed along the way, but dying days after he had reached Nova Scotia.

Carl shivered. Peace was one thing, isolation quite another.

Shirley circled the rock several times, staying above the wheeling gannets. Carl wished they could get closer to really see the nests, but they'd need a boat for that. He made a mental note that if he ever did dock at the tiny pier wedged into a cleft in the cliff, he'd be sure to bring a handsome offering for the lighthouse keeper.

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Carl reached down deep to the sandy bottom of the inlet, submerged to his shoulder. Tracing the stalks with his fingers, he found the root of the plant and dug underneath it, snapping off the rhizome that connected this shoot to the others around it. Eelgrass wasn't a deep-rooted plant and Carl didn't want to pull up the whole bed just to get a small sample.

He rinsed the long, flat leaves in the waves and held them out to examine them in the light. They
seemed sound and healthy, their bright, acid green unmarred by discoloration or inclusion. Carl flicked away a row of tiny periwinkles grazing along a leaf blade; they may have come to Canada a century ago, but they were still invaders, riding the hulls of empire to wreak havoc on the Gulf. What had this place been like before the periwinkles and the shore crabs and the greedy cod fishery? People seemed to think that you could just go on taking forever, not understanding that every little snail changed the ecosystem. Only the Mi'kmaq seemed to care about the Gulf's own rights, and no one in government was listening to them at all. Well, the eelgrass was healthy, at least, and that would have to be enough for now.

Carl waded ashore, passing the beached plane and claiming his clothes from a driftwood log. He dressed quickly and carelessly, still pondering the eelgrass in his hand as he walked up the beach to the place where Shirley had spread a picnic blanket among the dunes.

"What have you got there?" Shirley asked, nodding toward the green spray.

"What? Oh, this? Eelgrass."

Shirley cocked his head. "Is it edible?"

"Only if you're a goose," Carl smiled. Then, wandering off again down his own path, "I wonder if Brant geese come this far east. They must — in the fall — coming down from the arctic . . ."

"Well, if it isn't edible, it can wait." Shirley had already unpacked a generous picnic hamper that had yielded a pile of sandwiches, a bowl of cherries, a spice-scented cake crowned with brown sugar crumble.

"Did you bake?" Carl teased as he sank onto the blanket.

"Hardly. Susan will barely let me cut my own food, let alone let me near the oven."

"Well, I suppose it looks alright anyway."

Carl dusted his hands on his trousers and reached for a sandwich from the top of the pile. His brow furrowed as he inspected it. "You brought . . . cheese sandwiches?"

"Sure," Shirley replied, biting into one of his own. "Is cheese still alright?"

"Yes. It's fine. But . . ." Carl frowned, "you don't have to give up meat just because I do."

"I'm not planning on it, Shirley shrugged. "But I like bread and cheese just fine."

There was a hint of smile folded into the simple statement and Carl knew he was not the only one remembering other loaves, spread thick with soft French cheese and eaten together behind a thrice-locked door.

"Sorry I couldn't get you a bottle of wine," Shirley said, speaking the shared thought. "Prohibition and all. I looked for pears, too, but I couldn't find any, not even in Lowbridge. Maybe they aren't in season or maybe no one grows them here."

"You went all the way to Lowbridge looking for pears?"

"Well Carter Flagg didn't have any. It's only six miles."

He said it so casually, as if it were obvious that anyone would walk hours searching for out-of-season fruit for the sake of a memory.
Carl dropped his sandwich onto the blanket and shimmied over on his knees, twining his arms around Shirley's neck and kissing him soundly. Broad hands slid up Carl's back, holding him fast, and convincing him that perhaps lunch could wait after all.

"They were Anjou pears," Carl said between kisses. "They're ripe late in the fall."

"Mmm hmm."

Carl sat back on his heels. "I suppose they could grow here," he said thoughtfully. "You'd have to tend them carefully, but they might grow."

Shirley opened his eyes. "What?"

"Pears."

"Pears?"

Carl grinned. "Lost the plot, have you?"

"I've missed you."

"You've seen me nearly every day," Carl said, knowing that's not what he had meant.

"I'm not sure staring at you over the pews counts."

"Should I tell Susan you've been flirting in church?"

Shirley grimaced. "Why do you think she wants me to go? I've heard all there is to hear about Addie Taylor and Julia Cooper and Mary Margaret Macalister . . ."

"Mary Margaret Macalister?" Carl laughed, conjuring a vision of spotless white pinafores and neatly buttoned boots. "Isn't she the one who used to wear those enormous pink bows to school?"

"Maybe. I don't think I was in the habit of noticing."

"Oh, come on. All those nice girls and you never noticed any of them?"

"No."

"And why is that, I wonder?"

It wasn't always easy to coax Shirley into a real smile, one that was visible and unguarded, rather than layered or fleeting. Even here, away from everything and everyone, he was not naturally demonstrative. But Carl was well practiced in the art of beguiling the Blythe grin out of him.

"Are you fishing for compliments now?" Shirley asked, giving in.

Carl congratulated himself, though he mused that it was an odd sort of game that either had two winners or none.

"You could still have noticed girls," he said, allowing himself to be pulled over into the sand.

"I didn't."

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There was no such thing as time out there in the sun-swept, wind-scoured Gulf, no bells or
clocktowers or pocket watches to tick away the minutes or ration the hours. The afternoon stretched to the infinite horizon and further, like Joshua's endless day.

They sat among the dunes and walked the shore, chatting, holding hands, picking up interesting shells and bits of colorful glass washed up from wrecks and worn smooth by the waves. Carl heard all about the doings of the Ingleside folk and Susan's delight that Jem and Faith had decided to take up permanent residence there next May, little Sam in tow. Shirley heard about the plans brewing among the Merediths, how Una would stay another year in Kingsport to help Faith, how Jerry was bursting with enthusiasm for his law course, how much Rosemary and John Meredith were enjoying their grandson.

"I had a letter from Nellie as well," Carl said. "She asked me to pass along her regards."

"And how is Miss Nellie?"

"Very well. She stayed in Kingsport to work with a Botany professor over the summer. Apparently fruit trees make excellent subjects for watercolors."

"Any other news?"

Carl paused, thinking. "Did I mention that Anthony Marckworth's sister Hazel is getting married?"

"Isn't she the one that was friends with the girls during the war?"

"Yes. Apparently she met an officer in the hospital when she was volunteering during the flu epidemic."

Shirley snorted. "It must be true love, if she fell for him while he was sick with the flu."

"I don't know the particulars of it," Carl said. "I had a letter from Harry, too. He says that it's all over with that store manager he was seeing."

"Wife found out, did she?"

"It would appear so."

"Well, you did try to warn him."

They walked in silence for a while, the waves pounding a soothing drone punctuated by the shrieks of gulls overhead.

Carl licked his lips. "Have you had any letters?" he asked casually.

Shirley looked surprised. "Me? Who would write to me?"

Carl did not answer that, simultaneously relieved and exasperated. Shirley couldn't really be so dense, could he?

"Uh . . . my parents had a letter from Rilla?" Shirley offered. "Ken wants her to have the baby in a hospital."

"Your dad doesn't mind?"

"I don't think so. He might even be relieved. Besides, he has an obstetrician friend out there — Dr. Wilson, the one who worked with Di during the war. They'll just go and visit like normal grandparents."
"That will be nice for them, to see all the Fords."

"Yes, in sinful, squalid Toronto," Shirley smirked. "You should hear Susan go on about it. She nearly fainted when Dad said they were considering going for Christmas."

"If they do, you know you're always welcome for Christmas at the manse."

"If they do, Susan will use the empty house to hold a cotillion for me."

Carl laughed. "You'd make a smashing debutante."

"Oh, I'd smash something alright."

Carl grinned, imagining one of Susan's famous cakes sailing through the air to splatter over the satin pumps of all the Glen's most eligible maidens. He threaded an arm through Shirley's, savoring the freedom to walk like this, together on a vast and lonely shore.

They walked on and on until the Curtiss seemed like something on a postage stamp, rather than a powerful machine. Time or no, the sun was definitely slipping lower on the horizon, the light beginning to change from clear daylight to the raking gold of evening.

"We should get going soon," Carl said with a squeeze. "You can't fly in the dark."

"Sure I can."

"You can? Really?"

"What, you never had an air raid at night?"

Carl froze. Of course he had. Air raid alarms blaring, the sky lit up with searchlights and anti-aircraft fire, hunkering down in a dark dugout, praying not to die in a cave-in, with tons of earth pressing down from every side . . .

"Sorry," Shirley said, drawing back into himself. "I shouldn't have said that."

That flinch was worse than the momentary vertigo. Of course Carl never wanted to think about night raids ever again, but they were in the past. In rational moments, he could tell himself that they could no longer hurt him. But Shirley's armor, drawn across his face like a veil, censoring what he said, making him tiptoe on eggshells in Carl's vicinity . . . there was nothing past about that.

"It's alright," Carl said quickly, though it wasn't. "Don't worry about it. I'm fine."

"You . . . went away for a second there."

How could he say it wasn't true? It was always there, so distressingly close to the surface, just waiting for an excuse to erupt. And now he had a new image to contend with. Carl had imagined many things about Shirley's war: Shirley taking off in an S.E.5a with leader-streamers flying, Shirley swooping through the rolls and feints of a dogfight, even Shirley delivering a hot burst of machine gun fire that sent an opponent spiraling toward his doom in a plume of black smoke. Somehow, he had never imagined him hurtling through the cool night, serene and steady, as screaming, burning, bursting death erupted in wreaths of fire among the cowering mudmen.

"I . . . I just didn't realize you flew bombers."

Shirley released a pent-up breath. "I didn't. I sometimes escorted them, though."
"Oh."

"I'm sorry, Kit. I shouldn't tell you things like that. I won't."

As if his silence weren't one of the few things worse than a night raid.

"'Course you should," Carl said, grasping at slick leaves that slipped through his hands, sinking away below the surface of some impenetrable sea. "You can tell me anything. Really. Don't . . . not tell me things."

Shirley offered only a tight, skeptical grimace.

"I'm really fine," Carl assured him. "Things are better here." He gestured skyward and seaward, encompassing the freedom of air and space and movement, the comfort of waves and birds and eelgrass.

"Well, sunset's not for another couple of hours," Shirley said. "If we head back now, we'll be home with plenty of daylight left."

Carl couldn't — wouldn't — let the day end like that. "Let's stay a bit longer," he said, hoping he didn't sound desperate. "You didn't even get to swim yet."

Shirley gave him a look of such frank appraisal that it might have been insulting if Carl had not been so glad of its honesty. "You're really alright?"

"Yes," Carl said, undoing his shirt buttons. "And I'll be even better in the water."

"Well . . . if you insist."

"I do."

There was no more talk of air raids, nor of eelgrass, if it came to that. And when the Curtiss chased the sunset westward over the Gulf, Carl gazed out over the glory of peach and lavender, knowing there was nowhere he would rather be.
October 1920

There were no assigned carrels in Gardner Memorial Library, but that did not stop Shirley thinking of this one as his. He liked to work his problem sets here, on the bare oak desk with its empty bookshelf above, without the din and clatter of the vault-ceilinged reading room. Unseen, uncluttered, he could lose himself in a proof or in mapping a celestial sphere and emerge an hour or three later with a stack of close-written pages.

No one else knew this place, or so Shirley told himself, and believed it until the day when his elliptical geometry was interrupted by the too-close scent of sandalwood and hair oil.

"Come with me," Wilkie whispered low over his shoulder without greeting.

Shirley closed his eyes a moment, to gird himself, he thought, though there was enough savoring in the steeling to make his answer dart out keener than he had intended.

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Yes, you are," Wilkie said, lounging against the edge of the desk. "Pack your things."

The huff of Shirley's incredulity was sharp enough to ruffle the drying pages.

"Trust me, Blythe, you want to come with me."

Shirley could have picked apart every word of that sentence, each simultaneously laughable and true. "Why?"

Wilkie's amber gaze was unflinching. "Because this isn't about you."

"No?"

"It's about Meredith."

Shirley had been to Wilkie's suite before, but never on his own. They couldn't hold large parties here, in the penthouse of one of Kingsport's better hotels, but Saturday night often found Wilkie and Shirley poised across the poker table from one another, with the Swede and Roger Hallett and whichever other philoi Wilkie found particularly amusing. Shirley considered himself lucky that Wilkie had a taste for the callowest of Kingsport's wealthier sons, and saw no reason he shouldn't alleviate them of their cash while Wilkie pursued their other assets.
Now, with just the two of them, Shirley's skin pricked to the undercurrents cutting across the elegantly-appointed sitting room. He was reluctant even to remove his hat.

Standing at the bar cart near the marble-manteled fireplace, Wilkie tipped a crystal decanter in Shirley's direction.

"Can I get you a drink?"

Shirley scowled. "It's two o'clock in the afternoon."

"Two drinks, then?"

"Why am I here, Wilkie?"

Wilkie held the decanter up to the light and peered critically at the pale liquid. Evidently dissatisfied, he placed it back on the cart and retrieved a second decanter from a glass-fronted hutch. Smaller than the first, its contents glowed tawny-gold as Wilkie poured two generous glasses.

"You're here because I need to tell you a story, fly boy."

Shirley frowned but took the proffered glass, if only to get on with things. It pressed into his palm, thick and glittering where the electric lights caught its facets.

Wilkie sipped from his own glass and rested against the arm of the scarlet-tassled sofa.

"This past summer, I got a letter from a friend at Harvard," he began. "We were kicked out of boarding school together once upon a time. Good chap, even if he is a Yank. He said the boys down there have been having quite a bit of trouble recently."

"Fascinating," Shirley said dully.

"Just shut up and listen," Wilkie hissed, his tone earnest enough to re-focus Shirley's attention. "There was this kid, see? Wilcox. Had a bad breakup with an older man and got caught up in some blackmail. He ended up confessing everything to his brother: lovers, parties, favorite haunts. Wilcox knew he'd be disgraced once the blackmailer showed what he had, so he turned on the gas in his bedroom overnight, and bye-bye Wilcox."

The words were blunt, but the customary ironic drawl had receded. It almost sounded as if Wilkie cared.

"That might have been the end of it," he continued, "but his parents started going through his mail. He was a popular guy at Harvard. Got lots of letters. Chatty letters. Naming names. Who's going home with whom and who's hosting the next drag night and all that. The brother sent the letters off to the Dean at Harvard, and pretty soon they had an investigation going, see? Hauling in students, townies, alumni, even a professor, and asking for more names."

"What happened?" Shirley asked, fearing he knew the answer.

Wilkie shrugged. "They expelled seven or eight of them. Even kicked out a congressman's son. And there were a few more gas accidents. The boys didn't roll on one another, though. Gotta give 'em that. They didn't roll. The ones who got caught were mostly the ones named in Wilcox's letters."

Shirley cleared his throat, contemplating the rippling gold in his glass. "Well, I'm sorry for your
friend," he said. "But I don't see what all this has to do with any of us, least of all Carl."

Wilkie sipped his scotch, paused, and sipped again, indifferent to Shirley's glower. When it pleased him, he said, "Meredith's friends with Harold Noyes, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Has he written Harry any letters?"

A prickle of fear danced up Shirley's arm on icy tiptoe. He didn't know precisely where this was heading, but there was a whiff of smoke in the air that had not bothered him previously.

"Maybe. I dunno."

"Gotta keep a better eye on your boy there, Blythe," Wilkie smirked.

"I'm not his jailer," Shirley replied, refusing to rise to the bait. "He can write to whomever he likes."

"I'm sure he does," Wilkie said, sliding a shrewd smile around the rim of his glass. "In fact, I know it for certain."

"Snooping now, are you?"

Wilkie sniffed. "I hardly need to. Between Harry and that little goldilocks girlfriend of his... who knew you were so magnanimous?"

A small something — some secret sinew long stretched — snapped, and Shirley flared up hot. "God, Wilkie, what do you want? If all this is just about luring me away from Carl, it's . . ."

"Shut up," Wilkie spat. "I'm not trying to separate you from your drawers."

"I suppose there's a first time for everything."

Wilkie's eyes fluttered heavenward with an air of long-suffering affront. "Believe it or not, I'm looking out for you, Blythe. And for Meredith, too."

Shirley snorted. "Spare us your favors."

"Fine. Then I guess I shouldn't tell you that the city coroner carried Harry Noyes out of his residence hall on a slab this morning."

Shirley started. "What? That's nothing to joke about."

Wilkie took a deep pull from his glass. "Who's joking?"

"Was it . . . an accident?"

"Sure. Faulty gas fixtures everywhere these days."

Shirley pictured Harry Noyes, good-natured and ruddy in his mink stole, laughing at Anthony Marckworth as he cut in to dance with Carl on a dim and crowded floor.

Oh, shit. Carl.

"Why'd he do it?"

Wilkie shrugged. "Search me. Meredith might know. They wrote to one another all through the
summer while you were back in Eden. Didn't you know?"

"I suppose they did."

"Well I know they did. Do you think he was discreet?"

Suddenly it all fell into place. Harry's parents would come. Soon. They would gather up Harry's belongings. They would read his letters. They would read Carl's letters.

Shirley crossed to the bar cart and let his glass chime against the brass tray.

"What do we do?"

"Well, you could sit down and actually drink that . . ."

Shirley rounded on Wilkie, his body coiled for immediate action. "We have to do something. Have Harry's parents arrived yet?"

Wilkie tilted his head back, his swinging leg languid against the sofa. "From Fredericton? They'll be at least a day."

"Then we have time," Shirley said, beginning to pace. "We could break into Harry's residence hall tonight. Clear out all his drag. Find his papers. Burn his papers . . ."

With the attitude of a magician who has maneuvered his audience with exquisite skill, Wilkie reached into the inner lining of his jacket and produced a sheaf of envelopes. Fanning them like a winning hand, he held them out at arm's length. Even at a distance, Shirley recognized Carl's scrawl.

"Already done, Blythe."

With effort, Shirley prevented his jaw from falling open, but he could do nothing about his racing heart.

"So you've caught up at last," Wilkie said. "I burned most of it. Diaries. Letters. Snaps. But I thought Meredith might like to have these back. For keepsakes."

Shirley stretched out a hand, but Wilkie drew the letters back, out of reach. In the breathless moment that followed, Shirley attempted to think of a single thing he would not do to get them.

It was fortunate that Wilkie was satisfied by having Shirley at his mercy and did not insist on calling in his debt. Instead, he tapped the letters once against his chest, then made a gift of them.

Shirley's finger flicked along the edges of the envelopes. There were rather more than he had expected.

"Did you . . . read them?"

"They're quite fascinating," Wilkie said. "I learned all sorts of terribly interesting things. Of course, the real question is: are you going to read them?"

Shirley paused, but only for a moment. "No," he said, and slipped the letters into his jacket pocket.

"Suit yourself," Wilkie said, one corner of his mouth curling inward and upward. "If I were you, though, I'd want to know."
"Well you aren't and I don't."

"Have it your way. But Blythe? Tell Meredith to be more careful. For all our sakes."

There was nothing to say to that, so Shirley said nothing. The letters were secure and heavy in his pocket, a cargo of tiny bombs with Wilkie's fingerprints all over the fuses.

"You really aren't going to drink that?" Wilkie asked, thrusting his chin toward the bar cart.

Shirley considered the whisky. It slid around the crystal curve as a living thing, flashing quick and amber. He didn't need to be told that he'd never drunk anything half so fine. Wilkie lifted his own glass in salute and Shirley returned the gesture, then brought the cup to his lips and took a burning draught.

Wilkie grinned, something like triumph stretching his smile to its limit.

Shirley let the drink crackle through him, radiating warm strength from the center of his chest to his extremities. Truth be told, he wanted to take another sip, but resisted.

"I have to go," he said. "I have to find Carl before he hears about Harry from someone else."

Wilkie slid from the sofa and sidled up alongside, brushing shoulders and retrieving Shirley's glass before it had stopped vibrating against the tray.

"More for me," he smiled, pouring the remainder of Shirley's drink into his own glass and taking an audacious swallow.

It would be best to ignore his provocations. But Shirley could not deny that Wilkie had done a brave and valuable service, whatever his motives. No amount of goading could make Shirley read those letters, but he was truly grateful to have them safe in his possession.

"Wilkie," he said, voice low and fervent, "thank you."

"I'm entirely self-interested, Blythe."

"I know. But thank you anyway."

Shirley extended his right hand, never taking his eyes from Wilkie's face. Somewhere behind the sardonic expression, he thought he could discern a genuine emotion, though he did not wish to give it the power of a name.

Wilkie did not take his hand. Instead, he grasped Shirley's wrist, pressing pulse to pulse. Shirley swallowed and returned the embrace.

They stood that way a heartbeat longer than necessary or proper. Then Shirley was free, or nearly so. Hurrying toward the door, he crammed his hat back onto his head and was halfway into the hall when Wilkie called him back with a question like a blow to the face.

"Blythe?"

"What?"

"Who is Kit?"

Carl had not wanted to go to the Kingsport City Morgue, but it was the only place he was sure he
could catch Mr. and Mrs. Noyes, and he wanted to offer his condolences. The only other place he might have found them was at Harry's room, but somehow that was more terrible than the morgue. Carl had never been to the morgue before, and neither had Harry, as far as he knew, so the two did not seem connected in any way. Carl could sit in the cool, tiled corridor on a narrow bench next to a blanched and swaying Anthony, waiting to speak with Mr. and Mrs. Noyes when they emerged from the coroner's office.

"He didn't say anything to you?" Carl asked. "Nothing at all?"

Anthony opened his lips soundlessly. He managed to shake his head, but only just.

"But why . . ." Carl's next question was cut off by the shriek of a door hinge and a clattering of shoes on the gray-tiled floor. The coroner was shaking hands with an older man and woman and a tall, chestnut-haired man who looked enough like Harry that Carl guessed he must be his brother.

Carl and Anthony stood to greet the trio as they walked past.

"Mr. and Mrs. Noyes?"

The woman looked up from her sodden handkerchief, surprised, but her son urged her to keep walking. He stood before Carl and Anthony, arms crossed over his chest.

Harry's brother waited until his parents had disappeared through the double doors before asking, "Who are you?"

Carl extended a hand, but dropped it when the man only glared. "I'm Carl Meredith. This is Anthony Marckworth. We're Harry's friends."

"Friends, huh? I'll bet."

His tone made Carl's flesh creep. "We only wanted to offer our condolences," he said.

The tall man leaned close, hissing under his breath. "You stay away from my parents. You and the rest of your friends." Carl had never imagined that anyone could infuse such a lovely word with such loathing. The man sneered, his upper lip retreating in disgust. "Harry used to be a good kid. Let them think he still was."

With that, he crammed a gray fedora onto his head and stalked out after Mr. and Mrs. Noyes. He certainly did not hear Carl call faintly after him:

"He was."

***

". . . stay to do research over the summer?"

When Carl did not answer, Nellie stopped walking. He may not have been paying attention to what she was saying, but he did notice that she was no longer by his side. Carl shook himself awake.

"Sorry, Nellie. What were you saying?"

"You haven't heard a single word," she sighed, mildly annoyed. "What's wrong, Carl?"

"Nothing. I must be tired."

"You've been distracted all week."
Carl turned and began to walk again, rustling through the dry leaves that blanketed the sidewalk. Nellie shuffled along beside him, keeping pace, but waiting for him to speak. It was possible to hear anything you liked in the crackling whispers beneath their feet, or nothing at all.

Eventually, Carl said, "Did you hear about that junior? The one who died last week?"

"The gas accident?" Nellie asked. "Of course. Frightened me half to death. My roommates and I checked all our fixtures right away."

Was that what people were calling Harry now? The gas accident?

"Well, he was a friend of mine."

"Oh, Carl! I'm so sorry," she said, blue eyes gone round. "I had no idea."

Carl felt a bizarre urge to comfort her. He hadn't meant to share any of this with Nellie and now she was distressed and he felt responsible.

"It's alright," he said, though if pressed on the question of what, exactly, was alright, he would not have had a ready answer.

"Where did you know him from?" Nellie asked, her voice all soft solicitude.

"We used to play darts together."

"Darts?"

"I was never any good."

They had reached Nellie's house, a settled little abode not unlike Aster House, and of similar vintage. The flowers in the front garden had all passed, leaving only their wizened stalks and sleeping bulbs to bide their time till a distant, dreamt-of spring.

Carl paused by the door, but Nellie did not reach for her key. Instead, she stepped across the veranda to a bench swing and motioned for Carl to join her. Amazing how the gentle pressure of a single toe pressed to the peeling floorboards could cast them adrift on soothing waves, back and forth, like being rocked in a cradle.

"He survived the whole war, you know," Carl said, when the motion and Nellie's warm arm alongside his had lulled him. "Harry, I mean."

"Harry," Nellie repeated. "Did you know him from the army, then?"

"No. He was in the ambulance corps."

That was as much as Carl knew about Harry's wartime service. Ambulance corps. Ten days' leave in Nice with the black-eyed cafe owner. Peacock-blue scarf. There was certainly more to it than that. Why had he never asked? Maybe there would have been some answers there . . .

"That's a noble thing to do, going into harm's way to help the wounded. He must have been brave."

"He was."

Carl was not sure how he came to be holding Nellie's hand, only noticing now that he was, and not having the energy to puzzle out the whys and wherefores. Her fingers were firm and compact, with a little nub of pencil-callous on the knuckle of her ring finger. All that drawing, he supposed.
"How awful," she said, "to survive so much and then die in a senseless accident safe at home."

"Yes."

"Is there anything I can do? Is there a memorial service? I could go with you."

"No, there's no service."

Nellie seemed surprised by that, blinking in consternation, rousing again that urge to offer her comfort, as if she were the one bereaved.

"He was from New Brunswick," Carl explained. "His parents came . . ."

Harry used to be a good kid. Let them think he still was.

He narrow avoided sobbing, but there was no hiding the tremor, nor the sudden ferocity of his grip.

"Oh, Carl," Nellie covered their linked fingers with her free hand. "Let me help you. Any way I can. I have the notes from this week. Everything you never wanted to know about the lifecycles of zooplankton . . ."

This drew a weak smile. "Thanks, Nellie."

"Anything. Just say the word."

She caressed his cheek, palm as cool and light as a lily petal. Carl did not pull away.

Nellie's kiss was nothing like Shirley's. Sweet breath conjured the ghosts of sun-kissed strawberries, of May breezes and flower crowns, an island of green in the midst of imminent November. It was not an insistent kiss, asking nothing but that he should accept it.

He did. Then he returned it.

When she left him, he missed her. That, more than anything, kept him from opening his eye, not sure whether he was hoping to find her vanished or still sitting by his side.

As soon as Carl walked in the door, Shirley saw that he needed to go out again. The room was too small to pace satisfactorily, forcing Carl to turn every three or four steps, his agitation vibrating in tighter and tighter oscillations. Shirley didn't even bother to ask whether he wanted to go for a walk, merely retrieving the plaid coat from the floor beneath the peg and chivvying Carl out of the boarding house.

They went to the park, the only place in Kingsport where Carl could breathe. Nearly November again, and Shirley thought of frogs and ponds and the day he had begun to understand just what sort of wounds Carl carried. They did not sit. Carl was overflowing with nervous energy, so they walked and walked and walked, Shirley grateful for whomever had set aside all these generous acres.

On their second loop past the harbor, Carl blurted, "I want to tell Nellie about us."

"About us?"

"Yes. About you and me. Us."

Shirley had been expecting a fathomless quandary to do with the unknowable workings of dead
men's minds. He was almost relieved to be presented with something so simple.

"No."

"She kissed me."

That wasn't surprising.

"And I kissed her back."

Shirley stutter-stepped. A point to Wilkie, God damn him.

"I want to tell her," Carl continued. "She deserves the truth."

Maybe she did. If he were honest, Shirley would have to admit that he liked Nellie Fletcher. He had not spent very much time with her, but whenever he had, she had impressed him as intelligent, cheerful, and brave. Still, she was an outsider. Too many people knew too much already.

"You can't tell her about us," Shirley said, not without regret.

"Why not?"

The question was sharp enough to make Shirley go gently.

"Because she likes you," he said. "She'll be hurt. You can't hand her that sort of ammunition when you break her heart."

"I'm not going to break her heart," Carl protested.

When Shirley did not answer, Carl stopped walking, staring down the pebbled shore to the lapping waves of the harbor. "Nellie wouldn't betray me," he said, kicking a stone. "She's not like that."

"Isn't she?"

"No! She's my friend."

Shirley took a calming breath. No need to put him on the defensive. "I know. She's a good friend. But how well do you really know her?"

Carl scowled. "As well as anybody. She's incredibly kind. And smart and interesting and generous and . . ."

He paused.

"And pretty?" Shirley supplied.

"That isn't what I meant," Carl said, though he looked resolutely out to sea.

Far out in the harbor, a canvas sail scudded across the horizon, a red pennant beckoning from its mast. Shirley watched until it was swallowed by a pine-dark spit of land, knowing it must have emerged on the other side, even if it was invisible from this beach.

"Isn't it?"

Carl blew out a breath, half exasperation, half resignation. "So what if it is? It doesn't matter."

"It matters a little . . ."
"No it doesn't," Carl said sharply. "I'm not exactly looking."

Keeping his voice resolutely even, Shirley swallowed. "Maybe you should be."

"What?"

"You should consider her. Nellie, I mean."

Carl goggled at him, incredulous. "What do you mean, consider Nellie?"

Shirley bit the inside of his cheek hard enough to taste blood. "I'm not trying to be opaque. You could be with Nellie. Get married. Have a family. You'd be good at that. I meant what I wrote in that letter."

"You can't be serious."

"Quite serious," Shirley mumbled, reflecting that plummeting to a fiery demise did have its advantages after all.

Shirley thought he knew Carl's face in every possible mood from terror to ecstasy, but he was unprepared to see his features rearranged into fury.

"You... want to talk about... broken hearts?" Carl growled. "Those letters..."

They had never talked about those months after the Armistice, when Shirley had retreated into silence and let the ocean yawn between them. Staring down the barrel of the future, he had known that Carl's best chance at peace lay in living a conventional life. He wasn't convinced he had been wrong. Perhaps he had not explained it well enough in writing.

"Carl, you could be safe," he said earnestly. "That's all I ever wanted for you. To find a Nellie. If I hadn't come back, you could be with her right now. No impediments."

Carl never had made good on his promise to punch Shirley on the night he came home, but it seemed a distinct possibility at the moment. He seemed to tremble and Shirley resisted the urge to reach out a soothing hand.

When Carl did speak, his words drooped across the space between them, the very sound waves enervated so that Shirley had to strain to catch them as they fell short. "Do you honestly think that if you hadn't come back that I would be here at Redmond? That I would have picked myself up and come to Kingsport all ready to study and make friends? Find a nice girl? Build a 'normal' life?"

There was enough venom in this last to make Shirley wince. The stretching silence raised the possibility that it was not a rhetorical question. "I hoped that you would," he answered eventually.

"If I were very lucky," Carl said on the edge of hearing, "I'd still be curled up in the garret at the manse."

Shirley had never imagined that. In those long months of silence, flying desultory missions and wandering the thrumming streets of Paris alone, he had imagined Carl by the pondside, in green valleys and shores like this one, at Redmond, and in a tidy little house, playing with his blue-eyed children. The manse garret hadn't come into it, to say nothing of the unlucky.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Well, you did." Carl turned toward the sea, blind side to Shirley, his voice not nearly as flat as he
was trying to make it. "You dropped off the face of the earth and left me behind. Just like that. Just decided you were done with me and that was it."

"It . . . it wasn't like that . . ."

Carl rounded on him. "Well what was it like, then? You only ever tell me half of anything."

Perhaps silence was not the best answer to such a charge, but it was all Shirley had. Luckily, Carl was on enough of a roll to fill the gap.

"You know what the worst part is?" he asked, spreading his hands open before him. "The worst part is that I'm still grateful for that half because at least you haven't gone completely silent again. It makes me feel pathetic."

Shirley was not certain how the conversation had arrived at this point. "You don't tell me everything either . . ."

Carl made no attempt to dampen the huff of derision that came out half-snort, half-laugh. "What, exactly, do I not tell you?"

"What about Nellie?"

"What about her? That happened an hour ago."

Shirley licked his lips. He hadn't planned on asking, not ever, but if they were going to have this conversation . . .

"What about Harry?"

"Harry?" Carl seemed genuinely confused.

"Your letters," Shirley said, feeling clumsy. "I didn't read them. But . . ."

"You want to read my letters? To Harry?"

"No," Shirley winced. "It's just . . . well . . ."

Carl was already digging in his coat pocket. The loose papers he flung at Shirley's chest were already in much worse shape than they had been a few days ago. Read and re-read, envelopes missing, smudged.

"Go ahead," Carl said. "Maybe you'll find where I could have said the right thing. I sure haven't. Not for lack of trying, though."

Shirley bent down, picking up one of the fragile leaves that had fluttered to his feet. Close-written in that unmistakable scrawl that always tended to tilt up at the end of the line, just as he remembered. Signature splashed jauntily across the bottom.

"You signed them Carl . . ." he said, wondering.

"Gee, what a scandalous revelation."

Shirley felt entirely wrong-footed. He checked the bottom of another letter, but it was the same. "Sorry," he said, shaking his head. "I just . . . Wilkie implied . . ."

There was more laugh in the recipe of disbelief this go-round. "Wilkie? Good source of impartial
information is he? What did he imply?"

"Just . . . that . . . that you were signing them Kit."

Carl blinked. "Kit?" The unaccustomed edge of the last few minutes had fallen out of his voice, leaving only soft disbelief. "I wouldn't. That's . . . not for other people."

"I know," Shirley said just as softly.

"Shirley, I wouldn't. Really."

Shirley had never felt so stupid. To listen to Wilkie instead of trusting Carl . . .

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just thought . . . how would he know about that?"

Carl shrugged. "How does he know anything?" Then, tilting his head with curiosity. "You really didn't read them, did you? You would have seen right away that it wasn't true."

Shirley rubbed a hand over his face. He'd fallen for the bluff. How stupid.

"Of course I didn't read them," he said, sinking onto a half-dry rock, deflated. "They were private. You don't have to tell me everything."

Carl looked down at him and for a moment, Shirley thought he might stay that way, as if he were a judge on his bench or a priest on his dais. But there was room on the rock for two. Carl took a breath and closed the distance to take the seat beside him.

"Neither do you," he said, nudging Shirley's arm with his shoulder. "But maybe more than half?"

Shirley opened his clenched fists. More than half the truth? It seemed unwise, but Carl was staring at him expectantly. Something true, something that mattered.

"You know that at the end of the war, I was in a crash," Shirley said as steadily as he could. "I thought I was going to die. I had a moment of perfect clarity while I was falling. I could see you, and the life you could have without me. A happy, normal life. And I was so . . . relieved . . . to know that you would be safe, that I didn't mind dying."

Carl made a soft, strangled sound, but did not interrupt.

"All I had to do was do nothing," Shirley shrugged. "It would have been all over in a minute. But imagining you . . . it occurred to me that I'd never see you again. So I fought back. It was completely selfish. I couldn't give you up, even to keep you safe. I . . . the plane was crashing . . . I . . . got out. Of the cockpit. I stood on the wing and thought of you and then I just . . . jumped."

Carl blanched. "You . . . jumped?"

"Yes."

"You jumped out of an aeroplane? Without a parachute?"

"Yes."

More silence, except for the waves coming in. Shirley watched a small bit of dry, white shell among the pebbles near the end of their seat. One wave crept up to kiss it, then another, and then it was engulfed.
"Why did you stop writing?" Carl asked.

Shirley sighed. No time for half truths. "I was ashamed of myself. For being so selfish. I really thought that you'd be better off without me."

Carl chewed his lip. "Do you think Harry thought people would be better off without him?"

"Maybe. You knew him better than I did."

"Not well enough," Carl murmured. "We're not, you know. Better off. Not at all. I wish he could have known that."

Shirley looked up and down the pebbled beach, then put a hand over Carl's on the rock between them and squeezed. He was very glad that Carl did not push him away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I never know what to say. I never want to make things worse for you."

Carl met his gaze frankly. "Then just tell me the truth. Even if it's hard to hear. Can you promise me that? That you won't hide from me?"

Could he promise that? It seemed a momentous concession, to forsake all walls and protections, even those he had erected for Carl's benefit. Didn't loving someone mean that you were supposed to protect them, even when it cost you dearly? Isn't that what men were supposed to do?

But the blue eye was clear and fearless as ever it had been. Carl was no shy maiden, to be kept in a locked tower, safe and cherished and patronized. Maybe no one was.

"I won't hide from you," Shirley promised.

"You'll tell me the whole truth."

Shirley grimaced. "More than half?"

Carl chuckled. "I'll take it. I want you. Not pieces. Please don't hide from me."

A surreptitious press of hand to hand seemed entirely inadequate acknowledgement, but perhaps that was the point.

"Do you see now why I have to tell Nellie the truth?" Carl asked. "I can't keep her guessing. She doesn't deserve that."

Shirley nodded. "You really do care about her, don't you?"

"Of course I do. That's why I have to tell her I'm yours."

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Carl took Nellie to the park, of course. Not to any of the sacred spots, neither his nor hers, not wanting to ruin them. Instead, he found an ordinary bench, exposed to the biting winds that kept other pedestrians away from the high ridge over the harbor.

She had looked at him, brimming with so much fragile hope that he almost could not do it. Had he ever really noticed before that her eyes were the delicate, lush blue of irises? Perhaps it would have been easier if Nellie had only been intelligent and kind and generous, but she was beautiful as well and the truth was that Carl was not indifferent.
He found the words somewhere and saw at once that Shirley had been right to be cautious. She was poised delicately on the edge of explosion like a live grenade.

For a terrible moment, Carl traced the arc through the sky, watching to see where it would fall.

When it did, there was the old rush of relief, not here thank God, followed by throbbing shame. It may have missed him, but it still exploded somewhere down the line.

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Some weeks later, Jem passed a bowl of roasted sweet potatoes over the Aster House table to Carl and asked, "Is it true that Nellie Fletcher means to try for the Cooper Prize?"

Several heads snapped to attention, fixing Carl with looks of consternation and concern.

"Yes, I think she means to," Carl murmured in reply.

"The faculty are buzzing over it," Jem said. "Does she mean to go to medical school, then?"

Faith adjusted Sam on her lap so that he could not continue smashing his fist into her potatoes. "The Cooper's not just for medical school," she observed. "It's a cash prize, isn't it?"

"Yes," Jerry confirmed. "But I always heard that the committee favors students who are continuing their studies."

Nan frowned. "Is Nellie thinking of taking a graduate degree, Carl?"

"I think so."

Di cleared her throat. "I'm sure she will excel in whatever she chooses to do. And we all wish her the best."

Undeterred, Jerry looked thoughtful. "Have they ever given the Cooper to a girl before?"

"Well, I don't think they give it to anyone," Carl said with a touch of asperity. "It has to be taken. But yes, she'd be the first woman."

"It's an awful time commitment," said Nan. "I'm sure I've heard Dad say that he only went after the Cooper to distract himself after Mum broke his heart."

Carl contemplated his plate, not daring to look at any of them just then.

"What do you think, Carl?" Jem asked. "Do you think she can take it?"

Let it never be said that Carl Meredith was disloyal.

"Yes. If anyone can, it's Nellie."

Notes:

On May 13, 1920, a gay Harvard student named Cyril Wilcox died by suicide. After his death, his family turned his papers, including letters from his gay friends and lovers, over to the Harvard administration. Over the next several weeks, Harvard conducted an investigation (called the "Secret Court") that led to the expulsion of several undergraduates, a PhD student, and a Dental School student. Others were caught up in the investigation as well, including a recent grad and
some local men (Harvard tried to have a waiter fired from his job). The dental student, Eugene Cummings, was so upset after his interrogation that he was admitted to the school infirmary, where he died by suicide on June 11. Harvard did everything it could to see that the other expelled students were not admitted to other universities, sending scathing letters to Brown and McGill when an expelled student applied there. The University also contacted potential employers any time someone attempted to verify that the applicants had attended Harvard, sending bad character references. In 2002, Harvard students asked the University to award posthumous diplomas to the expelled students; Harvard refused.
After They've Seen Paree

Chapter Summary

Content Warning:
This chapter contains the threat of police violence and an act of physical violence.

March 1921

*How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm*

*After they've seen Paree*

*How ya gonna keep 'em away from Broadway*

*Jazzin around and paintin' the town*

*How ya gonna keep 'em away from harm, that's a mystery*

- "How Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm (After They've Seen Paree)"
  (Joe Young and Sam M. Lewis, 1919)

It wasn't a club, not really. It was more like a floating craps game, rarely in the same place twice, with invitations passed by word of mouth a day or two before.

Tonight, they gathered in one of their few semi-regular venues. Mrs. Howard said she'd risk twice a year, but no more, and even that would cost them dear in cash and rum smuggled in from St. Pierre and Miquelon. Sure, it might look suspicious for a crowd of white boys from the college to be seen gathering at one of Patterson Street's few black-owned restaurants, but there was a back staircase that led from the alley up to a private dining room on the second floor. And with Prohibition on and the cops imagining communists lurking behind every bush, the color of Wilkie Marshall's money was what counted.

There was an upright piano in the room upstairs, and sweet, buxom Daisy Howard was always eager to earn some extra dough singing ragtime and jazz in a room full of men who didn't tend to leer. A keg of beer and tables pushed aside for dancing, with the lights low enough to leave some shadowed corners at the back, and it was a tiny, clandestine slice of heaven.

Crowded tonight. By their standards, at least. Wilkie's doing, no doubt. He had an infallible eye and an unflinching nerve born of the sincere belief that he should have died on Hill 70 with his men, having been spared only by some cosmic bank error that would surely be corrected at any moment. Life might be a miracle or a sentence, but either way, they were all here now and meant to enjoy themselves.

Shirley was not much of a one for dancing. The unselfconscious abandon required to lose oneself in jazz did not come naturally to him. He preferred to sit with a beer, watching Carl attempt some of the more outlandish steps.

Carl gloried in the opportunity to cut loose every once in a while. All those years of not dancing, what with one thing and another, had finally burst like a popped seam. He didn't even seem to mind
the noise or the crowd, not when he had the chance to give him self over to the music and the camaraderie of the other dancers. He missed Harry, Shirley knew. It had been months now, and there were still days when Carl would turn dull thinking of him. Between those bouts of sadness and the attacks that still seized him from time to time, good days were always a relief, worth savoring and protecting.

Tonight, Carl was leading a jolly little sophomore through an energetic Texas Tommy that threatened shins left and right. Shirley loved to watch him, trim and dapper in plus fours and a patterned vest, his striped jacket long ago discarded in deference to his exertions. The sophomore was keeping up, but just barely, and it wouldn't be long until they dissolved into complete chaos.

Shirley smiled, letting the thrum of the music and the warm glow of the amber-shaded lights wash over him. There were new faces tonight — a few freshmen, but also some sailors from the harbour and a high-spirited crew Wilkie had ferried over special from St. John for the occasion. They seemed to be enjoying themselves, all but a thin-faced man seated by the door, nursing one of Wilkie's famous gin rickeys and refusing several invitations to dance. Shirley had caught the man staring at him a couple of times, each time feeling a prickle of gooseflesh.

Shirley regarded the man surreptitiously, trying to place his face with little success. He had come in with the St. John boys, but didn't seem overly friendly with them; was he maybe one of Anthony Marckworth's new friends from St. Columbia Seminary?

Shirley was startled out of his reverie when Carl snuck up behind him and planted a surprise kiss on his cheek. The frantic ecstasy of the previous dance had concluded, the sophomore gone off to catch his breath while the pianist settled into a more relaxed tune.

"One dance," Carl said, twining an arm around Shirley's neck. "This is just a foxtrot. A slooooooow one."

Shirley smiled up into the flushed face, the irresistibly beseeching blue gaze. He generally allowed Carl to drag him out for one of the slower numbers, if only to savor the heady joy of dancing together in a crowded room and drawing no more than incidental attention. Tonight was no different. As Daisy crooned her way through "Do It Again" — my lips just ache to have you take the kiss that's waiting for you — Carl took Shirley's hand and led him onto the floor.

This foxtrot was not like the slow dances Shirley had learned in the Glen before the War. No more chaste waltzes with stiff elbows and room for the Holy Ghost between you and your partner. These days, everyone danced cheek-to-cheek and chest-to-chest, leading one another not with agile tension in framed arms, but with the more immediate pressure of contact along the whole length of the body. No showing off with kicks and twirls here — this was a dance to be felt, rather than seen.

"You really should be leading," Carl chuckled. "You're taller."

Shirley shrugged. "You're a better dancer."

"You are a perfectly lovely dancer," Carl smiled, knowing full well that it was not a lack of grace that kept Shirley off the dance floor. "Pity you don't enjoy it more."

"I enjoy it just fine," Shirley said, consciously relaxing his hold so as not to fight against Carl's lead. "I just don't want to break an ankle trying to keep up with you."

They danced in contented silence for a while. Shirley savored the sight of Carl, happy and relaxed, quite as captivating up close as he was from across the room. The half-light forgave some of the newer lines in his face.
Chance brought them to the edge of the dance floor nearest the door and Shirley looked up to find the thin-faced man staring again. He couldn't put a name to the unease he felt under that scrutiny, but his flesh creeped uncomfortably.

"Do you know that guy?" Shirley asked. "The one sitting alone by the door?"

Carl looked over, frowning. "No. I think he's one of the Saint John boys."

"Maybe. He doesn't seem too friendly with them."

Carl was suddenly wary. "Do you think he's a problem?"

"Dunno," Shirley said. "He just . . . keeps looking at me."

Carl relaxed with a chuckle. "Half the room is looking at you."

"Only half?" Shirley smirked, turning his full attention back to Carl. "All this soft college living must be taking its toll."

Carl swatted him, grinning. "Only half at this exact moment."

They moved away from the door, back toward Daisy, who had sung the whole song through twice now, with plenty of flourishes and a bit of a piano solo thrown in as well. She wrapped up with a heartfelt riff on the refrain and was rewarded with appreciative applause.

"I'm going to go sit," Shirley said, bending toward Carl's ear as they clapped.

"Are you sure?" Carl asked with every pretense of innocence. "I'll bet I could could convince Daisy to come up with one of those old animal dances for you. The Bunny Hug? Turkey Trot? Chicken Flip?"

"Chicken Flip?" Shirley snorted, pulling Carl in close with a firm arm around his waist. "Thanks, but I'll pass. You keep on dancing, though. I like to watch."

"Then I'll be sure to put on a show."

Shirley chuckled and kissed him casually — oh, the thrill of that would never get old — before heading to the keg for a fresh glass.

Back at the table, Shirley smiled into his drink as Carl demonstrated a step sequence to a befuddled St. Columbia student. Seeing his partner's difficulty, Carl broke the move down into each of its constituent parts, coaxing and encouraging until the seminarian got the hang of it. They danced away together, moving in and out of Shirley's view. Somewhere out of sight, they switched partners, Carl emerging in Anthony's arms, pink-cheeked and laughing at some private joke pressed to his ear, their voices lost amid the music and the merry chimes of half-full glasses.

A blonde man Shirley didn't know passed by his table, then doubled back and pointed to an obviously empty chair. "Anyone sitting here?"

Shirley shook his head and the blonde man spun the chair toward himself on one leg, straddling it and placing his own beer on the table across from Shirley's.

"Quite a club you fellas have here," he said, flashing Shirley a winning smile. "Do you run it often?"

"Maybe once a month," Shirley answered. "When we can find a place."
"You a friend of Wilkie's?"

"Who isn't?"

The blonde man chuckled. "He sure knows how to have a good time. We're just lucky he's willing to share."

Shirley raised an eyebrow at this but was spared the necessity of replying by the sudden appearance of the man himself.

"Ah, don't waste your breath on that one, Prescott," Wilkie Marshall said, slapping the blonde man on the back. "Better men than you have tried and failed, time and time again."

"Oh?" asked the blonde man, appraising Shirley with a look of undisguised appreciation. "Why's that?"

At this opportune moment, Carl appeared, flushed and grinning. He leaned over Shirley's shoulder and plucked the beer from his hand with a proprietary air. Asking no permission, he took a long swig from the glass.

"Fuckin' married, those two," Wilkie scoffed, shaking his head.

Shirley shrugged apologetically, then brought his beer-less fingers to his lips and blew Wilkie a decorous kiss. Wilkie pretended to stagger as it struck him, reeling back a pace or two and clutching at his cheek. Prescott rolled his eyes and dragged his host away to pursue more promising opportunities elsewhere.

"Are you ready to go?" Carl asked.

Shirley looked him over, golden-brown hair mussed and slightly damp, red striped tie askew. "No," he smiled. "You're still dancing."

"I'm done. Let's go."

"You're feeling alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." He was, too. Relaxed and loose-limbed, as if he'd shaken off his usual tension and left it on the dance floor.

"Go have fun a bit longer."

"Come join me," Carl entreated, catching Shirley's hand and backing toward the dance floor.

"Maybe after I manage to get through a drink on my own."

"Are you sure?" Carl asked as Shirley reeled him back in toward the table. "I could teach you some of those new kicks . . ."

"That will probably require several drinks."

Carl bent and kissed Shirley soundly, pulling back only when an irrepressible grin stretched his lips tight and kept him from going deeper. A crisp, sour note of lime cut through the mellow beer and Shirley wanted more. He darted an arm around Carl's waist, pulling him into his lap, kissing him with an enthusiasm that caused nearby spectators to whoop at them. When half the room seemed to be cheering, Wilkie Marshall sauntered over to scold them.
"Alright, alright. That’s enough, fellas."

Shirley waved a dismissive hand without desisting.

Wilkie made a show of sighing. "Do I need to turn the hose on you two?"

With one last, emphatic flourish, Shirley released Carl and sent him careening backward, breathless, toward the dance floor. The dancers welcomed Carl with jests and ribbing, but he paid them no mind. For a long moment, Shirley kept him tethered with a blazing look of promise that cut a swath through the revelers.

But then Daisy Howard was signaling the pianist for another up-tempo number and the jolly little sophomore had Carl by the hand and they were borne away by the laughing, kicking, smiling crowd.

Shirley allowed himself a smirk and toyed with the rim of his empty glass. Maybe just one more dance before it was time to call it a night . . .

The thought made him look toward the door. As he did, the thin-faced man rose from his seat and disappeared down the stairs with a last furtive glance at the dancers that doused all Shirley’s joy in sudden, instinctual fear.

The back stairs were dark, the alley darker. Most of the snow was gone, but a scummy residue of dirty ice and last year's rotten leaves clogged the gutters, leaving the night's intermittent rain to pool in murky puddles of uncertain depth. Shirley kept on eye on the man all the way out to the street. It was late — very late — which meant he wouldn't lose him in a crowd, but he might lose him in the dripping gloom of the drizzly night. Hanging back, moving in shadow when he could, Shirley followed the man down one street and another, hoping fervently that he was following this poor bastard home.

He wasn't. Not unless the man lived at the Kingsport Police Station. Shirley stood under a scraggly maple across the road until the rat let the station door bang closed behind him. Then he turned and ran like hell.

Shirley burst through the front door of the restaurant and went straight for the bar, where Mrs. Howard stood, wiping glasses with a yellow dishrag. "Cops coming," he warned. There would be more than a few of her patrons who would prefer to make themselves scarce long before the police showed up with empty paddywagons and frustrated hopes of a bust.

Mrs. Howard frowned, but seemed unsurprised. "How long?"

"Dunno. Not long."

"Alright. Get your boys out," she ordered.

"Sorry, ma'am."

"Don't be sorry. Be gone."

Shirley made for the stairs, taking them two at a time. He crashed through the door and wasted no time in sounding the alarm. "Cops coming! Everybody out!"

Perhaps a more measured announcement would have blunted the pandemonium, but there was no
time. The music stopped, the dancers scattered. Someone seized the nearly-empty keg; Wilkie Marshall tossed the depleted bottles of gin into a sack. The room was ashambles, chairs overturned and empty glasses everywhere, but there was no help for it. Within a minute of Shirley's arrival, the revelers were pouring down the back stairs, spilling out into the night, and evaporating.

Shirley looked for Carl amid the crowd, but needn't have bothered. Carl appeared at his side as if by magic, taking his hand and letting the flow of bodies sweep them along into the night. They landed hard in the alley, hands coming unlinked by long custom.

They hurried toward the street, but when they reached it, Shirley stopped short.

"Go home, Kit," he said, hands thrust deep in the pockets of his coat to keep them there.

Carl regarded him warily. "Come with me."

"I'll be back later."

Carl shook his head. "What are you going to do?"

Shirley didn't answer.

"Just leave it alone," Carl pleaded. "Come home with me."

"I'll be there in an hour."

"No," Carl said. "Come with me. Please."

"Carl, you gotta get out of here." Shirley couldn't risk a parting kiss, not out in the open, even in the dark. So he turned his back and set off in the direction he had come only moments before.

Shirley waited beneath the same small tree across the street from the station. Three police cars rumbled by on their way to Mrs. Howard's, lights off, running quiet, followed by the lumbering, echoing wagon they used for busts.

*Out of luck, boys.*

Shirley feared that his own luck was at a low ebb. If the snitch had an ounce of brains, he'd leave the station by another door and get away clean.

He didn't.

Shirley followed the thin-faced man closer this time, closing the gap with every pace, until a last hurried step allowed him to grab the collar of the man's coat and shove him headfirst into the brick siding of another deserted alley. The informant grunted when his face collided with the dingy wall, and again each time Shirley struck him. A few heavy blows to the body doubled him over, but Shirley meant to make a point. He lifted the man up and sunk a fist into his face, once, twice, and then, with a sickening crunch, the bridge of the nose collapsed in on itself. Bubbling blood sprayed over Shirley's shirt when the man exhaled, collapsing to his knees. A swift kick to the soft, unprotected belly sent him gasping to the ground.

Shirley Blythe had killed many men. But none with his bare hands. It wasn't that he couldn't, but he didn't particularly need the hassle.

Crouching over the groaning form on the alley floor, Shirley dug his fingers into the scruff of the neck, giving the snitch a menacing shake. Leaning in close, Shirley could smell gin and lime on the
man's breath: Wilkie's gin and the limes Carl had bought at the market on Friday, humming a sprightly dancehall tune as he dropped them one by one into a paper bag.

Rage flared and Shirley's grip tightened until the man yelped, aware that lethal options were suddenly back on the table. But Shirley only took a slow breath and hissed, "If I ever see you again, I'll be the last person you ever see. Understand?"

The man nodded feebly, eyes closed against the gore streaming from his split brow.

Shirley released him, sending him crashing into a gritty puddle where he lay facedown and inert. Without a backward glance, Shirley turned and stepped into the street with even, unhurried strides.

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Carl was waiting in their room at the boarding house, pacing a narrow strip of floor. He looked up sharply when Shirley opened the door, crossing the room in two quick strides.

One step over the threshold and Shirley clutched Carl to his chest, burying his face in the lamp-gleaming hair and taking a deep gulp of air into lungs that had felt tight and shallow ever since the thin-faced man left his seat.

Carl pulled back and stared in horror at the stains spattered over Shirley's face and coat.

"Is that . . . blood?"

"Not mine." Shirley said, withdrawing his throbbing hand from his pocket and examining it for the first time. The knuckles were red and scraped, with bleeding splits in two or three places. "Not much of it, anyway."

"Your hand!" Carl exclaimed, taking it in his own. "Should I call Di?"

Shirley shook his head. "No, don't bother her. I'm fine. Maybe . . . maybe some warm water though?"

Carl darted past Shirley to the stove. He tipped the steaming kettle into the washbasin as Shirley eased himself into a chair, groaning as he forced his muscles to relax. Carl brought the basin to the table, dipped a corner of towel, and began to bathe away the blood from Shirley's face, his neck, his already-crusting knuckles.

Shirley closed his eyes and gave himself over to Carl's ministrations. He knew this feeling very well, the taut, light-headed feeling he had always gotten after a dogfight, when he was safe on solid ground, but still coursing with adrenaline. He had already vomited on the way home, and knew he would crash soon. It was always the same. The difference now was that Carl was there to catch him on the way down.

When the hand was clean and wrapped in strips of towel, Shirley could begin to feel the familiar leaden fatigue hauling on his edges.

"It doesn't look too bad," Carl said of the hand as he coaxed Shirley into taking a sip of tea.

"It's not. I'm fine."

"And the snitch?" Carl asked. "Is he . . . I mean did you . . ."

What was worse? That Carl believed he really might have killed the man, or that he wasn't far wrong?
"He'll have a bad couple of days," Shirley muttered. "But he'll get over it."

Carl raised a brow, inclining his head toward the bandaged hand. "Couple of days?"

"Couple of weeks, maybe."

"You should have come home with me," Carl said, squeezing Shirley's uninjured hand. Shirley made a feeble attempt at a smile, but couldn't sustain it. "Had to protect the line."

“It’s not your job.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Come on,” Carl whispered. "Let's get you to bed."

It was wonderful to be led by the hand, to make no decisions, to allow himself to be undressed stitch by stitch, lain gently on the clean sheets, tucked in snugly.

"Stay," was all he said, and Carl climbed in behind him, pulling the old tobacco-stripe quilt, trusty shield, over them both. Shirley felt an arm slip under his neck, drawing him close, and gentle fingers following the waves of his hair.

"Are you really alright?" Carl asked.

Shirley didn't answer, but pulled the quilt tighter around his shoulder and focused again on relaxing, letting himself melt into Carl's reassuringly solid warmth.

In a few minutes, he felt himself begin to fall into sleep as into a bottomless, black well and let himself go. He only hoped he wouldn't dream.
On Saturday morning, Una Meredith balanced a laden basket on her hip and knocked at the door of a tidy blue house on the outskirts of Lowbridge. It was not a large house, nor a fashionable one, but its lines were clean and honest, and the orderly beds of spring-blooming flowers in the front garden would have won the approbation of any Ladies' Aider on Prince Edward Island.

The woman who answered Una's knock was as neat as her home: daffodil apron trimmed with an inch of hand-tatted lace, fresh-scrubbed face pink and pleasant, graying hair swept into a reliable knot.

"Miss Meredith!" exclaimed Mrs. Palmer. "Goodness, child, we didn't expect you today!"

"It's Saturday," Una smiled as she stepped over the threshold. "Why shouldn't you expect me?"

Mrs. Palmer fussed, laying aside Una's hat and taking her basket before leading her through to the kitchen. Una couldn't help but smile as she accepted a cup of oolong at the kitchen table; it had taken many months to convince Mrs. Palmer that she was kitchen company, not parlor company. Well worth the effort, though.

"It's a tourtière," Una explained as Mrs. Palmer lifted the covered dish out of the basket.

Mrs. Palmer shook her gray head fondly. "Now, Miss Meredith, I'm sure you had plenty of cooking to do this week without worrying yourself over us."

"It was no trouble. The oven was warm anyway."

"You oughtn't have come today. Surely you have more than enough to do?"

Una smiled. "The wedding isn't until the afternoon. I have plenty of time."

"That's very kind of you, dear," Mrs. Palmer said as she put the tourtière away in the cold cupboard. "I know Lewis will be awful pleased to see you. Why don't you go in now? He'll have heard you come in."

Una finished her tea and rinsed her cup and saucer before Mrs. Palmer could intercept her. Then she padded down the hall to what had once been the sitting room. The sofas had been moved, the knick-knacks packed away, and Mrs. Palmer's potted ferns removed to the parlor for hygienic reasons, but the tall, double-hung windows still admitted plenty of light and the hearth was still warm in winter. Tapping quietly at the door, Una let herself in and perched on a cushioned chair beside the bed in the center of the room.

"Hello, Lewis," she smiled.

Lewis Palmer blinked blonde lashes in her direction and held up his slate for her to read.

"Shouldn't you be at the wedding?" it said.

Una shook her head, still smiling. "As I've just told your mother, the wedding isn't for hours and hours, and Jerry hardly needs my help dressing himself."
Lewis scrubbed at the slate with a rag he kept for that purpose, then wrote, "YOU need to get ready, don't you?"

Una brushed away his concern. "And miss my Saturday with you? There's plenty of time."

She had not finished speaking before he began writing again. Una took the interval to look him over. There was no denying that Lewis Palmer was thinner than he should be. The feeding tube threaded through his nose and into his stomach kept him alive, but not plump. It wasn't easy for him to get much exercise either. The blast that had taken half his jaw had riddled his torso with shrapnel, one vicious piece slamming into his spine and leaving his legs unresponsive. It was miraculous that he had survived the ambulance, let alone the CCS operating theatre, and then the torturous journey over land and sea and land and sea again to bring him home to his mother. Now Lewis spent his days in the bed at the center of the old sitting room, reading when he had the energy to sit upright, sleeping when he did not. Father Kirkland was working on getting him a wheelchair so that he could sit in the garden on sunny days.

"Aren't you in the wedding party?" Lewis wrote.

Una shook her head. "No. Nan asked me to be, but I wanted to be on hand in case Faith needed help with the babies. Mrs. Blythe and Rosemary and Susan will be so busy with the party, and Jem has his duties as Best Man. Nan doesn't need me. She has Di for her maid of honor and Sylvia and Persis to stand with her. She will be very well attended, I assure you."

Lewis blinked and scribbled, "Will you be wearing sackcloth to the ceremony, St. Una?"

Una laughed quietly. "I have a very pretty dress for the occasion, thank you."

"Tell me about it."

The brown eyes were lively and intelligent and more than a little hopeful. Una sat a little forward in her seat and made an effort to put in as much detail as she could. "It's lavender muslin with a square lace yoke and little fluttery sleeves and a drop-waist. I have a string of artificial pearls and new silver slippers and . . ."

A quarter hour later, after they had exhausted the topics of dress and refreshments, Una was describing the setup at Ingleside — the huge canvas canopy and the dance floor and the eight-piece band hired from Charlottetown — when Mrs. Palmer came in with a pile of clean sheets.

"Go away," Lewis scrawled on his slate.

"I would, darling," Mrs. Palmer clucked. "But I will not be responsible for Miss Meredith missing her brother's wedding."

"I'm sorry I can't stay longer," Una said, reaching for Lewis's hand. "But I'll make it up to you next week. A proper visit, and I'll describe everything down to the last petal."

Lewis drew his hand away to steady his slate. "Take notes," he wrote.

"Perhaps I will," she smiled, rising from her seat.

Una took Lewis's slate and pencil and laid them on the bedside table. He closed his eyes, and she flinched, knowing how much he hated this part. Back in the beginning, Una had tried to help with all his care — bedpans and feeding and washing as well — but she had arrived one Saturday to find that Lewis had written her a long, emphatic letter insisting that she leave that sort of work to his mother and the trained nurse. Una had acquiesced, agreeing to visit as a friend, not a caregiver. But
the trained nurse only came during the week, and his mother couldn't change the sheets without help. In the interests of preventing bedsores, Lewis had agreed — reluctantly — to let Una assist in this, but he always closed his eyes and went away during.

Una and Mrs. Palmer worked silently and quickly, steady hands stripping the blankets, rolling Lewis this way and that to pass the new sheets under him, tucking him up safe at the end. Only when Mrs. Palmer had left with the laundry and Una had lain his slate and pencil back at his side did Lewis rejoin her, scribbling across the chalk-dusted surface: "Try to have a good time, won't you?"

"I will," she said, and bent to kiss his forehead.

The previous afternoon had found Carl sprawled in the shade at the edge of a meadow drifted over with ox-eye daisies. Jem had found the place; now that he was home for keeps, he knew every strawberry patch and jay's nest within rambling distance of Ingleside. How he kept abreast of such ripenings and hatchings alongside his obligations to the human inhabitants of the Glen was something of a mystery. Perhaps it was because he preferred to leave his father's Cadillac in the garage and walk his rounds; perhaps it was because he did not sleep.

Jerry had initially asked Carl to be his Best Man, but Carl had declined. As much as Carl loved Jerry, he knew that the place beside his brother wasn't his.

"Is it alright to have a married best man?" Jerry had asked when Carl had urged him to have Jem instead.

"He's your best friend," Carl answered, masking a flicker of exasperation with a smile. "Let anyone try to tell you that you can't have him."

No one had, which is why it was Jem organizing this pre-wedding expedition. He had called at the manse after tea with an armful of empty buckets for Jerry and his brothers. There was one for Shirley as well, though he was not a member of the wedding party. Jem had pressed him into service anyway, dragging him from the Ingleside kitchen over Shirley's protests that Susan needed his help with the icing and Susan's equally convicted declarations that she did not.

"Got your pocketknives?" Jem asked as he distributed buckets to the Merediths. "Sorry, Shirley, I should have asked you before we left home. Do you have an extra, Jerry?"

Shirley merely held up the corkscrew knife he always carried.

"That'll do!" Jem beamed.

They had tramped over fields and wood lots bursting with violets and mayflowers. The breeze was fresh and crisp as line-dried sheets, and warm enough that they soon carried their jackets. Jem and Jerry talked over plans for tomorrow while Carl named the plants and insects for Bruce's sake, keenly aware of Shirley's unflagging step behind him. Somewhere beyond the MacCallum farm in the Upper Glen, they had passed through a scrim of underbrush and emerged in this sun-warmed meadow with its daisies in their thousands, their bobbing heads weighed down here and there with bees, smelling faintly of the honey they would become.

"Just the tops," Jem said. "No need for stems." With a flick of his knife, Jem decapitated an ox-eye and dropped it into his pail.

"Why do we need so many flowers?" Bruce asked as they fell to work.
"They're for the tunnel," Carl explained. "After the ceremony, the guests will line the way from the manse to Ingleside for the reception and throw flowers for Jerry and Nan."

Shirley raised a brow in skepticism. "They're going to run a gauntlet?"

"A very gentle one," Carl chuckled.

"Is it alright that we're taking so many?" Shirley asked, moving to a fresh patch of daisies as the party fanned out. "The flowers don't need to... I don't know... germinate?"

Carl followed, shaking his head and suppressing a grin at these botanical musings. "They're an invasive species. *Leucanthemum vulgarc* Impossible to eradicate, since the rhizomes regenerate. We're not even hurting the plants we're taking."

"So you're saying that we're going to shower the newlyweds with weeds?" Shirley smirked.

"Very pretty weeds," Carl said, flicking a daisy head at Shirley and snorting when it fell inside his collar. "Can I help you get that?"

"Best not," Shirley said, low enough that the others could not hear his tone. Instead, he unbuttoned his own shirt, leaving it open over his undershirt even after the errant flower had been scooped into his pail. After all, it was quite a warm day.

Later, their buckets full and their fingers green-stained and fragrant, they rested in the shade of a maple at the edge of the field. Carl shared his canteen with Bruce and offered it around, but Jem waved it away. He produced a copper flask from some hidden pocket, passing it to Jerry with mock ceremony.

Jerry took a timid sip and spluttered. "Rum? Ugh. That takes me back. I haven't had rum since the trenches."

He offered the flask to Carl, but Shirley intercepted it and sniffed. "Is it even rum?" he asked. "It smells awful."

Jem shrugged. "Beggars can't be choosers. Got it from one of the fishermen who runs up to Newfoundland every now and then. There's better money in rum than fish these days, even if it is raw stuff."

With disdainful delicacy, Shirley screwed the cap back into place. Reaching for his jacket, he emerged with his own flask, silver and unembellished but for its sleekly tapered lines. It sloshed when he tossed it to Jem.

One cautious sip and Jem's eyebrows disappeared into his curls. "What the devil is this?"

"You never had whisky before?"

"I never had *this* whisky before. Where on earth did you get it?"

Carl had a fairly good idea where Shirley had gotten excellent whisky, but it hardly mattered. Wilkie was gone, graduated, off to see the world. He had come by the boarding house once before he left Kingsport, to bid a cheeky goodbye and share his plans: New York first, then Paris on his way to Berlin.

"Berlin?" Carl had wrinkled his nose.
"They're making the new world over there," Wilkie had grinned, winking at Shirley as he reclined with his boots resting on top of the tobacco-stripe quilt. "Clubs, bars, fabulous costume balls where you can wear whatever you like, drink whatever you like, dance with whomever you like . . . you'd love it, Meredith."

"I think I've had rather enough of Germans, thanks," Carl grimaced.

"Well I haven't," Wilkie chortled. "Not these Germans, anyway. Give me a year or two and I'll report back."

If there had been a more private farewell, Carl was not particularly keen to hear the details. "More than half" was enough, and he wasn't anyone's jailer either.

In the hazy maple shade, Jem passed the flask to Jerry, who seemed much more satisfied with this offering. It went all hands round the circle until it came to Bruce.

"Oh, go on," Jem prodded, winking at Bruce. "If you're old enough to be a groomsman, you're old enough to have a drink."

Bruce darted a glance from Jerry to Carl, but neither made any protest. He touched the flask to his mouth and took a sip so small he had to lick it from his lips. Jem clapped him on the back and plucked the whisky from his hands.

"Are daisies alright, do you think?" Jerry asked, dipping a hand in one of the pails and letting the blossoms run through his fingers. "Shouldn't we have rose petals?"

"Sure," Jem said reasonably, "if you want to wait another month."

Jerry whipped a daisy head at him, then went in for a playful shove, splashing liquor from the top of the flask.

"Hey now!" Jem exclaimed, licking the drops from his hand. "This is not for wasting!"

"I have a whole bottle at the house," Shirley said lazily. "It's yours."

"You can't just give this stuff away," Jem protested.

Shirley lay back in the grass, unconcerned. "Sure I can. I don't need it."

***

There was not enough room inside the manse for all of Jerry and Nan's guests to see them married. Therefore, they were married on the veranda, with friends and family crowded into the little yard, filling all the space down to the old Methodist graveyard. Carl thought that the gathered guests looked like a flock of tropical birds, arrayed in feathers and silk, their Easter finery repurposed to this next most joyous occasion. He was particularly glad to see Una looking sweet and shining-eyed in lavender, and hoped she wouldn't spend the whole wedding lodged between Rosemary and Susan.

Carl himself was dressed in a dove gray waistcoat and black tails, the same as Bruce and Jem. A starched white collar and smart blue tie completed the ensemble, which was as close to formal dress as an afternoon wedding at the Glen St. Mary Presbyterian manse could bear. According to Di, the waistcoat-tie combination had been the subject of a week's planning that had involved pro-con lists, swatch books, and some barely-concealed tears. They needn't have bothered; Carl would have worn anything short of khaki if it meant seeing Jerry happy.
He was, too. Radiant, even. After everything, Jerry Meredith stood up before God and the Glen, with his best friend at his side and his tear-choked father officiating, and promised to love and keep Nan Blythe through whatever else the world could throw at them.

If Jerry was radiant, Nan was incandescent. The gossamer threads of her frothy veil caught the afternoon sun so that she seemed to be wreathed in light. She carried a bouquet of silvery pink peonies, their tight green buds burst into outrageous profusion.* But even the exuberance of the peonies paled beside Nan's dress, an intricate confection of tiered bobbin lace, every frond and flower a captured hour of her interminable waiting, finally come now to its end.

Carl couldn't help grinning through the ceremony, though he faltered a bit when they got to the vows. Somewhere around in sickness and in health, he darted a glance at Shirley, standing with the Ingleside contingent beside the veranda steps. He shouldn't have, not while he was on display in front of everyone like this, with nowhere to hide from that unveiled gaze. With an effort, Carl picked an arbitrary blossom in Nan's flower crown and fixed all his attention on it, hoping that the hot blood rising in his cheeks and up from his collar would not overflow and go splashing over every dove-gray, bride-white, petal-pale flounce and ribbon on the veranda. Can't we laugh over them together? he had written once. Perhaps, but not right now.

Fortunately, most of the wedding guests were deep in their own reveries. Throughout the crowd, married couples were finding one another in small ways — Dr. Blythe taking Mrs. Blythe's hand in his, Emile Gagnon flashing a toothy smile at Marie, Rilla Ford stopping in the gentle swaying that kept little Gil quiet on her hip to lean back against Ken. It did not matter whether they had been married three years or thirty, all were turning their own vows over in their hearts, refreshing them as they welcomed a new family to the world. When John Meredith asked it of them, the guests promised to encourage and support Jerry and Nan in their marriage, to lift them up and witness their love, not just this day, but every day. No, it wasn't something to laugh over after all.

But the solemn moment passed. Jerry and Nan Meredith were man and wife, kissing one another in front of all the world, their marriage announced in the whooping applause of the crowd. Carl cheered along with the rest, grinning again when Jerry went in for a second kiss against all etiquette.

The guests, having been coached in their duties, went off to form ranks while Jerry and Nan accepted congratulatory embraces from the wedding party. A heartfelt hug for Jerry, a kiss on the cheek for Nan, a staggered step under the enthusiasm of Jem's clap on the back. Carl offered his arm to Sylvia, who squeezed it and gave him a saucy wink. Then they were off, following Jem and Di as they traipsed along behind Jerry and Nan through the tunnel of daisy-tossing well-wishers.

Across the road and down the hill, past the big tamarack tree on the tumble-down, grass-grown dyke of the Bailey garden, and down into Rainbow Valley. Revelers lined the way, strewing the newlyweds' path with flowers. A few, including Jims and Claude, were notably energetic in their pelting, but most sent their blossoms high and soft in a continual fall of snowy blooms. Nan and Jerry went beaming hand-in-hand until they came to the little wooden bridge that arched over the brook near the place where they had first seen one another at the long-ago trout supper that had been the start of so many things. At its apex, in full view of everyone before and behind, Jerry seized Nan around the waist and kissed her long and well. The delight of the multitude rang up and down the Valley, the fairy echoes of their joy chasing the merry company up the hill to Ingleside.

Sometime between the soup and the main course, Shirley Blythe burst out of the huge white tent that dominated the Ingleside lawn. He had made an effort, he really had. But after cocktails with
Irene Howard and Olive Kirk at either elbow, canapés in the slightly-preferable company of Mary Douglas, and a quarter hour at a table whose seating chart could only have been devised by Susan at her wiliest, Shirley had had more than enough.

Of course he hadn't expected to be seated with Carl and the rest of the wedding party at the head table. But he had hoped that he might be allowed to eat his meal in peace with Una. Or Rilla at the very least. He would have welcomed a full-length discourse on the weather in Toronto or all little Gilbert Ford's most precocious doings if it had meant he could have sat in genial, nodding silence and let others do the talking. But Betty Mead had been keen to know all about Redmond and Marjorie Drew had developed an unlikely passion for aviation and round about the hundredth question, Shirley excused himself abruptly, not caring if they thought him rude.

It was much cooler outside the tent, the golden afternoon tapering off toward a periwinkle evening. Shirley stepped off the flagstone path as several hired waiters carried entrees from the house to the tables in the tent. Susan had made major concessions to Nan's plans, giving up control over the dinner itself, though she had still insisted on making the cake with no help from anyone but Shirley. By their combined efforts, Nan, Mother, and Rosemary had convinced Susan that she was to be a wedding guest, not a caterer, extracting a dubious promise that she would leave the kitchen to the hired staff. Perhaps Shirley should go up to the kitchen on her behalf and check that everything was in order.

When he reached the veranda, Shirley nearly tripped over a small person with toffee-colored curls and a besmeared sailor suit, running in the opposite direction.

"Whoa there, Sam," Shirley said, crouching to address his nephew. "Out here all alone?"

"Not alone," said Una, coming around the corner of the house, her arms full of the wee, red-fuzzed bundle already known to the family as Wally. "Just a bit more nimble than I am at the moment."

Shirley lifted Sam to his hip, brushing dirt and grass from his tunic. "I see you've been giving your Auntie Una some trouble," he said.

Solemn hazel eyes blinked back at him. "Sam fast."

"Fast, eh?" Shirley asked, letting half a smile show. "How about Sam fly?"

Flipping the toddler onto his belly, Shirley swung him in a wide arc that made Sam squeal with delight. Down the veranda steps and onto the lawn, Shirley spun the child around and around, letting him soar and dip. Una followed along in their wake, rocking Wally and smiling at Sam's glee.

"More! More!" Sam shrieked when the ride slowed.

Instead of continuing, Shirley set him down on the grass and grasped him firmly under the arms. "Alright, Sam. Are you ready to go high?"

"High!"

"Get ready. You're gonna fly."

"Fly!"

"Ready . . . set . . . fly!"

On the last syllable, Shirley hoisted Sam into the air, rocketing him up to the extremity of his
outstretched arms and letting go for one breathless second of actual flight. Sam soared free, silhouetted against the purpling sky, then dropped back into Shirley's waiting hands.

"More! More!"

Shirley tossed his giddy nephew up and down until his shoulders began to burn with the effort. He set Sam down on the grass and was about to flop down beside him when he felt a small tug on the hem of his dinner jacket. Surprised, Shirley looked down to find another child, golden-haired and gray-eyed, looking up at him with determination.

"Gil up! Gil fly!"

Here was a bold little cuss. Sam Blythe had known his Uncle Shirley since he was hours old and they had spent the last week at Ingleside getting reacquainted. Shirley was a virtual stranger to Gil Ford, who had arrived in Glen St. Mary two days ago and was staying with his parents and paternal grandparents at the old House of Dreams. Oh, they had come up to Ingleside to visit, but Shirley had had his hands full running Susan's errands and hadn't spared a thought for Rilla and Ken's son. This lack of familiarity did not seem to deter the little princeling, who pouted his small pink lips and made the same demand again.

"Gil up! Gil fly!"

Shirley lifted the boy into his arms just as other voices filtered down from the tent.

"Gil! Gil! Where are you?"

"Come to Mummy, Gil!"

"Gilbert!"

Shirley frowned at his nephew, who mirrored the expression back in miniature. "Snuck away, did you?" Shirley asked.

The shouted entreaties had taken on an edge of panic, so Shirley wasted no more time.

"I have him! Rilla! Mother! I have Gil here!"

Una joined in, waving to the search party until Rilla came sprinting across the lawn, her green silk gown plastered to her legs as she ran. Ken followed in her wake, with assorted grandparents bringing up the rear. Shirley held Gil out to Rilla, who clutched him to her chest, panting.

"Gil! Sweetheart! I only looked away for a second," she insisted, though no one had asked for an explanation. "One moment he was in the chair beside me and the next . . ."

"It's alright, Rilla," Anne soothed, putting a consoling arm around her daughter's shoulders. "Children wander. When Shirley was about this age, he toddled away from Susan and when they found him he was in a stable standing right under one of the horses!"**

Shirley exchanged a look of fellow-feeling with young Gilbert, who showed no sign of being moved by this maternal display. Instead, he fixed his gray gaze on his uncle, who could practically hear him thinking FLY.

Rilla hugged her son close, but Ken peeled him out of her arms and spoke to him sternly. "Gilbert Ford, it is very naughty to run away. You made your mother worry. Never run away again."
Gil merely pouted at this admonition, stubbornly silent, downy brows drawn together mutinously. Ken seemed on the point of demanding some sort of reply, but Shirley intervened.

"Why don't you leave him here with us? Una and I can watch him and he can play with Sam while you enjoy the party."

Ken gave Shirley an appraising look, then turned to his son.

"Do you want to stay here with your Uncle Shirley?"

"Yeth."

"And will you be a good boy and listen to him?"

"Yeth."

"Good. No more shenanigans," Ken warned, passing Gil into Shirley's waiting arms.

"Don't let him muss his clothes," Rilla warned as Ken took her arm to lead her back up to the tent.

"No promises," Shirley said mildly.

When parents and grandparents had gone back to their dinner, Shirley turned to the glowering cherub sitting in the crook of his elbow.

"Alright, Ace. Are you ready?"

"Gil up! Gil fly!"

***

Later, when the star-speckled sky had deepened to lush indigo, Faith and Jem and Rilla had come to collect their boys and carry them protesting upstairs to bed. Shirley escorted Una back to the tent just in time to witness the cutting of Susan's magnificent cake. Then the band struck up a waltz and Jerry led Nan out onto the dance floor to general applause, with only old Sophia Crawford daring to mutter about the state of a world in which ministers' children were allowed to dance in public.

Una took her leave apologetically, murmuring some urgent business requiring Rosemary's attention. Shirley snagged himself a piece of cake, which hadn't turned out half bad if he did say so himself. Rather than braving the hydra menacing his own assigned seat, he commandeered a chair at the table recently vacated by various Fords and Blythes and attempted to make the cake last as long as possible, lest he be expected to dance.

Other couples had joined the newlyweds now. Shirley's parents were all smiles and admirable posture, laughing as they exchanged partners with Mr. and Mrs. Ford. The wedding party had entered the lists as well, Bruce Meredith red-faced with the effort of avoiding Persis Ford's silver-slippered toes.

Shirley quite forgot his cake when Carl led Sylvia to a starting position. He didn't mean to stare, but found that he could not help himself, not with Carl gliding easily across the floor, poised and debonair as no son of a minister had any right to be. When had he ever learned to waltz?

"Shall I tell Nan that the groomsmen's suits were a good choice?"

Shirley jumped at the whisper in his ear, making Di grin.
"Come dance with me," she said. "The Best Man's still up at the house wrestling ankle-biters and if I leave you unattached for too long, you're liable to be picked off by the pack."

Shirley could not remember the last time he had danced a waltz either. Perhaps at the lighthouse the night the war began? No, he had danced at his Queen's convocation ball; there must have been waltzes then. Still, a different world. Stepping out into the swirl of skirts and suits with Di, Shirley found that his body remembered the steps well enough, even if he had to remind himself that it was alright to lead.

Di was all smiles above the dreamy blue chiffon of her bridesmaid's gown. The cornflower shade was distinctive enough to be immediately recognizable among the dancers, which made it easy to keep track of all three bridesmaids and their partners.

"He's not going anywhere, you know," Di said kindly.

"What?" With an effort, Shirley directed his attention to his sister. "Oh. 'Course not. It's just . . . it's his first time out dancing since . . . you know . . ."

"He enjoys it?"

"He did."

Di patted his shoulder reassuringly. "You'll have more chances."

Would they? With Wilkie graduated and off on his adventures, was there anyone among them who could take his place? The money had only been part of it. Even if he had a million dollars, Shirley couldn't have done half of what Wilkie had done for his philoi. All out of unapologetic selfishness, Shirley knew, but that didn't change matters much.

"What about you?" Shirley redirected. "I suppose you'll be getting up to all sorts of mischief with Nan and Jerry out of your hair at last."

Di grinned to the limit. "Just more of the usual."

"Has Nan moved all her things to Charlottetown already?"

"Yes, she shipped the last trunk just before we came home."

Shirley had seen a snap of this newest house of dreams, a cheerful, gabled cottage near King's Square, just around the corner from the Provincial Court. The bridesmaids had spent much of the previous day on an excursion to make sure that the pantry was stocked, the kindling boxes filled, the bed made . . .

"They're driving there tonight?" Shirley asked.

"Yes, Dad's letting them take the car so they don't have to bother with the train."

"Can Jerry drive?"

"Jem's been teaching him."

"Can Jem drive?"

Di's laugh joined the jolly cacophony of the party. "I'm sure they've worked it out between them."

Shirley checked his wristwatch. "They ought to get going soon if they mean to make an evening of
"It isn't as far away as it once was," Di said. "In the car, Charlottetown's only an hour from the Glen."

"In a plane, Kingsport's only an hour from the Glen."

"Well then perhaps you should pop up to Ingleside more often."

Shirley tightened his hand on Di's waist, guiding her out of the path of Norman Douglas, who was leading Ellen in enthusiastic but imprecise steps without any apparent awareness that other people were dancing in their vicinity.

"No thanks," he said. "A week at Christmas and again in the summer is more than enough for me."

"Are you staying long this time?"

"No. Carl's got to work on the research for his thesis. Some kind of birds. We go back on Tuesday."

Di firmed her own grip, squeezing Shirley's hand in her own. "We should keep Sunday dinner going, just the four of us."

"You don't need to cook for us, Di. Enjoy Aster House. It's all yours now."

"You're always welcome," she pressed. "No need to hide yourselves away for the year."

Shirley looked again at Carl, twirling Sylvia with ease. A year. He'd barricade them in forever if he could, portcullis down and drawbridge up.

The band put a final flourish on the tune. All around, dancers were bowing to their partners, negotiating new pairs for the upcoming foxtrot, returning to their tables for drinks. At the center of the floor, Jerry was whispering something in Nan's ear, and by the look of things, it wasn't seating arrangements.

"I didn't know you could waltz!" A chipper voice at Shirley's elbow, closer than he'd been all day, flushed from dancing, a teasing twinkle in his eye. Sylvia hovered at Carl's side, her expression of merry mischief matching his, though Shirley saw her only peripherally.

Carl made a little bow to Di. He half-swallowed a grin as he asked, "May I borrow your charming partner?"

Sylvia could not stifle her hilarity and soon she and Di were a merged cloud of blue chiffon giggles. Carl did not break, blinking innocently at Shirley until there was no use fighting it anymore and Shirley gave him the smile he wanted.

Carl bent and pressed a kiss to the apple of Sylvia's cheek before handing her off to Shirley. Di took Carl's arm and followed him out as the music swelled again, stepping into the foxtrot with confidence.

"I think I have something that belongs to you," Sylvia said before she and Shirley joined them. Stretching up to the limit of her tiptoes, she planted the kiss on his cheek and rocked back with a look of satisfaction.

Across the dance floor, Carl was leading Di with flair. They were well-matched, being of similar height and slim build, and Shirley wasn't the only one watching them. But he was the only one who
got a look back, a bright bolt of blue so fleeting it might have been an accident, but wasn't.

"Careful or they might make a match of it," Sylvia smirked, echoing a dozen similar observations passing among the onlookers by whisper and wink. "Everyone knows you Blythes can't resist a Meredith."

"We're awfully predictable," Shirley agreed.

That got a silvery laugh, clear and sparkling enough to cut through the low murmurations of the be-spangled, be-feathered, kaleidoscope crowd.

"Oh, yes," Sylvia concurred. "Nothing but dull moments with you lot around."

There were, in fact, a few dull moments as the evening wore on. Shirley couldn't dance with Di and Sylvia forever, though he did try to pad out his dance card by waiting on his mother and Mrs. Ford and eventually Faith and Rilla when they rejoined the party. He even took a turn around the floor with the bride, who was not so much dancing as floating. Una had vanished and Susan flatly refused to dance, but Shirley obliged her by making perfunctory efforts toward Irene and Betty.

Then it was time to farewell the newlyweds with a more raucous round of whistles and hoots. Shirley hung back, letting the other well-wishers surge past him until stood alone in the shadow of a candling horse chestnut, watching. Nan managed to get into the Cadillac without snagging her lace; Jerry guided the car down the drive, slowly but successfully.

"Off to their happily ever after at last," Carl said, appearing at Shirley's side with a deniable brush of sleeve against sleeve.

"Do you really think there is such a thing?"

"I know it."

Shirley looked askance, mouth twisted in a sardonic smirk. "After everything, you believe in fairy tales?"

Carl pressed a hand to his own breast pocket. "Someone once told me that happiness is like an enchanted palace guarded by dragons and monsters. Sounds like a fairy tale to me."

Shirley snorted softly, far back in his throat. Now was probably not the best time to recount Dumas's plot, with its labyrinthine intrigues and the myriad unintended consequences of violence, no matter how righteous.

"Too many monsters," he said instead. "You think you've got them all, but there are always more."

"Maybe so," Carl said fairly. "But you don't have to defeat them all. Just cut a path to the side door. I'll hold it open for you."

The laugh that bubbled up through Shirley's chest escaped through his eyes first, then in soft, rumbling shudders through the rest of his body. Beside him, Carl was chuckling, not, he suspected, at the joke, but in delight at its success. Yes, perhaps they could laugh over it together after all.

Notes:

*Rilla of Ingleside*, chapter 1.
Anne of Ingleside, chapter 3
Wally Blythe might be too young to speak, but he was perfectly capable of making himself understood. At the moment, he was vigorously proclaiming his dissatisfaction with the porridge Una was offering him. Perhaps it was too hot or too cold, but in all likelihood, Wally had merely seen Susan slip a gingersnap to Sam as he toddled out into the sun-speckled garden with Dr. and Mrs. Blythe, and was sensible of having been cheated.

“Listen to this,” Faith said, chuckling over one of the many letters mounded on the kitchen table. “Di says that Marie Gagnon wanted to have her baby in the hospital, but Emile was against it because he wanted to be with her during the delivery. Jem’s fault, I’m sure, setting a bad example. But Marie insisted. And do you know what Sylvia did?”

Una made a polite sound of inquiry as she spooned drips of porridge from Wally’s cheeks.

“She got him a orderly’s smock and stuck him in a corner of the delivery room! Listen to this: It would have gone off without a hitch if I had attended the delivery as I was supposed to, but I got bogged down with twins (as ever) and one of my colleagues went to help Marie. I was sure the jig was up, but everything went smoothly and the next day, my colleague asked where that one-legged chap had gotten to, because he had another French-speaking mother and wanted him to assist again!”

Wally brought his wee fists crashing down onto his tray, gurgling oats down his chin as he echoed his mother’s laughter. He was a jolly little fellow, Una reflected, with ungovernable tufts of orange hair and a talent for reducing everyone at Ingleside to giggles. He did not remind Una of solemn, dark-eyed Bruce, whom she had left sitting in the manse study with Father, both of them wholly absorbed in their studies. Still, it was awfully nice to have a baby to dote on again. Una wiped Wally’s face and extracted him from his seat, kissing his dimpled cheek as she settled him on her hip.

“What did they name the baby?” Susan asked over the clicking of her needles.

Faith caught Una’s eye with a wicked spark. “Di says they’ve named him Wilfrid.”

“Wilfrid!” Susan ejaculated. “After Laurier?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Susan ruffled like a damp hen, muttering certain dark remembrances of the politics of Whiskers-on-the-Moon as she purled four and knit one.

“Come now, Susan,” Faith soothed. “After all, the Gagnons are French. Besides, the baby is Wilfrid Blythe Gagnon, so that makes up for a lot, doesn’t it?”

Susan sniffed in a way that indicated that it did indeed, though she would not deign to make any explicit concession on the matter. Instead, she set aside her stocking and held out her wisened arms for little Wally. Una was not eager to give him up, but he squirmed, desperate to relocate nearer Susan’s bulging, spice-scented apron pocket.

Faith went on playing postmistress, sorting the day’s mail into piles for each of Ingleside’s
occupants. There was a small but heavy parcel addressed to Dr. Blythe, but the rest were breezy
notes from all the happy corners of the New World. There was a letter for Susan from Rebecca
Dew and one for Jem from Emile, no doubt relating the other half of little Wilfrid’s birth story. The
pale green envelope from Toronto was addressed to the house at large and included a crayon
scrawl on the back in token of little Gil Ford’s desire to be remembered to them all.

Una was still scrubbing down Wally’s chair and the floor beneath it when Jem appeared at the
kitchen door. Once, he would have been accompanied by Little Dog Monday, who always gave
Ingleside fair warning of his imminent arrival. Alas, even the most faithful of dogs must end his
watch eventually, and Monday had gone to his well-deserved rest in a sunny corner of the garden
where Jem liked to sit when he was in one of his quiet moods. Wally, who had never yet hit on the
notion of a quiet mood, greeted his father with various squeals and dribbles of well-gummed
gingersnap.

“Is that for me?” Jem asked, catching Wally’s fat little arm and pretending to bite the decimated
cookie. At the last moment, he veered off course and nibbled Wally’s elbow instead, drawing
another wild shriek in reply.

Jem offered pleasantries to Una and Susan, then dropped his black doctor’s bag on a chair and bent
to kiss Faith’s cheek. It was a simple gesture, one Una had seen a hundred times before, but she
still dropped her eyes and hurried off to rinse Wally’s spoon. She was glad, of course, that Faith
had a husband who adored her and didn’t care who knew it. Still, there was a queer little twinge
that twisted her heart whenever she saw Faith catch Jem’s hand as he walked past, or Jerry put an
easy arm around Nan. It was something like the feeling of chapped hands back in Rainbow Valley
days, trying very hard to be glad of Mary Vance’s good fortune in muffs.

“Letter for you from Emile,” Faith said, handing it over. “There are more little Gagnons in the
world.”

“Been reading my correspondence, have you?”

“No, but we’ve already had half the story from Di. I imagine the other half’s well worth sharing.”

“Quite the haul today,” Jem said as he slid a finger under the envelope flap. “One from Rilla as
well? And what’s that?”

He leaned over the table to get a better look at the parcel, brushing aside other letters to expose the
return address. When he did, he froze.

“What is it?” Faith asked.

He did not answer. Instead, he turned the flat little package over in his hands, the grim set of his
mouth hardening into resolve.

“Jem?”

“Is Dad home?”

“He’s down the garden with your mother and Sam.”

“Would you . . . would you call him?”

Faith didn’t have the chance to move before Susan dropped Wally into Una’s arms and hurried out
with purpose. Una could not flee in the opposite direction without being conspicuous, so she
inquired of Wally whether they hadn’t better go see about the kettle. The familiar slosh of water,
the rustle of the Red Rose canister, and the click of china might not set things right, but they would plant their saucers and take a brace nevertheless.

“Love, what’s wrong?” Faith asked in a low tone Una still couldn’t help but overhear.

“I’ve seen one of these before,” Jem said. “Alec Burr’s mother in the Upper Glen got one a while back and Ned called me in to give her a sedative. Dr. Parker told me the Manleys got one last year.”

Chills were catching despite the rising steam. Una remembered Alec Burr and Clark Manley as the boys they would always be, dancing at the Lighthouse and boarding the train in khaki, never to return. If this package was for them, then it was for the houses that had not been passed over. Perhaps she really should go.

“But what is it?” Faith asked. She took the parcel from the table, testing its substantial weight.

“A gift from the King,” Jem said bitterly.

“Again? We’ve already got that dreadful scroll . . .”

Una had never actually seen the scroll in question. It had arrived sometime last spring and been hastily hidden in a drawer to lurk unseen if not quite forgotten. Faith must have caught a glimpse at some point because she had told Una of the calligraphy, the heavy black lines bearing the generic condolences of the Crown to every corner of the Empire. Hadn’t that been enough?

Wally squirmed in Una’s arms. She eased her grip, not having realized that she was squeezing her nephew. He did his level best to lighten the mood in the room, poking fingers into Una’s ears and babbling in a way that generally charmed the adults in his vicinity. Una rewarded him with a second cookie, but handed it over mechanically rather than indulging in the usual hide and seek.

When Dr. Blythe arrived, it was clear that Susan had put some pepper into her summons. He arrived slightly winded, with Susan, Sam, and Mrs. Blythe trailing far behind.

“Everything’s alright, Dad,” Jem assured him. “Sorry to worry you.”

“Susan . . . said . . . mail?”

Jem kicked out the chair across from his own place.

“I’m fairly certain it’s a memorial plaque,” he explained, sliding the object in question across the table. Dr. Blythe did not touch it. He only looked from the envelope to Jem and back again, delaying the moment that must come, as surely as the telephone must be answered.

“You’ll have seen them around, I suspect,” Jem muttered. “The Warrens have one for Mark all framed on their mantel.”

“I’ve seen it,” Dr. Blythe rasped.

This was too much for Wally, who could not abide such solemnity among his people. He pushed away from Una with surprising strength, wriggling and squawking. It was all Una could do to hold him.

“Let me . . .” Faith said at the same time that Jem said “I’ll take . . .” The ensuing scramble over baby rights, in which Jem prevailed, ended only when Mrs. Blythe appeared at her husband’s shoulder. There was no need for her to speak over the din. Even Wally hushed at sight of his
grandmother’s face, as white as her dress and unnervingly still even when she spoke.

“Open it, please, Gilbert.”

Dr. Blythe did as she asked, slitting the pale envelope carefully so as not to damage the contents. There was another envelope inside, embossed with the Royal Arms, and a flat, square case made of dingy cardboard. Dr. Blythe set the square aside and opened the envelope with infinite care, as if reverence for the lifeless object could transmute somehow into a caress. It held a single sheet bearing only a few words.

“It’s from Buckingham Palace,” he said, tipping the page so that they could all see the red header. “It says, I join with my grateful people in sending you this memorial of a brave life given for others in the Great War. It’s signed by King George.”

“Is it really?” Susan blurted.

“It’s a facsimile,” Dr. Blythe murmured.

“A what?”

“A copy.”

Susan mustered a fresh store of indignation. “A copy? Can the man not find a spare moment to sign his own name?”

Dr. Blythe looked as if he very much agreed, but he was nothing if not just. “Be reasonable, Susan,” he said miserably. “There are more than a million of these letters. If the King signed a thousand of them every day, it would still take him years.”

Susan sniffed. “Well, it doesn’t seem right.”

No one contradicted her. A copy was such a soulless thing.*

The paper passed from hand to hand, landing with Una, who tried to hold it without touching it. But no, it was indeed soulless, wholly inert, a form rather than a letter. Someone must have handled it somewhere along the way, creasing the paper and sliding it into its envelope, but only as one copy in an endless stream of copies. A dead letter, if ever one deserved the name.

At the table, Dr. Blythe hesitated over the cardboard case. He sent a searching look in Mrs. Blythe’s direction, but she did not stop him, though her posture was unnaturally rigid. The others hovered and Una found her view blocked by the point of Susan’s bony shoulder. Perhaps she should have taken that as a sign to retreat, but it was too late for that. Una found a chink between the Blythes and peered through, catching glimpses as Dr. Blythe opened the package.

It was a curious little square, its top layer cut into four crisp triangles with sharp points that opened like some horrible flower to reveal the bronze medallion within. Una felt the letter in her hand crumple.

The plaque was as large as a saucer. Its outer edge proclaimed, “HE DIED FOR FREEDOM AND HONOR,” over the raised letters spelling out WALTER CUTHBERT BLYTHE.

None of those words registered more than superficially. What made the bile rise in Una’s throat was the image that dominated the plaque. It showed a woman in the flowing robes of classical allegory, holding an olive wreath in her outstretched hand. A powerful lion strode beside her, all bared teeth and rippling muscle. Una knew them both. At her feet the Lyon watch doth keep.
Una stepped back, letting Jem’s sleeve hide the plaque from her view. Another step and another until she bumped the sink and rattled the dishes in the pan. No one noticed.

“... least they’ve spelled it right, because you never can trust those...”

Would the Blythes put the horrid thing in a frame? Would it loom over the living room or hang in the hall, presiding over all Ingleside’s comings and goings? Una recognized the queasy tilting of the room and gripped the side of the sink, focusing all her attention on the cold, unyielding porcelain under her fingers. Was bronze cold, too?

A tug at Una’s skirt jolted her out of dire imaginings. Looking down, she found Sam with a fistful of apron and an expression of uncertainty.

“Sam up?”

Instead, Una crouched down and took the warm little body in her arms, holding him as tight as he would let her.

Di was late for dinner again, but no one seemed to mind much. Shirley and Sylvia were both too familiar with the habits of doctors to expect punctuality and Carl was perfectly content to play niddy-noddy to Sylvia as she wound a ball of yarn by the hearth. They chatted while Shirley built an intricate tower of kindling that Carl hoped would become a fire sooner rather than later. In the meantime, the green lambswool around Carl’s outstretched hands kept his fingers at least partially warm.

“How goes the thesis work?” Sylvia asked.

“Very well, I think! I’ve finished processing the data from the spring nesting season and Prof. Michelson thinks we can get another week or two of field work in before the weather gets too bad. The terns have all flown south, of course, but there’s still plenty to do at the colony.”

“So you’re still going out in the boat?”

It wasn’t a rebuke, just curiosity with a bit of admiration mixed up in the worry. The sea was a bit rough these days, but it was also gloriously open and wild, with nothing pressing in and no sounds but the wind and the squawking of birds. Work was hardly work when you had freedom like that.

“It’s perfectly safe,” Carl assured her. “Prof. Michelson’s an old hand and he’s teaching me all the safety precautions along with the data collection. It’s a bit chilly of course, but it’s wonderful. We should go out on the water sometime. All four of us.”

“Perhaps in the spring,” Sylvia said drily.

That was only sensible, Carl conceded. He had gained a new appreciation for the sea in his work with Prof. Michelson, who seemed to be on the best terms with every colony of shore birds within a day’s sail of Kingsport. Carl still preferred the miniature world of insects, but avian colonies were awfully interesting as well. As intricate as ants’ nests, that was for sure. Roseate terns were monomorphic, which meant the untutored human eye could barely tell male from female let alone recognize individuals. Yet, every bird knew its own mate and its own chick out of thousands and returned to its own nest with unerring accuracy. They might spend their winters in the turquoise waters of the Caribbean, but when it came time to settle down, every tern found its way home to Canada. There was, no doubt, a natural explanation for all that, but somehow Carl couldn’t imagine that it would wholly satisfy his father. Nor himself, come to that.
A breath of warm air kissed his cheek and Carl looked up to see that Shirley had gotten the fire going and stepped away so that he no longer intercepted its warmth. He eased himself onto the cushion beside Carl, close enough that Carl could feel the heat Shirley’s sweater had absorbed. He leaned back into it, as snug as any manse cat had ever been. Sylvia supplied them with a report on little Wilfrid Gangnon’s disposition — *bruyant*, according to Claude — along with several character sketches of her recent patients that left Shirley chuckling and Carl near tears.

That is how Di found them when she blew in with the gale, scattering leaves across the entryway and making the fire shiver.

“I’m so sorry!” she called, tossing her hat and gloves onto the telephone table in the hall and hurrying to give Sylvia an apologetic kiss.

“Twins again?”

*“Breech* twins,” Di grumbled. “They seem to be my destiny. Did you save me a plate?”

“Don’t be silly,” Sylvia said, rising and shaking out her skirt. “We waited.”

Carl smiled at the dismay on Di’s face. She had insisted repeatedly that they not hold dinner for her when she was running late. Most doctors liked to have Sunday mornings off for church, so Di volunteered to take those shifts in order to guarantee that her Sunday afternoons remain free. Babies, however, were notoriously indifferent to timetables, and Sylvia made sure to prepare dishes that were easy to keep warm.

“You shouldn’t have . . .” Di protested feebly.

Sylvia ignored her. “I have an idea! Let’s eat in here tonight! It’s so much cozier with the fire. We’ll have a picnic!”

“Good idea!” Carl was up from the couch, pulling Shirley toward the kitchen before Di could call them back. He piled the Ladies of Llangollen onto a tray with a fistful of cutlery while Shirley hunted up a trivet for the casserole. Hands full of dishes, Carl could not evade when Shirley reached over to tuck the corner of a dish towel into Carl’s waistband, nor did he attempt it. Instead, he tilted his face up for a kiss.

The meal was not, perhaps, quite to the standard that Nan had established for Aster House in her years at the helm. There was no roasted joint nor elaborate dessert, nor even a tablecloth spread over the braided rug beneath them. Instead, they balanced their dishes on their knees and passed a plate of biscuits between them, soaking up the gravy and the warmth of the fire. There was cake afterward and cocoa as well, served with whipped cream and Sylvia’s smiling demand that Shirley favor them all with a poem.

“I don’t recite . . .” he protested.

“Nonsense. Di assures me you’re just as capable as the others. Let’s hear something.”

Shirley shot Carl a beseeching look, but found only a conspiratorial grin.

“Something cheerful,” Carl clarified.

“You first,” Shirley said with a shove.

Carl knew any number of selections from the Royal Readers, having learnt them off by heart as both student and teacher. But the others knew those backwards and forwards as well, and there
wasn’t much entertainment value in parroting the tired old lines. He was always happy to give “To a Mouse” again, but there was nothing new in that either. Better something fresh.

“I don’t know any new poems,” Carl said, “but Prof. Michelson did give me a fascinating book this week. It’s called *Courtship Habits of the Great Crested Grebe*, and . . .”

Ten minutes later, Carl was still rattling on about “the penguin dance” and Huxley’s theory of the ritualization of animal behavior.

“It’s awfully interesting to think that birds might have . . . I guess you’d call it *culture,*” he enthused. “Behaviors that aren’t essential to survival, but create emotional bonds between individuals and, oh, what did Huxley call them? *Love-habits!*”

“Love-habits?” Di asked with enough skepticism to earn a swat from Sylvia.

“I suppose the terminology could use some work,” Carl conceded. He offered Shirley an apologetic grimace, only now realizing that he hadn’t let anyone else get a word in edgewise for far too long. Not that Shirley seemed to mind. He wasn’t laughing, either, just looking at Carl with a soft expression that would have made Carl blush if he weren’t already. “Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to go on.”

“Go on as long as you like,” Sylvia said. “It’s fascinating. Of course, dogs and cats have emotions, so why shouldn’t birds? Even insects, maybe, if we knew how to recognize them.”

“They do!” Carl assured her. “You should come ant-watching with me, Syl. It’s quite as dramatic as the cinema.”

“In the spring, love. For now, I’d prefer some cozier entertainment. Perhaps . . . a recitation?”

She raised a piquant brow in Shirley’s direction. Carl expected him to brush her off again, but it was only the four of them here before the glowing hearth.

“I can give you some Whitman if you like,” Shirley said.

Di settled her arm around Sylvia’s waist. “Please do.”

People who gave recitations were supposed to stand, shoulders back, facing their audiences and projecting to the corners of the room. Instead, Shirley leaned in, murmuring a poem into the pool of firelight between them. A strange poem, to Carl’s ear. But then, most of Shirley’s Whitman was strange. It hardly ever rhymed, and often sounded like nothing but ordinary speech. It had a heartbeat, though, in its cadences and repetitions, and watching Shirley deliver it was quite as fascinating as any anthill or tern colony.

*I have perceived that to be with those I like is enough,
To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,
To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough,
To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment, what is this then?
I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.*

Notes:

*Rilla of Ingleside, chapter 23, "And So, Goodnight*
**Walt Whitman, "I Sing the Body Electric"**
In February, an envelope arrived at the boarding house. There was no return address, no postmark, no stamp, only Shirley's name block-printed on the front in a hand neither of them could recognize, no matter how they tried. Inside, a clipping from a New York newspaper:

**BANKER'S SON PLEADS GUILTY TO INDECENCY CHARGE; THREE YEARS HARD LABOR**

"Christ," Carl had whispered, retrieving the scrap of paper from the table where Shirley had dropped it as if scalded. There was a photo and everything.

They had talked it over but never could decide whether the clipping was a threat or a gesture of solidarity. It wasn't from Anthony, judging by the wounded sound he made when Carl showed it to him. Di and Sylvia were at a loss as well, no matter how many times they debated the matter in voices low enough that they did not carry beyond the firelight. There was no way to know for sure.

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A Saturday night in March found Carl and Shirley at home: Carl hunched over a sheaf of notes at the desk, Shirley reclining across the beds, perusing a copy of *Aerial Age Weekly*. There were no more dances and few outings of any other kind, except to Aster House on Sundays. They rarely even walked home together from Redmond, just in case someone was watching.

Carl shoved back from his desk with a sigh. His thesis was due mid-April and he was still puzzling over the demographics of roseate tern colonies. Was it destruction of nesting sites that was hurting the population? Or was the decline mainly due to plume hunting? It might take decades of data to get a clear answer, but he had nowhere near that much time.

Carl risked a look over at Shirley, absorbed in his article, long legs splayed carelessly over the tobacco stripe quilt. There was never going to be a good time to say what he needed to say. But he had thought it over all week and knew what must be done, even if he dreaded it.

Rising from his chair, Carl went and perched hesitantly on the edge of Shirley's bed, his whole posture a question.

Shirley lowered his magazine. Putting off the moment, Carl directed his attention to the article Shirley had been reading, now visible: "Note on the Interpretation of Wind Tunnel Experimental Data with Reference to the Longitudinal Damping Characteristics of an Airplane." The spread pages were dense with mathematical equations, all of them involving various parentheses and logarithmic functions expressed in a bewildering alphabet of symbols and subscripts.

"You can understand that?" Carl asked, nodding at the page.

"A bit."

"You'd be top of the class if you put more time into studying."

Shirley shrugged. "Not the best use of my time."

Carl tried to smile, but he was stalling and knew it. What was more, Shirley knew it, there being no doubt about the expression that said Carl had come to tell him something he was a little afraid to
"Just spit it out," Shirley urged. "You'll feel better."

"It's only . . ." Carl faltered, "only . . . I think I got a job."

"A job?"

"For after graduation," Carl said.

Shirley squinted at him. "And this is . . . bad?"

"No, not bad. At least it could be good. The job, that is." The conversation thus breached, Carl's words gushed out in a torrent. "It's an excellent job, actually. Better than I could have hoped for. Professor Michelson, you know he's been advising my work, and he introduced me to a friend of his from the Department of Marine and Fisheries. That was my meeting on Monday — I went to his office and we had tea and talked about migratory birds and the threats to their colonies, what with habitat destruction and hunting and invasive species, and the long and short of it is that the Department is starting up some wildlife research projects and, well, they heard about my thesis work with the roseate terns. And they . . . they want me."

"A job at the Department of Marine and Fisheries?" Shirley asked, attempting to distill the salient information from this flood.

"Yes. I'd mostly work on my own, but I'd be a Fisheries agent."

"An agent?" Shirley started. He sat up, no longer at his ease. "You want to be a cop?"

"No! It's nothing like that!" Carl exclaimed, raising a placating hand. "They have other people monitoring the catch. I wouldn't be enforcing regulations. I'd just be looking at habitats — going out to little islands to count nesting birds, observing marine mammals, writing reports, that sort of thing."

"They're going to pay you to watch birds?"

"Well, there's a bit more to it than that," Carl said with a touch of asperity.

"Where?"

"It's . . . uhh . . ." No use for it. Carl swallowed his trepidation and plunged ahead. "They want me to monitor the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The Magdalens. And the west coast of Cape Breton."

Shirley stiffened. "That's . . . home."

"I know."

Shirley's face cleared as realization dawned and the relevant pieces clicked into place. "You want to move home," he said, astonished. "To Glen St. Mary."

Carl shriveled. "It's a good job."

"At home."

"Forget it. I know you don't want to go back."

Shirley did not reply right away. Instead, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat beside
Carl on his sighted side. "Are you serious?"

"It's a good job," Carl repeated, knowing how pathetic that sounded.

"I'm sure it is. But... there's no place for us. Not there."

Carl looked up through dark lashes, blue eye imploring. "You don't think we could make one?"

Shirley's jaw was set, his lips compressed. But when he spoke, his voice was as calm as ever. "There are places we could go," he said. "Where we could live together. Montreal or Toronto or New York..."

"Would things really be better there?"

If he hadn't known Shirley's face so well, Carl might have missed the infinitesimal quiver. But he had always been an observer of small things, and he knew Shirley's face like he knew the smell of the sea-wind off the Gulf and the grit of red Island earth between his toes. With that small change of expression, Carl understood what it meant to Shirley to know that the irrepressible Wilkie Marshall was rotting in a fetid cell somewhere, enduring things Carl did not dare to imagine too specifically. If he was still alive at all.

"What would we do in a big city anyway?" Carl asked miserably. "A place with no trees and no ocean? No woods or streams? Could you really live like that?"

"With you, I could."

Carl wanted to mirror the words back. He wanted to say, I would live in a concrete box with you; I would live in a hole in the ground with you; I would spend eternity in the blazing, blasted, barren desert of the Seventh Circle with you.

But Carl Meredith had lived in concrete boxes and holes in the ground. Sometimes, unexpectedly, he found himself there again, the breath squeezed from him as if he were pinned beneath the merciless descent of a cider press. And as for the Seventh Circle — the souls of violence condemned to chase one another aimlessly across the burning sands under a sky alive with flakes of fire — well, Carl had seen all that with his own eyes and lost one in the looking. In his secret heart, he believed that he might see it again one day. But it wouldn't do to say so to Shirley, who had little patience for dangers that couldn't be fought.

"I... don't think I can live in a city."

"No, I guess not," Shirley muttered.

He was silent a long time and Carl began to feel fidgety, but held himself in check. There was no need to voice all the arguments. Shirley would skip all unnecessary recitation and come out with the essential point at the end.

He did. "You want to go back to Glen St. Mary."

"Yes," Carl admitted dismally.

"You're really serious?"

Carl bit the inside of his cheek, a collapsing effort to keep tears in check. "You know how it is with me," he said, barely audible. "Even in Kingsport. I can't live in a city. No matter how much I might want to."
Shirley frowned. "Does it have to be the Glen?"


A long pause, eloquent in itself, but not infinite. "I only came back for you, Kit."

He almost hadn't. He had almost stayed in Paris to make a new life in a city that offered opportunity and choice and a different sort of freedom. He had meant to release Carl as well.

Carl flicked a bit of sheet back and forth between his fingers, studying it intently. "I . . . it's not . . . I mean . . . you don't have to come with me. If you don't want to."

The brown gaze sharpened at that. "Don't be stupid."

"I mean it," Carl said, and did. "There's a whole world out there. It's not for me. But you'd do well. You have . . . options. You don't have to follow me back to Glen St. Mary for old times' sake."

However sincere he might have been, Carl found that he could not quite bear to look Shirley in the eye. He risked a single, brief glance, but met a look of such unveiled fervor that he snapped back to the sheet in his fingers, feeling scorched.

Shirley did not speak at once, but reached into Carl's field of vision and stilled his fingers with the enveloping warmth of both his hands. He held them steady until Carl looked up of his own volition, swallowing against the arid crackle of a throat gone painfully parched.

"There's no option," Shirley said. "Not for me."

"Carl had seen this exact expression only twice before. The first time had been their very first night in Charlottetown, after supper had been eaten and Mrs. MacDougal had sent them off to their room to get a wholesome night's sleep before the first day of the fall term at Queen's. The second had been in a shabby hotel room in Paris, when the splendid young RFC officer had fallen away with the uniform and revealed Shirley Blythe, all grown up and not completely certain that his soldier boy remembered him.

Carl did what he had done twice before. He leaned forward and kissed Shirley, tenderly at first, but with ardor enough to say you are neither mistaken nor forgotten. And as before, there was a tiny ripple of relief that would have been imperceptible to anyone who did not have palms pressed to Shirley's pulse.

When he surfaced for breath, Carl shook his head. "Forget it. It's not important."

Shirley did not release him. "Of course it's important."

"No. There's nothing for us in the Glen. Nothing worth anything."

"Except trees," Shirley said. "And the ocean. And our families. And your job. Your perfect job."

"What job?"

"Your perfect job," he repeated. "The one where you're going to play Noah and save all the animals from man's sinful transgressions."

Carl made a vague attempt to smile, but fell somewhat short of success. "I can't ask it of you. What would you do in the Glen?"

Shirley was silent for a long moment before saying, "I could fly, I suppose. My Curtiss is still out
there in Abel Cooper's old barn. I could build a new plane, too. And a hangar. Give lessons. Scare some migratory birds."

Carl began to let himself imagine it.

"But we couldn't live together," Shirley said, his hand firm at Carl's waist. There was no use softening the truth. They could live nearby; they could see one another often. But the Glen was the sort of place where everyone knew everything.

"No, I guess not."

There was a moment of silence. It was the moment that other people filled with vows and plans and castles in Spain. It's the birthday of our happiness."

"Would you go back to the manse?" Shirley asked instead.

"No," Carl shifted his weight. "Bruce is going to Queen's next year. And Una's been hinting that she wants to be closer to her church in Lowbridge. I think maybe she and I could get a house together. Somewhere quiet. No one really thinks twice about a brother and sister setting up housekeeping together."

Shirley considered. "That might work."

"Would you go to Ingleside? Susan would love to have you back."

Shirley rubbed a hand over his face. "No. God, Susan. What am I going to tell her? I suppose I'll have to move back in until I can get a hangar built. I could put an apartment in it, though, and live there."

"But you don't want to?"

"Of course I don't. I want to stay right here."


It was impossible to say whether he meant it. Carl did not know himself.

"No," Shirley replied. "You want to go back to Glen St. Mary. It's not just the job, is it?"

It wasn't. The job was well and good, but there was more than that. Cities might offer certain sorts of freedom, but even sleepy Kingsport pressed in on him. There was a different sort of freedom at home: freedom to move and breathe, freedom from the jangling edginess that spilled over too easily into suffocation and terror. That wasn't all, either: Una was in the Glen, and Bruce and Father and Rosemary and Faith and Sam and baby Wally. And even though it felt a bit silly to count them at all, there were the animals to consider, because no one was paying adequate attention to the invasive species issue and the ecology of the Gulf would be ruined if things went on as they were going . . .

"No. Not just the job."

"Well, that's settled, then," Shirley said, and his arm around Carl's waist was brace and ballast, as well as caress.

Carl squeezed back and Shirley dropped a kiss on the top of his golden head.
"I'll have to get a boat," Carl offered. "A motorsailer, probably. Big enough to do some multi-day trips."

"Oh?" Shirley said, something like interest sparking in his eyes. "The sort with a cabin?"

"That's the idea. Sail out to the Magdalens and drop anchor for a day or two. To watch birds, you understand."

"Naturally. Do you think you can handle a boat like that all on your own?"

"Oh, I expect I could learn," Carl smiled. "Motorsailers are made for small crews. Though it's not a bad idea to take on an extra hand aboard every now and then."

"I see. Well, I can't be flying all the time."

Carl searched Shirley's face, alert for regret or insincerity. But Shirley had never been much of a one for either.

"You'll really come with me?" he asked. "To Glen St. Mary?"

"I go where you go. Anywhere. Even home."

Sweat trickled down Shirley’s collar as sparks sprayed from the grinder, illuminating the far corner of the deserted machine shop. Shirley held the metal steady, squinting through the goggles and the fire as the cylinder head took shape in his hands. If he was going to haul the Flying Boat with his new truck, he’d need as much horsepower as he could get.

The truck was a Commencement gift from Mum and Dad. Jem had gotten half the practice and Di had gotten a down payment on Aster House and Nan had gotten the wedding of her dreams. Shirley had only to name his wish.

He hadn’t wanted to accept anything, not even congratulations, but Mum and Dad had insisted. In the end, Shirley had seen sense and asked for a Ford Model TT pickup. It was a good truck and would be better if he could customize the engine. Shirley really should have been studying for his final exams, but he would only have access to the Redmond machine shop for a few more days, and what use did he have for good marks anymore?

“I don’t understand,” Professor Lloyd had puffed when he called Shirley to his office. “My associate at Vickers says you cancelled the interview. Explain yourself, Blythe.”

Shirley had swallowed, blinked. “I don’t want the job at Vickers, sir.”

“Why the devil not? They’ve just won the contract to supply planes for the Canadian Air Force and they need top-shelf engineers.*** You’re a shoo-in.”

It was very difficult to say anything at all. Shirley didn’t like pompous, blustering Professor Lloyd any more than he had on first acquaintance and the thought of letting him see anything like regret was utterly intolerable.

“I’m not interested in going to Montreal,” he said evenly.

Lloyd narrowed his shrewd little eyes and scowled. “The hell you aren’t. I don’t know what it is with you, Blythe. You have a decent spoonful of brains in your head and you’re a good hand in the shop, too, but you pass up the Vickers job when it’s handed to you on a silver platter. Why even
bother taking a Redmond degree if you’re just going to throw it away?”

“I have other plans.”

It was true enough. Ever since Carl had told him about the Department of Marine and Fisheries, Shirley had gone into planning mode. He had spent the Easter holiday back home in the Glen, asking after properties until he found something that might suit. It was a flat, open piece of ground near Mowbray Narrows with enough room for an airstrip and a hangar, and water access to launch the Curtiss. Shirley had plunked down a good chunk of his savings, reserving the rest for building costs. He’d spent every day since then in the drafting room or the machine shop, drawing plans, working on a hitch for the truck, trying to set everything in order, not least of all his expectations.

It would have been easier if it hadn’t been for the Vickers job. Montreal. An apartment in the city among incurious strangers. Like the boarding house, but clean and secure and theirs. Good pay for building new aircraft. Hell, maybe even testing them! And such a long, long way from Glen St. Mary.

Shirley blinked as a few errant sparks flew up toward his face. One nipped his cheek, burning for an instant before dying. He paused in his grinding, using a pair of calipers to measure the cylinder head. It looked alright, but he wouldn’t know for sure until he had a chance to work on the engine. You could finesse a hunk of metal down to the thousandth of an inch, but you never really knew if the whole thing would work until you actually tried it.

Something clanged in the empty shop and Shirley looked up sharply, surprised to find Carl apologizing to a wrench he had inadvertently knocked to the floor.

“What are you doing here?” Shirley asked. “I thought you had a Statistics final?”

“I did. Hours ago. It’s nearly seven.”

That was surprising, too. It was usually Carl who got lost in his work, not Shirley. But then, there was so, so much to do and barely any time in which to do it.

“I still have some work to do here,” Shirley said, though not without regret. All the hours were ticking away, including the ones behind the deadbolt, and that didn’t bear much thinking either, not when there wasn’t anything left to be done about it.

“I know,” Carl said, smiling. “I brought some sandwiches. Come outside and eat with me and then you can get back to work.”

There was something so hopeful in Carl’s expression that Shirley couldn’t bear to disappoint him. All these past weeks, as the prospect of their return to the Island loomed ever larger, Carl had been hard pressed to keep a lid on his excitement. It bubbled over in the readiness of his smiles and the enthusiasm that had propelled his thesis to the finish line, as well as in certain amorous flights of fancy that Shirley couldn’t help but appreciate.

What was Vickers against all that bright joy? Shirley hadn’t even told Carl that he’d had the offer.

“That sounds great,” Shirley said, pulling off his gloves. “Lead the way.”

Notes:

*Rainbow Valley, Chapter 33: "Carl is —Not— Whipped"
The Canadian Air Force was founded in 1920 and became the Royal Canadian Air Force in 1924.
Una was elbow-deep in suds, foamy clouds rising in billows to fill the dishpan set in the deep, stone basin of the kitchen pump sink. The little gray house on the Lowbridge Road was not despoiled by modern conveniences like running water, which is probably why she and Carl had been able to afford it in the first place.

"We'll bring it into the 20th century as soon as Shirley's finished with the hangar," Carl had promised. "Faucets, telephone, gas stove, whatever you like."

Despite the enormous sink, the kitchen wasn't nearly as large as Susan's at Ingleside, nor even as large as the manse kitchen that Rosemary Meredith had coaxed back into life. Still, Una had plans for it. Yesterday, she and Carl had painted the walls a bright, sunshiney yellow that drew summer indoors. When the paint was dry, Una stood on the enamel-top table to hang a framed needlework of her own design over the door. In a wholesome, stem-stitch script embellished with leafy tendrils, it proclaimed Micah 4:4 to all who sat beneath its benediction: *They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid.*

Today they were unpacking the dishes. Carl sat on the floor, lifting Cecilia Meredith's blue-patterned wedding china out of dusty boxes and handing it up to be washed. Una soaped and rinsed, dancing nimble fingers over the plates, welcoming each piece to the daylight after having been packed away in the manse garret for so very long.

A firm knock at the front door announced the Merediths' first visitor in their new home.

Carl sprang to his feet and bounded into the hall to answer it. Hearing no audible greeting, Una assumed it must be Shirley.

She was proven correct when Shirley followed Carl into the kitchen, brandishing a toolbox.

"Hello, Una." Shirley said, taking in the improvements. "I like the yellow."

"Thank you," Una smiled, drying her hands on a towel. "I think it turned out nicely."

"As it happens, Una's very handy with a brush," Carl beamed. "You won't find a single drip on any of the baseboards, I promise you that."

"No thanks to you, I see," Shirley said, pointing to the smears of paint on Carl's overalls. "If I need any help painting out at the hangar I'm sure I'll know which of you to call."

"Have you decided on a color yet?"

"What's wrong with white?"

Una smiled into her suds as they went back and forth, Carl extolling the virtues of every hue in the rainbow, Shirley maintaining that white was clean and practical. Besides, he'd already bought the paint; what was the point in buying more?

"Can I give you a hand with those dishes?" Shirley asked, abandoning questions of interior design to nod toward the rinsed plates in the drain board.
Una shook her head. "There's nowhere to put them away yet."

Carl indicated a wooden hutch propped on its side against one wall. "I could use your help putting that up. I didn't have any of the right tools."

"Well, I'm at your disposal," Shirley replied, patting the toolbox.

Una untied her apron and hung it on a hook behind the door. "While you work on that, I'm going to run over to the Palmers'."

"It's not even Saturday," Carl observed.

Una smiled. "No, but Mrs. Palmer is making a new frontal for the altar at St. Elizabeth's and I'm helping."

"It's three miles to Lowbridge," Carl said. "Take my bicycle."

"That's alright. I like the walk," Una replied, adding, "I'll probably stay to tea, so don't expect me back till sunset."

She knew that Carl understood her by the slight flush that bloomed in his cheeks as he said, "Alright. See you later, then."

Una wasted no time. She stepped lightly into the hall, retrieved her handbag, and closed the front door softly behind her. She took a single step away, then paused and turned back to lock it.

It was not quite evening when Carl led Shirley out onto the back porch, insisting that he keep his eyes closed as Carl guided him down the steps and toward the garden. Carl felt a bit giddy, an anarchic smile resisting all his attempts to dampen it. This surprise had been several months in the making — even before Commencement — and it was ready now because he finally had a place to set down roots.

"I promise I'll only look at the ground," Shirley protested as he tripped up a small swell in the uneven lawn.

"No peeking. It's just a bit farther."

They stopped at the crest of a knoll just beyond what would be the vegetable garden come spring. Beyond, the ground fell away into a shady dell overgrown with a tangle of ill-kempt trees. Here, there was no such cover. That was perfect: Carl had been advised that full sunlight was necessary for them to flourish.

"Can I open my eyes now?" Shirley asked.

"Yes."

Shirley blinked to clear his vision, then squinted again, contemplating the three spindly saplings planted at broad intervals along the back of the garden.

"They're . . . trees?"

"Very observant."

"Are they . . . apples?"
Carl beamed. "No. They're pears. Everyone's always going on about apples, but I thought pears would be more appropriate."

"Pears?" Shirley repeated, stretching out to rub one leathery leaf between thumb and forefinger.

"Yep. I put them in yesterday. I think they'll do alright here. Full sunlight. They'll take at least three years to bear fruit and I may have to wrap them in the winter to keep them warm and of course there's always the danger of fire-blight and . . ."

Shirley stopped his recitation with a kiss. "They're great."

Carl felt something solid in his chest dissipate. More than once over the past several months, he had seen Shirley swallow one disappointment or another: the necessity of living at Ingleside and the manse all summer, the five miles that separated the hangar from the little gray house, building difficulties that had delayed the project several times. But now the hangar was half-built, with the office and the upstairs apartment useable, and the rest coming along well enough. The little gray house was habitable as well, the roof repaired and new windows hung, even if it did lack modern conveniences. They were making a place for themselves and Carl was relieved to find that perhaps Shirley might be persuaded to like at least some parts of it.

Shirley was circling the trees now, peering with interest at the stakes Carl had constructed to hold the trunks steady.

"Where did you get them?"

"I happen to know an excellent botanist."

Shirley paused in his perusal. "And how is the winner of the Cooper Prize?"

"She's very well," Carl said, glad to be able to say so truthfully. "She's on her way to South America with an expedition; they'll be gone at least two years."

"She's not going for her PhD then?"

"She may. I think she wanted to get away for a while, though. Draw from life."

Shirley nodded. "Good for her."

"Yeah."

There was a small stack of letters in Carl's desk in the corner of the sitting room. Not all of them were from Nellie, but those that were had arrived more regularly this summer than last, to say nothing of the silent summer before that. There were other letters as well, from Professor Michelson, and from the Department of Marine and Fisheries, and from friends who had scattered like dandelion fluff to take root where they could.

"I had a letter from Anthony," Carl ventured. "He's getting married at Christmas."

"Is he?" The raised brow was more eloquent than the question.

Carl shrugged. "He's gonna be a minister. No sense putting it off. And Edith seems nice."

Shirley made no reply, turning back to the pear leaves in silence.

Carl scrambled for a more neutral topic.
"Uhh . . . how's your kitchen coming along?"

"Alright," Shirley said a bit flatly. "The plumbing's done, and the propane line. I just need to finish building the cabinets."

"I've heard good things about propane. Will you help us convert the stove here when you're done with yours?"

Shirley was still looking at the tree, evidently intent on tracing the veins of a particularly fascinating leaf. "No. No gas."

Carl wrinkled his nose. "No? Everyone has gas stoves now. Even Susan . . ."

"I already talked to Una about it," Shirley cut him off. "She didn't like the gas stoves at the Household Science lab, so she wants to keep the wood stove. It's a baking thing."

"But you put in gas for yourself . . ."

Shirley turned toward Carl, slipping an arm around him in a way that made Carl's heart race. He was on his own land, true, but out in the open like this . . .

"It's already decided. Unless you want to do the cooking, Una gets the stove she wants."

"I'm going to have to chop so much wood," Carl groaned.

Shirley squeezed his shoulder. "I'll help with that. As soon as the hangar is done, I'll come over and spend a whole week stocking that back porch. Just mark the trees you want taken out of the valley."

It was true: there was a half-dead oak down there and a maple leaning so precariously it was sure to be uprooted in the next serious thunderstorm. There was a dodgy-looking pine as well, but that would hardly serve for firewood, all soft and sappy, though it would be alright for kindling.

"You haven't even seen the valley yet," Carl said, quite forgetting non-arboreal topics. "Do you want to?"

"Yes," Shirley said decidedly. "Only . . . can I keep my eyes open this time?"

Lewis Palmer sat in the shade of a variegated maple in the garden, a magazine open in his lap.

"A magazine today?" Una asked, taking her usual place on the bench beside him. "Did you finish *David Copperfield*, then?"

Lewis did not reach for his slate. Instead, he folded back the magazine cover and tapped a finger to the title of the article.

Una took it and read aloud: "A Meditation on Luke 12 . . . by Lewis A. Palmer!" The magazine fell to the grass as she sprang from her seat to engulf him in a hug. "Lewis! You've been published!"

Lewis hesitated a moment, but eventually gave back the embrace, patting Una's back gently, as if he was afraid to break her. Una felt his timidity and drew back, chiding herself for being so forward.

"Forgive me," she said. "Just . . . congratulations, Lewis."
He could not respond until Una got down on her knees in the grass to hunt for the slate pencil she had sent skittering away, except to blink indulgently through long, blonde lashes. With pencil back in hand, he wrote, "Don't work yourself into a lather. It's only the *Canadian Churchman*." 

Una shook her head emphatically. "It's a wonderful accomplishment! I didn't even know you'd submitted anything."

"Didn't want to get your hopes up."

"You'll have to amuse yourself for a while," Una said, taking *David Copperfield* from the basket of Lewis's wheelchair and handing it to him. "I must read this straight away."

Lewis sat with Dickens open in his lap, though it is doubtful whether he read much, being too occupied in watching Una, following her eyes as they scanned the lines back and forth.

When she had finished, she met his gaze, shining-eyed, the magazine held close against her chest. "Oh, Lewis," she sighed, "that's beautiful. *Fear not: ye are of more value than many sparrows.* Even Father Kirkland couldn't have done better."

He looked away long enough to write, "The editor asked for more."

"Of course he did. It's lovely. I'll have to go pick up a copy for myself on the way home."

"Keep that one."

Una smiled. "I can't take it; it's your copy."

"You won't find another. Mum bought out the whole bookshop."

"Did she?" Una's smile deepened into a quiet laugh. "I would expect nothing less."

"Keep it," he wrote.

Una thought of the scarlet-covered *Faerie Queen* she had unpacked yesterday, setting it on the shelf in her bedroom at the little gray house along with its fading letter and an old college paper. She had never thought to expand that small library, but perhaps she should consider it.

"Thank you," she said. "I was thinking that my new bookshelf looked a bit bare."

Lewis scribbled with the verve of someone racing to catch up. "How's the house?"

"It's wonderful," she said. Then, when he raised his brows expectantly, "we painted the kitchen. Yellow. Carl has a bedroom downstairs off the sitting room and I have the upstairs bedroom. There's a little sewing room above the kitchen where I can do my work without leaving scraps and bits of thread everywhere. It's small, but it's . . . homely."

"Glad to be away from the manse?"

"I suppose," Una sighed. "I miss Bruce. But he's away at Queen's now. I imagine we'll be over to dinner enough that I won't have too much chance to miss Father and Rosemary. And I still get up to Ingleside twice a week."

"Carl likes it?"

A more difficult question, but Una gave a truthful answer. "I think he's glad to be home. We'll get along alright."
Days were noticeably shorter now. It made Shirley antsy. He had wanted to have the hangar finished before the potato harvest made labor scarce and now the creeping darkness was stealing more minutes every day. Hiring two or three additional Drews had helped move things along, but it still wasn't finished.

A sliver of moon was already up when Shirley drove away from the little gray house, down the dark and uneven road toward Mowbray Narrows. It was only five miles from the house to the hangar, which was close enough that it was silly to feel like he’d been banished. Stupid, really.

They had established ground rules. The truck could never stay overnight at the little gray house. There were few enough autos in the area; people would notice. But that wouldn't be so bad; there was such a thing as a bicycle. Besides, now that Carl was finally out of the manse, they could make it work. Una had told Shirley solemnly that he should regard the house as his own, the earnest entreaty in her voice making it clear that she didn't just mean that he was a welcome dinner guest.

*God love Una Meredith.*

Still, they had to be careful. Shirley would live at the hangar, not as a ruse, but as the ordinary state of affairs. It was safer that way.

Up one hill and another, down a shadowed valley flanked with rustling pines. It was dark as a pocket here, with the needle-sharp trees tall and straight and dense as walls to either side. Nothing whispered but the wind, but that didn't mean that Shirley was not glad when the valley flattened into marshland and the encroaching glade gave way to open air once more.

The truck skimmed along under a sky freckled with a thousand thousand stars, constellations bright against the milky spray of galaxies beyond. There had not been skies like this in Kingsport, not with street lamps and late-night revelries and ten thousand homes lit up after nightfall. Even at the park, the city had dimmed heaven's lights. It would have been even worse in New York, or Paris, or Berlin, with buildings encroaching on every side, pressing too close.

Could you see the sky in prison?

Useless speculation. Shirley had sent a letter to a penitentiary in New York but received no reply, and had contented himself with the fact that it had not been returned to sender.

The truck jolted over a rock on the margin of the road and Shirley swung it back to the middle, shaking himself out of profitless reverie. Driving into a ditch wouldn't help anyone.

There was just one small slope now, then a lane leading off the main road and down to the quiet cove where he had spent these past several months trying to build something worth having. For a single moment, the tinny headlights fell across the sign at the end of the drive, lettered in clear, black paint: *Blythe Aviation*. In a few more weeks, it might even be true.

At the end of the lane, Shirley guided the truck into its stall in the finished portion of the hangar. The Curtiss was parked out on what would someday be a runway, awaiting the safe harbor of the still-roofless hangar, which was large enough to accommodate at least two additional planes. Perhaps he had been ambitious with the plans, but it felt good to insist that just one thing turn out exactly the way he wanted it.

Fishing a torch from under the driver's seat, Shirley lit a narrow path to the door of his public office. This was unfinished as well, but he'd have all winter to sort it out. Through the work zone
and up the stairs at the back, Shirley let himself into his apartment.

A single room, sparsely furnished. Any visitor could see at a glance that he lived alone: one narrow bed, one trim wardrobe, nothing hidden away except the washroom with its one toothbrush. Immediately in front of the door, there was a small kitchenette with half-built cabinets between the sink and the icebox. A plain wooden table and three hard chairs. Carl had laughed at that — one for solitude, two for company, three for society — but coming home alone made it hard to remember why it had been funny.

To the left, a small sofa and armchair made a sitting room of sorts, completed by a single bookshelf bearing back issues of Aerial Age Weekly and the copy of Leaves of Grass Shirley had bought for himself in Charlottetown after giving his first copy to his mother. What had happened to Uncle Paul’s copy? Shirley knew Walter had taken it to France and that it hadn't come home with his other papers. It was strange to think that somewhere over there, among all the mangled bodies and blasted trees, there might be a volume of Whitman returning slowly to the earth.

*Lose not an atom . . .

Blasphemous, perhaps, to equate a book with a body, though Whitman did it himself often enough.

Shirley did not really need to read the words to know them, not after all these years, but he took the book from the shelf anyway and settled onto the narrow, neatly-made bed in the far corner of the room. The pages were supple and the spine soft from frequent perusal, and he let it fall open where it would. Shirley had heard of people praying by letting a Bible fall open to a particular passage as if God had guided them to it. It seemed an unlikely explanation, but Shirley was not entirely surprised to see that Leaves of Grass had delivered him a book-body metaphor in "Whoever You Are Now Holding Me In Hand," addressed to the person holding the volume:

*The way is suspicious, the result uncertain, perhaps destructive,*
*You would have to give up all else, I alone would expect to be your sole and exclusive standard,*
*Your novitiate would even then be long and exhausting,*
*The whole past theory of your life and all conformity to the lives around you would have to be abandon’d,*
*Therefore release me now before troubling yourself any further, let go your hand from my shoulders,*
*Put me down and depart on your way.*

Shirley let the book fall onto his chest, still open, pages pressed to his shirt. *The way is suspicious, the result uncertain.* True enough. But they could make a path, couldn't they? Narrow, perhaps, but navigable. *Depart on your way . . . no.* Not an option. After all, that was only the beginning of the poem. Shirley propped it up again and read on, trying very hard to imagine a different path.

Notes:

Walt Whitman "Whoever You Are Now Holding Me In Hand," *Leaves of Grass*

also various references to Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1897)
"I'm so glad you could visit," Amelia Newgate burbled as she poured Una's tea into a cup resplendent with rosebuds and rimmed in gold. "I've been dreaming of wedding china ever since I was a little girl and now that I have my own, I'm positively desperate to use it."

Una smiled sympathetically and accepted the butter tart Amelia pressed on her.

"Tell me all about yourself," Amelia continued. "There aren't so many neighbors hereabouts and you're only down the road a bit. We've got to stick together."

Una had only intended to make a polite call on her new neighbor, not acquire what Mrs. Blythe would have called a "bosom friend." Nevertheless, she found herself liking gabbling, garrulous Amelia, who was as plump as a partridge and considerably less timid.

A week ago, Amelia and Archie Newgate had moved into the cheery, red-shingled cottage on the bank of Pelham's Pond, across from a fallow field the same aunt had left to St. Elizabeth's. They had leased the house from old Mr. Pelham, who lived in a comfortable house in Lowbridge and had no use for the potato farm he had inherited from an aunt he had never liked in the first place.

Archie didn't have enough to buy the place outright, as Amelia had explained in voluble detail. Instead, he had given Mr. Pelham what was left of his service gratuity and a promise that he'd pay off the balance a bit at a time after every harvest. A handshake sealed the bargain and the little gray house gained a neighbor.

"There's not much to tell, I'm afraid," Una said, attempting to deflect Amelia's keen attention.

"Nonsense! Oh, please do tell me. I don't know anyone here and I miss my own folks dreadfully."

"You aren't from Lowbridge, then?" Una asked, taking a bite of her tart.

"No indeed. That is, Archie is from Lowbridge, but I'm from Hazelbrook. My brother came down to Lowbridge to work at the canning factory and that's where he met Archie. He introduced us, my brother that is, and that was that. We were both dead gone from the start. Of course, Archie didn't want to go on canning forever — his father was a farmer, you know, but his older brother inherited the farm and left Archie with nothing at all. But he's a smart lad, my Arch, and found this place for us and bargained with old Mr. Pelham and so here we are!"

Una suppressed a smile, thinking of the way wee Sam Blythe rattled on when he got going, holding up sticks and flowers for Auntie Una's approval and telling long, imaginative stories about their provenance.

"You've done lovely things with the house already," Una said, gazing around the parlor. The walls were freshly papered with a pattern of roses against a forget-me-not field, echoing the blue of the sofa and the exuberant florals of an impressive hooked rug before the hearth. An assortment of embroidered cushions brightened the chairs and a spray of daffodils on the tea table made the room as genial as its mistress.

"That was all Archie," Amelia beamed. "I didn't know that he had been coming out here to fix the place up, but as soon as I walked in and saw everything all papered so nice and new, I felt like I was home straight away. And now I'm even getting to know the neighbors! Oh, do tell me about
yourself Miss Meredith. Unless . . . may I call you Una?"

"If you like."

"Have you always lived out here on the Lowbridge Road, Una?"

"No," Una answered. "I grew up in Glen St. Mary. My brother Carl and I moved here just last year."

"He's the one with the eyepatch?" Amelia asked, taking a sip of her tea.

"Yes. He works for the Department of Marine and Fisheries."

"Fancy! And whatever does he do for them?"

"He manages wildlife."

Amelia's mouse-brown brows knit like two caterpillars charging one another. "Whatever does that mean?"

The frankness of her confusion surprised a little laugh out of Una. "I'm not exactly sure myself," she admitted. "He spent most of this past year reading books and preparing all sorts of ledgers I don't understand in the least. He'll go out into the Gulf and observe animals that live there, now that he finally has a boat."

She did not say more about the delay, caused by some Department official's reticence to approve Carl for solo navigation on account of his eye. Carl had spent the better part of a year appealing to the Department, arguing that they had hired him to do a job and could hardly prevent him from doing it just because he had been wounded. Yes, the Pension Board had rated him at a 40% disability, but he was sound of body and had the support of the Four Winds harbourmaster, who had seen him sail and would swear under oath that Carl was an able seaman. In the end, Dr. Blythe had written a long, persuasive letter on Carl's behalf, attesting to his physical fitness and using enough medical jargon to impress any bureaucrat. The authorization had come through after that and Carl had gone to Charlottetown straight away to purchase the little motorsailer he had had his eye on all along.

"So he goes out sailing?"

"He will soon."

Amelia beamed. "In that case, you must come to visit me often. I insist that you come straight away whenever you want a spot of company."

Una agreed. Then, inquiring after Amelia's own relations, she settled in for a recitation that promised to occupy the rest of the morning.

It was a perfect day for flying. A few lazy cumulus clouds lolling puffily over Four Winds harbor lent texture to the sky, but offered no impediment. The gentle breezes that whispered through young maple leaves and ruffled stands of June lilies were only refreshing, not inconvenient. It was the sort of day in which children since time immemorial have dreamed of taking flight with the trilling birds. Recently, some had.

Shirley felt the call of the wind, but the late-morning sun found him piloting his truck, not his beloved Flying Boat. He jostled over the rutted harbour road, biting his lip in anticipation on his
He parked under an overhanging oak and hoisted a bulging rucksack from the truckbed. Nodding politely to a pair of gruff old sailors chewing the fat by the harbourmaster's shed, Shirley made his way down the wharf, walking as stealthily as he could. The many empty moorings showed that plenty of boat owners were already out in the Gulf, enjoying the gorgeous weather, not hanging around the dock.

Near the end of the wharf, Carl sat on the salt-crusted boards, wholly absorbed in the task of stenciling letters onto the green hull of a lovely little motorsailer. It was by no means the sleekest boat in the harbor, nor the fastest, but it was sturdy and comfortable and could be crewed by a single man. Perfect for day trips to Cape Breton or overnights in the Magdalens, counting migratory birds or singing with the whales or whatever it was Carl actually did for work.

Shirley had an overwhelming urge to surprise Carl with a kiss. A strip of bare, sunburnt skin showed clear on the back of his neck where his collar gaped invitingly. But the sun was shining and there were people about, so there was nothing for it. Shirley had long ago stopped tallying the times he wanted to kiss Carl and couldn't. Instead, he stepped past Carl and folded himself cross-legged onto the wharf beside him, their knees not quite touching.

Carl did not look up. Chewing his lip in concentration, he peeled the final letter stencil from the hull. The characters, bold in black against the olive hull, proclaimed the vessel's name to all the world.

"You went with *Sweet Flag* after all?" Shirley asked, nodding toward the letters.

"Yep."

Shirley didn't bother trying to hide his amusement. "Not worried about scandalizing Rilla? I doubt she's forgotten good old Calamos and Carpos."

Carl sat back, surveying his work with a critical eye. "I'm sure she hasn't," he said, sounding satisfied.

*What would happen*, Shirley wondered, *if I just reached out right now, pulled him to me, kissed him here in the sunshine in the midst of the human world, rather than skulking around, waiting for cover of night or the privacy of complete isolation . . . *

"And you're not worried she might have told Ken about all that?" he asked lightly.

Carl chuckled. "I would pay good money to watch Rilla tell Ken that story."

"Can you imagine?" Shirley had a sudden vision of his sister, crimson-cheeked and lisping with vexation, explaining to a stone-faced Ken that Calamos and Carpos were very, very good friends.

"What are you doing down here, anyway?" Carl asked, picking tape off the stencils. "Aren't you giving a lesson this afternoon?"

Shirley allowed himself a smile. "Nope. George Davis had to run into town on business. I'm a free man. So I thought I'd come down and hitch a ride on the maiden voyage of the *Sweet Flag*."

Carl frowned. "I wasn't going to take her out until tomorrow morning."

Shirley said nothing, waiting until Carl looked up from his paint-stained fingers to see what the trouble was. When he did, Shirley blinked innocently back at him.
Carl did not require further persuasion. “Fine. I just need to run home first to get something to eat.”

"I brought a picnic," Shirley said, rising to his feet and dusting off his pants.

"You've got this all planned out, don't you?"

Shirley held out a hand and pulled Carl to his feet with a wicked smirk. "Indeed, I do."

"Wait a minute," Carl said, recoiling. "You're not here to check up on me are you?"

"What?"

Carl crossed his arms over his chest. "I can sail this boat myself."

"I know you can."

"I don't need any help."

Shirley held up his hands defensively. "I'm really not here about the boat."

"No?"

The grin that very much wanted to erupt came out as a sparkle of mischief in the brown eyes. "Let's get going and I'll prove it."

A chill, rainy Friday found Shirley on the veranda at Ingleside, clutching a bouquet of bedraggled tulips he had expropriated from Una's garden. Of course, Una had spent the better part of the week at Ingleside, only having gone home this morning for a bit of well-deserved rest. Shirley wondered whether he ought to have come sooner, but really, there were more than enough people in the house as it was.

Should he knock? That seemed awfully formal, but this wasn't his house anymore. It was stupid to stand on the porch like this, though. Rather than barge in the front, he decided to slip around to the kitchen door, calling, "Hello?" as he entered.

The metallic clatter of an avalanche from the pantry invited Shirley's immediate assistance.

"Are you alright?" he asked, lifting half a dozen cake pans from Susan's arms.

"Oh, I should know better," Susan groused, flexing her wrist. "Jem made me a very sturdy stepstool for fetching things from the high shelf and I'm just too stubborn to use it."

Shirley deposited the cake pans and the tulips on the chopping block and escorted Susan to her rocking chair. Lowering himself into the window seat beside her, he prodded her wrist gingerly. When she winced, he grimaced.

"Is Dad home? Or Jem?"

"Nonsense," Susan sniffed. "I'm perfectly alright."

Shirley meant to go hunt out one of the various Doctors Blythe, but was spared the trouble by the precipitous entrance of two small and shrieking boys, pursued by a cardboard-masked creature on all fours who might have been either a lion or a pig. Whatever it was supposed to be, it menaced Sam and Wally into half-nervous giggles with its hearty roars. Spotting Shirley, the boys raced to climb him, tiny fingers digging frantically into his shirt as they scrabbled up to the safety of higher
"Shirley!" the lion-pig said, panting slightly and sitting back on his heels as he pushed his mask up over mussed curls. "Didn't hear you come in. How are you?"

"Fine, Dad," Shirley said, bobbling young Sam as Wally poked an exploratory finger into his ear. "But could you take a look at Susan's wrist?"

"Burn?" Gilbert asked, using the edge of the big oak table to steady himself as he rose to his feet. "Cut? Marriage proposal gone wrong?"

"That was seven years ago," Susan sniffed. "And I do not recall injuring myself in the process."

Gilbert and Susan spent the next several minutes parrying back and forth, neither quite landing a decisive blow.

Sam, less than enthralled by their sparring, leaned close to Shirley's ear and whispered, "I got a new baby sister."

"I heard," Shirley said, nodding solemnly. "Do you like her?"

Sam shook his caramel curls emphatically. "She's too loud. And she's all red. She's got orange hair like Wally's!"

"I got a new baby sister when I was Wally's age," Shirley sympathized. "She had red hair, too."

"Hair!" Wally added, patting his own head for emphasis.

"Does your sister have a name?"

Sam frowned at this, thinking hard. "Yes," he admitted at last. "But I don't remember."

"Jemima," Susan interjected from the rocker, where she had reluctantly assented to Gilbert's examination. "Far be it from me to question such things, but did you ever hear the like? There's never been a Jemima in either the Blythe or the Meredith connections, as far as I have been able to discover. Nor a Beatrice, either, though Mrs. Dr. has informed me that Beatrice is from Shakespeare and I suppose I might have expected that from Nan and Jerry."

"Jemima is a Biblical name, Susan," Gilbert chided with lips quirked. "One of the daughters of Job born after his blessings were restored. Surely you can't fault them choosing a name from Scripture."

"Oh, indeed? Then I suppose you'd never bat an eye at a Nebuchadnezzar or a Zerubbabel, Dr. Dear?"

The twinkle in Gilbert's hazel eyes made it difficult to say for certain whether he argued from conviction or for the sheer love of antagonizing Susan. "I'll put in a good word for Epaphroditus next go-round."

Susan scowled, but was interrupted by the kitchen door opening to reveal Anne and Rosemary, hands full of decimated tea trays, the residue of some joke still lingering in their joyous smiles.

"Shirley!" Anne said with delight. "How lovely to see you, sweetheart."

Sam wriggled out of his uncle's arms to investigate the remnants of the tray; Wally reached pudgy arms toward his grandmothers and cuddled into Rosemary's shoulder with a sigh. Susan bustled off ground.
to fix the boys' tea, having convinced Gilbert that she was not substantially inconvenienced by a bruised wrist.

Unsure where his place was, Shirley stood awkwardly by until his mother came and took him gently by the arm.

"Come with me," she said. "I want your opinion on something."

Shirley blinked but complied, following Anne to the sitting room. It was much as it ever had been, albeit with more toys scattered about than he remembered from his own childhood. Perhaps that was the indulgence of grandparents; perhaps it was only that the last forty-eight hours had been harried enough that no one had bothered themselves over Sam's trains and Wally's blocks.

As Anne rummaged through the books in the barrister's case, Shirley extracted an ancient, earless sawdust dog from between the sofa cushions. He was surprised it still existed; Nan had given it to him when he was small, that year when Mother had been so very ill and they had all felt the chill and the fear and went softly and unhappily.* Contemplating the stuffed dog's forlorn face, the awful uncertainty of that time came rushing back unexpectedly. Shirley found it oddly comforting to realize that the prospect of losing his mother had once been something he had feared.

"Here it is!" Anne said triumphantly, brandishing a slim volume bound in tan cloth. "Uncle Paul sent this to me after I confessed that his Whitman intrigued me."

Shirley's ears pricked at the name, wondering just what to make of the possessive adjective. He set down the dog and took the proffered book: "The Waste Land" by T.S. Eliot.

"Do you know Eliot?" Anne asked, hands clasped beneath her chin.

Shirley shook his head, opening the cover and letting the pages slip through his fingers. "I don't really know much about poetry, Mum."

"You've said that before," she said, a copper brow arched in challenge. "Though whenever you've ventured an opinion, I've had reason to believe that you sell yourself far too short."

The first page was open under his hand, the opening stanza beckoning.

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

Shirley frowned uncertainly and tried to hand the volume back. "I don't know . . ."

Anne did not unclasp her hands.

"Take it," she said. "If you don't like it, no harm done. But either way, I'd like to hear your thoughts."

Shirley's mouth felt thick, his tongue unresponsive. At best, he would only disappoint her; at worst, she might ask questions he couldn't answer. "Mum . . . I'm not . . ."

Her smile was one part understanding, one part mercy. "This isn't Walter's sort of poetry," she said, eyes bright but not brimming.

Shirley did not answer, turning the book over in his hands. It was awfully small for such a
Anne reached out and laid a slender white hand on Shirley's arm. "You once gave me *Leaves of Grass,*" she said. "I don't know whether you really knew how much it meant to me then."

Swallowing hard, Shirley risked eye contact.

"I could say the same to you."

Una would not have admitted as much, but she was tired. Her feet ached, her throat stung, and she had cried quietly for most of the first mile of her way home from Lowbridge.

Lewis Palmer was ill; too ill to write, though he had squeezed Una's hand in recognition as she sat beside him. Dr. Parker had promised to call Dr. Blythe for a second opinion, but if he agreed that infection had taken hold, there was little enough they could do about it. Dr. Parker had tried to offer a kind word, not understanding that it was no comfort at all to say that Lewis had defied the odds longer than anyone expected. Was it sinful, Una wondered, to chafe against God's will, rather than rejoicing in the time they had been given?

Lewis was stable now, but sleeping. He had marked 1 John 4:11 for his next meditation and Una had read the whole epistle to him, hoping he could hear. *Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.* She would have sat up with him all night, but Mrs. Palmer had seen her exhaustion and sent her home for rest and fresh clothes. Some secret, guilty part of Una was glad of the respite, though she would not have admitted it.

Some might call the three-mile walk from Lowbridge lonely, but Una preferred to think of it as peaceful. By the second mile, the budding world of hopeful spring had eased some of the tightness in her throat, though her eyes still smarted. She noted a place where an errant tangle of early pink roses was beginning to bloom, thinking that she should gather some for Lewis on her way back in the morning.

A mile from home, Una passed the Newgate house and sighed. She really ought to drop by and see how Amelia was getting on; she hadn't looked in at all this week. But not just now. At the moment, all Una wanted was to get home and fix something simple for supper. She doubted she could manage more than tea and toast.

Past Pelham's Pond. Past the vacant St. Elizabeth's property. Past the overhanging oak that marked the home stretch.

When she rounded the last bend in the road, Una was surprised to find the little gray house dark. It was just about nightfall and Carl should have been home by sunset. He knew that Una worried when he stayed out on the water late unless he warned her ahead of time.

Una slipped a slender hand into her purse and groped for her key, but froze at a muffled thud from somewhere behind the door. Trying the latch instead, she found it unlocked. Una was sure she had locked the door that morning, knowing that both she and Carl would be out all day. Perhaps he was home after all?

"Hello? Carl?"

Slipping into the darkened hall, Una paused, still as a mouse trying to read the air with twitching whiskers. No light, no sound. But from the recesses of the house, she caught the scent of something warm and bready. Surely burglars wouldn't bother to bake . . .
Una took a ginger step down the hall, then another. When she reached the kitchen door, she called again. "Carl?"

A match hissed, a kerosene lamp blazed, and Una threw up a hand to shield herself as someone — more than one someone — shouted, "Happy Birthday!"

"Oh!" Una gasped, pressing a hand to her chest.

The little yellow kitchen seemed to be bursting at the seams. The enamel-top table, set with Cecilia Meredith's china, was laden with steaming dishes, a vase of exuberantly diverse wildflowers, and an undeniably impressive chocolate-frosted cake on a cut-glass stand. Behind it, Carl and Shirley were squashed into a corner by the ice-box, both of them beaming jubilantly. Most of the floorspace was taken up by . . .

"Is that a . . . bicycle?" Una asked, when she had recovered breath enough to speak.

"Did you ever see a bicycle with three wheels?" Carl laughed as Shirley elbowed him in the ribs.

In truth, Una had never seen anything quite like the curious vehicle dominating her kitchen. Bright blue, with one large wheel in front and two slightly smaller behind, it sported a broad saddle, gracefully curved handlebars, and a voluminous basket fastened behind the seat.

"Is it . . . for me?"

"Well of course it is," Carl grinned, blue eye flashing in the lamplight. "Unless someone else in the house has a birthday today!"

"We thought you might like to get to Lowbridge more easily," Shirley said, wheeling the trike forward a foot or two and strumming a chirp out of its bell.

Una stretched out a hand and ran tentative fingers over the cool metal of the frame.

"It's very stable," Carl added. "Even if it's raining or muddy, you won't have to worry about skidding. And Shirley put in an extra-large basket in case you're bringing donations to the church or delivering parcels, or anything like that."

"For me . . ." Una echoed, still unbelieving.

Carl beamed. "And supper, too! Now, you're not to do any dishes — none at all. And tomorrow we'll take the trike out for a spin to make sure that the seat and pedals are right."

Una regarded the food with interest: a savory custard with onions and peppers, a mountain of garden greens, fresh-baked biscuits, and that toothsome-looking cake.

"Carl, did you bake?"

Carl grinned wider than ever. "Nope. That's all Shirley."

"Shirley?" Una found herself smiling as well, looking up with curiosity at the man who towered above her, arms crossed over his broad chest in mild exasperation.

"Why is everyone always so surprised that I can bake?" Shirley sighed. "Didn't I spend my whole childhood in the kitchen at Ingleside? You'd think I never paid any attention."

Carl affected his best impression of Mrs. Marshall Elliott. "Showy looks are well and good, dearie, but I say we reserve judgment of your baking skills until we've had a chance to taste for ourselves."
Una smiled as Carl stepped nimbly out of Shirley’s reach.

"Laugh all you like," Shirley said, "but there's nothing wrong with that cake."

"I'm sure there isn't," Carl smiled, stepping forward and tipping his face up for a conciliatory kiss. Shirley obliged, leaning over the trike, which, true to its billing, did not tip even when Carl pulled him forward for a more ardent apology.

A small pain somewhere under her ribs interrupted Una's smile. It was very good to see them happy, of course. They had obviously put thought and time and effort into this surprise, and she resolved to show her appreciation, no matter what.

Putting on a smile, Una took her place at the table and gestured for Carl and Shirley to join her. She reached out one hand to each of them, and when they had completed the circle, she prayed.

"Lord, thank you for all your blessings. For food, and fellowship, and another year in which to serve You and one another. Let us always remember to be thankful for your mercies, and to love one another as You have loved us."

Notes:

*Anne of Ingleside*, chapter 26
"Whisk these for me, won't you, dear?"

The bounty on display in the Ingleside kitchen reminded Shirley of a painting he had seen at the Louvre during one of those solitary days after the war, when he had paced its endless halls in silence. He had stared at the old Flemish masters, with their glistening oysters and bursting grapes in exuberant abundance, and felt glad that they were all safely dead. Now, here it was again, the spoils of the Golden Age, in curling peels of lemon and clutches of heavy eggs set out in bowls on the hewn oak worktable, filtered sunlight caressing every wholesome curve.

Tomorrow, Persis Ford would marry a rich American she had met on the coast two summers ago, and she had insisted that the only wedding cake good enough for her guests was a Susan Baker original.

"Everyone still talks about Nan's cake," Persis had said when she came up to Ingleside to beg Susan's indulgence. "And Rilla's, too. And Rosemary Meredith's, and that was over fifteen years ago! Some wedding cakes are dry as bandage lint after sitting out so long being decorated. But not your cakes, Susan. They're so plummy and rich. You could open a shop if you wanted to!"

Susan had done a poor job of hiding her delight. The recipe was a secret of hers and no one — not even Mrs. Dr. Blythe — knew it, except perhaps Shirley, who had helped in the making enough times to commit it to memory.

He obliged again now, taking the whisk from Susan's calloused fingers and frothing the egg whites. This cake required a full week's eggs, and beating them was a job for a strong arm. At 73, Susan Baker was still the undisputed queen of the Ingleside kitchen, still the author of perfect pot roasts and sensational strawberry pies. But Shirley had made a point of coming over today, knowing that a wedding cake might be getting beyond her stamina. Susan had greeted him with a joyous embrace and shooed Sam and little Wally out into the yard with a plate of monkey-faces so that she could have her own boy all to herself.

"It's a sight easier to do when you have someone else doing the hard work," Susan observed as the egg whites began to rise into foamy peaks.

"I'm happy to help," Shirley said, and meant it.

"I appreciate that," Susan assured him, "but when it's your own wedding, you'll leave the egg whites to me. It would never do to have a man make his own wedding cake!"

No, it wouldn't, but Susan could rest easy on that count. There had been many times in the year since he had returned from Kingsport when Shirley had been so close to telling her, but had
refrained. What she didn't know couldn't hurt her, or so he had told himself.

But Shirley had not counted on the relentlessness of Susan's campaign. A parade of eligible maidens tripped off her tongue every time he stepped into her orbit, boasting their virtues in a never-ending matrimonial pageant. It was never going to stop.

"Trust her," Carl had said. "She loves you."

Now was the time, if he was brave enough.

Shirley gritted his teeth and dove in, pennants streaming behind him in the wind.

"I don't think I'll ever be in much need of a wedding cake," he ventured.

"Nonsense," said Susan crisply. "I can't say but I'm glad that you didn't find a girl in Kingsport. Hand me that grater? Plenty of lovely Island girls right here at home."

Shirley cleared his throat. "No, Susan. I'm not going to get married."

"There now, dearie, don't talk such rubbish," Susan chided, zesting a sun-yellow lemon. "You're quite young yet. You just have to find the right girl."

Shirley set the bowl of egg whites on the table, focusing all his attention on Susan. "There isn't one. Not for me."

"Of course there is," she replied, folding the eggs into the batter. "I've kept an eye out around the Glen, and there are some real nice young ladies about. Have you met Aurelia Drew? She's a few years younger than you, but pretty as a picture and a real fine cook, too. Her mother was a Taylor from . . ."

"No, Susan, I'm not interested in Aurelia Drew. I . . . that is . . ."

Susan paused in her stirring, squinting as Shirley fumbled, trailing off into silence.

"There is someone," she said. "Someone I haven't noticed? But then . . . oh!" Susan clapped a hand to her chest, leaving a floury print over her heart. "It's Una Meredith. Goodness, I should have guessed. She's the only girl I've ever seen you talking with. Well, I can't say she's the belle of the Glen, but Una Meredith is a sweet, honest, good-tempered . . ."

"Not Una, Susan," Shirley meant to go gently, but was finding it frustratingly difficult to speak plainly. "I'm not interested in any girl. And I'm not going to get married."

Susan frowned into her batter. "Shirley, I want to see you settled and happy. To know you have someone to take care of you."

"I am happy," Shirley said, his mouth gone to cotton. "I have you. And Carl."

"Oh, fiddlesticks," Susan said, applying her spoon with renewed vigor. "I'm no spring chicken, young man. And Carl will get married, sooner or later, and then he'll be busy with his own family."

_Here goes._

"He won't."

"Of course he will."
Shirley reached across the flour sifter and the mangled innards of an orange to pluck the bowl from Susan's hands. Setting it on the table, he stilled the perpetually busy hands with his own and looked her in the eye.

"No, Susan. Listen to me. There's no girl out there for me. Not anywhere. And none for Carl, either. Neither of us is ever, ever going to get married. Ever."

Susan peered at him, eyes gone sharp and body still, like a prowling cat caught in a torch beam. Shirley held her gaze, willing her to see him as she had on a day long ago, when he had been a child crying into her apron right here in this very kitchen. A day when she had promised that she would always love him, whether he was a horse thief or a pirate or a vampire or . . .

"Oh!" Susan exclaimed, withdrawing her hands with a start.

"Susan . . ."

"You can't mean . . ." she spluttered. "Shirley, no!"

"Susan . . ."

She shook her head, a lock of gray hair working its way loose from her bun. "No. I . . . I don't believe you. Why would you say something like that? You're not . . . you're not like that. And Carl? No."

"Susan . . ."

"Does your father know about this?"

"No, Susan, please don't . . ."

"I don't believe you. I can't. I won't."

"Susan, if you'll just let me explain . . ." Shirley caught at her apron.

"No. I refuse to discuss this. Not in my kitchen. No."

And with that, Susan Baker wrenched her apron free from Shirley's grasp. The swift motion upset the batter bowl, sending it smashing onto the floor. Unbaked wedding cake seeped across the boards in a fragrant puddle, fluffy with egg foam and citrus peel. Susan did not spare a glance for the mess oozing across her pristine floor. She turned and walked out the kitchen door, letting it slam shut behind her.

***

On the morning after Persis Ford's wedding, Shirley sat alone in his apartment at the hangar, pushing a fried egg from one side of his plate to the other and back again. The wedding had been a glamorous affair, hosted at a hotel down the shore and attended by glittering ladies and men who spoke of stock markets and securities. Shirley had put in a brief appearance at the reception for his mother's sake, long enough to hear someone comment that the cake had come out rather dense, hadn't it, and old Susan Baker must be losing her touch.

Shirley sighed and was about to rise and rinse his plate when a hesitant knock interrupted his solitude.

Crossing the small space to the door, he opened it, revealing Susan Baker in the flesh, carrying a
cake of the ordinary variety. She did indeed look older.

"Susan!"

To his own ears, his voice sounded childlike. Surely he had been a child the last time he had been so relieved to see her.

"Shirley." Susan said, her own trepidation evident in the uncharacteristic whisper. "I... I brought you a spice cake."

"Come in," he said, breath coming short. "Please come in."

Susan stepped cautiously into the small apartment, eyes darting to and fro as if searching its uncomplicated angles for hidden things. There weren't any, not in this single bare box with just enough room for one person who did not own much of anything. What little there was was scrupulously tidy — Shirley's natural inclination honed by military discipline. Even Susan could find no fault with the precise corners on the narrow bed, softened only by the tobacco-stripe quilt folded across its foot. The kitchenette near the door was spotless, but not from disuse. A tea kettle stood ready on the stove next to the frying pan, and a prim glass dome holding a plate of scones adorned the little white table where the uneaten egg sat congealing Flemishly on its plate.

Susan nodded toward the scones. "You didn't bake, did you?"

Shirley shrugged. "I've watched you enough times."

"There is a considerable difference between watching and doing, my dear," Susan replied with a hint of her customary vim.

"I know," Shirley said, feeling the smallest smile tug at the corner of his mouth. "But I can. I made a cake for Una's birthday..."

Susan pursed her lips.

"I'm not starving, Susan. I get along fine. Watch. I'll make you a cup of tea and you can tell me where I've gone wrong."

She couldn't. There was nothing whatever the matter with the tea. Shirley poured and Susan cut the spice cake she had brought, setting it out on the plain white dishes Shirley fetched from the cupboard. They sipped in silence a while, neither sure just how to begin.

When the silence became uncomfortable, Susan clicked her teacup into her saucer. "I'm sorry, Shirley," she said, though she did not look at him.

"Don't apologize, Susan," he said in a rush. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"But I did." Susan raised her eyes and Shirley could see that they were brimming with unshed tears. "This is all my fault."

"Your fault?"

"It's my fault," she repeated. "All of it. I... I over-mothered you. People say that's what does it, you know. Boys who have too much mothering. I never could spank you, even when you needed it, and scolded your father when he tried. You already had a mother... you didn't need another. But I was... selfish. I loved you too much. And now..."
Shirley might have smiled, but Susan's distress was pouring down her face in rivulets and it wouldn't do to belittle her fears.

Instead, he took her hand.

"It's not your fault, Susan. It's no one's fault. I don't even think it's a fault at all."

"People say it's an illness . . ." she hiccuped.

"I'm not ill."

"That it's caused by mothers having too much influence . . ."

Shirley's brief impulse toward smiling had vanished completely. Could Susan really think that she had damaged him with her love? Susan, who had saved his life when he was born and spent the intervening years encouraging him, teaching him, remembering him even when no one else at Ingleside seemed to?

"Be reasonable, Susan," he said, pressing her hand. "You never hurt me and never could."

"But I have!" she wailed. "If it's true, what you say . . . that you . . . that you're . . ."

"Homosexual?"

Susan blanched at the term, and Shirley resolved to stick to everyday language for the sake of kindness.

"I know what people say," he said gently. "But truthfully, Susan, even if you think I had too much mothering, that doesn't explain anything. What about Carl? Do you really think that he was over-mothered in his childhood?"

This appeared to be a new thought, judging by Susan's forceful blink. "No . . . no, I can't say that he was."

"Well, then. There's that theory shot, if I had too many mothers and he had too few, and we both ended up in the same place."

Susan took a fortifying sip of tea, mulling this new perspective as she drank. "How do you explain it then?" she asked.

Shirley shrugged. "I don't, particularly. There are lots of theories, I suppose, but I don't see how it helps to look for a why unless you want to change what already is. And I don't. I'm not ill, and I don't particularly want to be cured."

Frowning, Susan set down her cup. "Shirley, do your parents know? That you . . . that you're . . ." she faltered. "I can't say it . . ."

"I love Carl, Susan. You could just say that."

Susan sniffled. "They don't know, do they?"

"They may have guessed," Shirley shrugged. "But I haven't told them."

"Will you?"

"Not if I can help it."
"But you told me."

Shirley brought his other hand to cover their linked fingers. "You once promised that you would love me, no matter what. Even if I killed someone. I have, Susan. Lots. And it's never stopped you yet."

"Did you know back then?" she asked, voice faint. "You were only a child."

"I didn't know what it meant," Shirley answered with complete sincerity. "But I knew I was different from the others."

"At eleven?"

"That's about when people generally start noticing one another, isn't it?"

Susan blinked away a leftover tear. "And you're very sure? You don't think it might just be . . . a phase?"

That did make Shirley smile, though he swallowed the accompanying laugh. "Quite sure. It's definitely not a phase."

"And Carl? You and him . . . I mean, the two of you . . ."

Shirley squeezed Susan's hand. This time, she returned the caress.

"Listen to me, Susan," he said. "I love Carl. I have for a long time. And he loves me. We haven't changed; it's just that you know us better now."

Susan drew her hand away, not in retreat, but so that she could dab her eyes with a sturdy handkerchief and muster her courage for what must be done next.

"Not as well as I'd like," she sniffed, a whiff of crispness returning to her tone. "I have a few questions."

Shirley gulped, but if she needed clarification, he could steel himself and try to answer whatever questions she might have, though the prospect was more than a little unnerving. Certainly he would try to be generous, but the thought of answering all her questions kindled a queasy panic in his gut. "I . . . I'll try to tell you anything you're really sure you want to know . . ."

"I don't know enough about Carl," Susan said. "What is all this nonsense about not eating meat? None at all? Not even fish? And when it comes to baking, does he prefer gingerbread or monkey-faces? I know that all of the manse children used to be wild for doughnuts before Rosemary married Rev. Meredith, and even now, you know Una never does put enough sugar in her . . ."

Perhaps Susan would have arrived at another question eventually, but she did not get a chance. Before she could complete her thought, Shirley had pulled her to her feet and into an embrace that lifted her quite off them. He hung his head low over her shoulder, too tall now to bury his face in it as he had done when he was small.

"I love you, Susan."

"I love you, too, Shirley. And always will."
Of all the hours in Una Meredith's week, this was the one she cherished most. Other hours were for visiting the sick and feeding the hungry, but this one was for herself. A solitary, silent ride through early-morning snow flurries to Lowbridge; a few serene moments alone in the church, out of time, out of the world. There was no one here but Una and God and the jewel-glass St. Elizabeth, timid dawn-light glowing softly through her roses.

Una padded noiselessly past the pews, through the little side door to the sacristy, emerging soon after with arms draped in linens. She knelt a moment at the chancel rail before entering the sanctuary, praying in her heart: Lord, please accept the work of my hands. Bless me as I care for the holy things of Thy house, grant me a devout spirit and a reverent demeanor, that my offering may be made worthy of Thy table.*

She could set the altar in a matter of heartbeats if she needed to, but it was not a thing to be rushed. Una ran steady hands over the waxed-linen cere cloth that protected the altar from dirt and damp. There were no wrinkles, of course, but it was the proper way to begin.

Mrs. Palmer had been in to do the ironing on Friday, readying the violet frontal with its delicate gold embroidery for Advent. The decorative cloth was rich and beautiful in a way that not many things in Una's world were, at least not beyond these walls. Opulent. Most of the work was Mrs. Palmer's, though plenty of the tiny, even stitches were Una's own. It had given her an excuse to keep on with her Saturday visits this past year, and for that, Una was grateful. She and Mrs. Palmer would sit together and sew or take turns reading while the other worked. Sometimes, they would come across a passage that Lewis had marked in his familiar hand: ask Una; show Una; for Una. Mrs. Palmer had insisted that she keep an issue of The Canadian Churchman containing an article on the history of the Anglican deaconess movement that Lewis had annotated so heavily it was difficult to read. What does Una think about this?

For now, she thought of nothing except the snowy fair linen cloth under her hands. Una smoothed it with her fingers, checking that its deep lace trim did not sag or ripple. She did not know who had made it; probably someone long dead, judging by the suppleness of the heavy fabric, washed and washed a thousand times, rinsed before and after in clear water that must be poured out on bare ground, never down a drain. Una had done it herself often enough, having long ago ceased caring what Miss Cornelia might think of such a libation.

Una placed the polished brass candlesticks on the front corners of the altar, their fresh white tapers pointed heavenward. Then she stepped back to make sure that all was neat and symmetrical. It was, of course, and the rightness of that satisfied her like a snug-fitting glove.

Back through the chancel rail and kneeling again, Una whispered a psalm, thrilling to the knowledge that other women in other Altar Guilds were even at this very moment reciting it in their own empty churches: Lord, I have loved the habitation of Thy house, and the place where Thine honor dwelleth.

She made no sound as she slipped back toward the sacristy. Father Kirkland would be along soon, and would need his vestments laid out beside the complicated linens for the chalice. Una would see to all that. But first, she would pause — just for a moment — to pay her respects to the brass memorial plaque near the sacristy door:
The sales counter at the department store in Charlottetown was festooned with holly and bright red ribbon. The glass cases glittered with a hundred enticing baubles — watches and stickpins, cufflinks and cigarette cases, billfolds and lighters — all arrayed in opulent profusion, waiting to be wrapped for Christmas morning.

Carl admired the wares, but he had come to town with a plan. It was always impossible to buy gifts for Shirley, who never wanted anything but what he already had and didn't put too much stock in that either. The only material things he actually loved were vehicles, but you couldn't exactly wrap an airplane for Christmas, now could you? As if he needed another of the infernal machines.

This past fall, an idea had come to Carl in a giddy moment aboard the *Sweet Flag*. They had been out on the water for three days and there had been no point in trying to shave on a rocking boat. Up on deck with the autumn sunset setting the sea aflame in apricot and blushing rose, Shirley's stubble had prickled along Carl's skin, raising gooseflesh where it scraped. Carl had chuckled to himself, remembering the first letter he had received in England: *No need to worry — I won't tell anyone about your close shave.*

A good line. Carl had read those few scant words until they had imprinted themselves indelibly on his heart, then burned the page, letting the incriminating ashes filter through his fingers. Things were not so dire now. Carl could put a note in with the gift, knowing it would not be censored and need not be burned. *I won't tell anyone about your close shave either.* Yes, that was just the thing.

"Do you see anything you like?" A blonde-bobbed salesgirl, pert and pretty, with red lipstick so unnaturally perfect she might have been an advertisement herself.

Carl beamed at her, eliciting a mirroring grin. "I'm in search of a straight razor. A fancy one."

"Of course!" chirped Lipstick, beckoning for him to follow her to the other side of the display. "What style do you prefer? We have ivory-handled, mahogany-handled, silver-handled . . ."

She drew a velvet-draped tray from the glass case and set it on the counter. A row of razors gleamed, all of them embossed or embellished or glowing with the warmth of exotic woods.

"Try this one," she said, offering Carl a delicate ivory model carved with vines and flowers. "It suits you. See if it fits your hand well."

Carl felt as if he had missed a step going down stairs, but recovered at once. What did it matter if Lipstick assumed that he was purchasing the razor for himself? The misunderstanding could do no harm.

He hummed, turning the razor over in his hand. "It's lovely," he said, handing it back. "Maybe a bit too floral, though."

The salesgirl nodded conspiratorially. "Yes, I see that now. I think I have just the thing, though."
She plucked an opalescent specimen from the display and laid it in Carl's hand. It was beautiful — in fact, it was exactly the razor Carl would have selected if he had been shopping for himself. The mother-of-pearl handle shone in a delicate play of dove gray and iridescent pinks and blues, swirling toward the acanthus leaves carved at either extremity. The blade itself was labeled *Puma Gold* in black and bronze amid an enameled pattern of delicate vines. Carl sighed audibly the moment it touched his palm.

Lipstick grinned in triumph. "It comes with a patent leather case. May I wrap it for you?"

Carl opened and closed the blade, admiring the smoothness of its action. It was perfect. But not for Shirley.

"No," he said regretfully, placing it back on the counter. "I think I need something more . . . substantial."

The salesgirl blinked her long, mascaraed lashes in a brief flicker of skepticism, but she recovered quickly. "Of course," she said, upping the wattage of her crimson smile.

A knot of nervous agitation coiled deep in Carl's gut. This woman was just doing her job — and doing it well! He felt inexplicably that he must apologize to her.

"Sorry," he blurted. "That one was just right. Really. It was perfect. It's only . . . it isn't for me. It's a gift."

"Oh!" Lipstick relaxed, her face taking on more natural lines. "Of course! For whom?"

"Um . . . my . . . brother." Did people give expensive razors to their brothers? What would Jerry make of such a gift? "I borrowed his," Carl said, inventing wildly, "last time I visited. And then I . . . broke it. It was a very nice razor. I thought I should replace it."

*Stop talking stop talking stop talking.*

"That's very thoughtful of you."

"Uh huh."

"Tell me about him."

"Sorry?"

"Your brother. What sort of chap is he?"

Oh, this was not going well. Carl could feel his skin prickling in protest against the confines of his shirt, his collar growing tighter by the moment.

*Just breathe.*

"He's . . . um . . . an engineer? He likes . . . simple things. Well-made, but not fussy."

Lipstick was nodding along, pursing her vivid mouth in concentration. She skimmed slim fingers over the display, coming to rest over a thick rosewood handle, streaked in sunset tones.

"Beautiful," Carl said, rolling its heft in his palm. "It's nearly right. He'd like the natural wood. Maybe a bit too cumbersome, though? Do you have anything more . . . graceful?"

What was he saying? This one was fine. He could escape. Whatever she offered him next, he
should take and run.

But a moment later, Carl was glad that he had stayed. The salesgirl handed him a horn-handled razor in gray and cream. Clean lines with just a hint of a flare at the ends, the only embellishment the swirl of the natural horn. It was Shirley's razor.

"Perfect!" Carl beamed, winning an answering grin from Lipstick.

"Shall I wrap it for you?"

"Please."

She returned in moments with a parcel as red as her smile.

"Is there anything else I can help you with?" she asked. "We have lots of lovely things in the ladies' department if you're looking for a gift for someone special . . ."

The instinct to run was very strong, but Carl plastered on a pleasant expression. "Thanks, but no. No one special."

***

On a bench across the street, Carl turned the cheerful parcel over in his hands.

It was just what he had wanted. But all the joy had run out of the joke now. He knew he would never see this razor without being reminded of this moment, and of his shame.

When he was a kid, Carl had been afraid of hanging. Of one spectacular punishment for his spectacular sin. But that wasn't the way of the modern world, was it? Someone had decided it was too cruel.

Instead, they killed with a thousand tiny cuts and never even realized that they were doing anything. Lipstick in there was probably congratulating herself on a sale well made. She had been perfectly sweet and professional, and didn't know that she had ruined the day and the joke and the gift.

No, she hadn't. That was the cruelest cut of all. Carl had done it himself. Censored, lied, denied Shirley how many times? He hadn't even given the salesgirl the opportunity to be disgusted with him; he'd done all the dirty work for her.

Nauseated, Carl rose from the bench and walked down the street to a church on the corner. Without hesitation, he shoved the red package through the slot for donations to the poor, and turned toward the train station, empty-handed.

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Notes:

*paraphrased from Josephine Wood Smith's instructions in A Manual for Altar Guilds with Suggestions for Altar Linen (1915)
Shirley strapped the last crate into the cargo bay of the Curtiss HS-2L and checked his watch. Mr. Horton should be here in about an hour; there was plenty of time to pack his own overnight bag.

Back up in the apartment, Shirley changed out of his coveralls and into flying clothes — thick pants, sweater, wool socks — and packed an extra set into his rucksack. The sound of a car in the drive and a knock at the door surprised him; Mr. Horton wasn't due yet.

It was not Mr. Horton, but Susan, smiling and holding a tin that promised cookies.

"Monkey-faces," she said, by way of explanation. "For Di."

"I'll see that she gets them," Shirley said with mock gravity.

"And do ask whether she's bringing Sylvia for Easter. We hardly ever see them."

Shirley tucked the tin into his rucksack on top of his clothes, pulling the drawstring tight over it. "They're busy at the hospital. Mothers and babies never take a holiday."

"Goodness, I know that well enough by now. As if the phone doesn't ring in the dead of night at least twice a week. But you might tell Di that there's no sense running herself into the ground with overwork."

"I'll pass that along," Shirley promised.

"Oh! That reminds me. Be sure to tell Carl congratulations from me."

Shirley frowned. "Congratulations?"

"On his article being published. Rosemary was all of a dither telling me about it this morning. I didn't understand half of what she was saying, but I was led to understand that it is an important paper and will be published in an important journal and that everyone is very pleased and proud. As am I."

Shirley felt as if he had missed a step going down stairs. She must be talking about Carl's article on the importance of federally-recognized sanctuaries for migratory birds. He'd worked on it all winter and sent it out for review, but hadn't heard back. Until now, evidently.

"Sure," Shirley said, covering his confusion. "Thanks. I'll tell him next time I see him."

"And I'm making up the menu for Easter. I'm using vegetable stock for the soup and shortening instead of lard for the pastry so he can eat the pies as well."

Shirley pushed his own scattered feelings aside and gave her the smile she deserved. Really, Susan had been a brick this past year. All she wanted was his happiness, and he didn't want to disappoint her.

"Thanks, Susan. I know he'll appreciate that."

A honk from outside called Susan back to the door. "Must run. Jem's off to check on Mr. Meade
and he's to deliver me to Cousin Sophia's on the way. I just wanted to wish you a safe flight."

She gave Shirley a peck on the cheek and disappeared through the door, calling admonitions to Jem for his impatience.

When she had gone, Shirley stood quite still. Carl's article was good news, wasn't it? So why did it rankle? He recalled a letter he had received during the War, in which Carl had complained of hearing news of him from Una, rather than directly from Shirley himself. He had thought Carl over-sensitive then, but had a bit more sympathy now. To get news of Carl from Susan? It didn't feel right. But then, when would he have had a chance to hear it directly? When was the last time he had seen Carl anyway? Friday? No, that was the day he had gone up to St. Pierre. Maybe Wednesday?

Shirley crossed the room to the telephone and lifted the receiver. They did not call often because you couldn't say much of anything on an open party line. But there was a ratcheting tightness rising in his throat that did not fully dissolve even when the receiver at the other end clicked.

"Hello! Carl Meredith speaking."

Shirley swallowed, realizing that he had not thought at all about what he might say. He paused overlong until Carl called, "Hello? Anyone there?"

"It's me."

"Oh! Hi! How are you?"

*Great. I'm great. Everything's great.*

"Fine. I just wanted to call to say congratulations. On your article."

Carl's voice brightened, his smile audible. "Thanks! I just got word from the editor yesterday."

"That's what Susan said."

"Susan?"

"I guess she heard from Rosemary."

"Oh. Right. I was over at the manse last night, right after I got the letter."

"Right."

That's all it was, he had been out late. Probably lost track of time explaining the article to his father, getting into the minutia of it all, and then went straight home to bed.

"You should come over for supper tonight," Carl said. "We'll celebrate."

Shirley grimaced but kept his voice light. "Can't. Sorry. I'm flying a client down to Kingsport in half an hour."

"Oh."

"Can I come tomorrow?"

"I'm leaving in the morning for Cape Breton," Carl said, subdued. "I won't be back till Saturday."
"Oh."

There was a long pause, the sort that was good for reading an expression or reaching out across a space to touch, but only at a distance considerably less than five miles.

"You're staying with Di in Kingsport?" Carl asked eventually.

"Just for the night."

"Shirley?" He sounded small and far away.

"Yeah?"

"Be careful, alright?"

"I always am."

"I know," Carl said, though he did not seem reassured. "You'll come to supper on Saturday?"

"Yes."

"I'll tell Una."

"See you then."

"Safe trip."

"You, too."

***

In Kingsport, Shirley saw Mr. Horton safely into a cab before he called one for himself.

"Staying awhile, are you?" asked the driver as Shirley loaded two crates, his rucksack, and a large suitcase into the back.

"Visiting my sister," Shirley said with studied lightness.

He gave the driver the address, not reacting to the man's look of skepticism. They rattled up the hill from the harbor, through the Hydrostone neighborhood with its finished homes and shops and offices. Shirley had made this journey often, never without thinking about the first time he had ridden up this street in a jolting, loaded wagon, joyful even in the still-singed ruins of the blasted city. If he hadn't used up all his wishes already, he would have returned to that day in a never-ending loop.

The cab pulled to a halt in front of a restaurant sleeping through the lull between the mid-day meal and the supper rush.

"You sure this the right address, pal?"

"Yep. Thanks," Shirley said, handing over a tip generous enough to forestall any further questions. The cab driver got the message and was only too pleased to skedaddle as soon as he had helped Shirley deposit his luggage in front of Mrs. Howard's door.

"Well, will you look at what the cat dragged in!" said Mrs. Howard, stepping around her bar to take Shirley's hand in a grip that had some steel under its softness.
"Good to see you, ma'am."

She stepped back to look him over critically. "I was starting to wonder where you'd gone. Everything alright over on your island?"


She nodded politely, but that was enough small talk for both of them. After all, this was a business transaction, and not one that would keep indefinitely. Mrs. Howard hefted the crate easily, careful not to jostle it, and led a laden Shirley through to the kitchen.

"What do you have for me today?" Mrs. Howard asked when they had deposited their cargo on the prep table.

"You said the cognac did well last time," Shirley said, prying open one of the crates. "The other is champagne. I couldn't find much in St. Pierre; you're lucky I got any at all."

Mrs. Howard lifted a cool, dark bottle out of the sawdust and hay cushioning it. By the way she caressed it, Shirley felt confident he could get a good price. It wasn't so difficult for people to get their hands on beer or raw whiskey, but the little French islands up by Newfoundland were doing a roaring trade in fine European liquor. It was no trouble for him to fly over and back in a day. Flying lessons and bird's-eye tours were well and good, but they wouldn't buy him the land-based trainer he needed to teach novice pilots on something more congenial than the cumbersome Curtiss. He loved the old bird, but it was a pain in the ass to haul it in and out of the water, even with the truck.

"And this?" Mrs. Howard asked, eyeing the suitcase.

"A bit of this and a bit of that," Shirley said, popping it open. "See what your customers like and I'll get you more of it."

Mrs. Howard examined an umber bottle of Cointreau. "I don't know. People like what they already like."

"Well, I think they'll like this."

Shirley had no doubt that Mrs. Howard would take the lot, but they still had to perform this little ritual. "How about you take that bottle as a gift," he said.

Now came the part where she smiled and patted him on the cheek and took two glasses down from the shelf to toast their deal. They would haggle a bit more, but in the end they would both walk away satisfied. And next month they'd do it all again.

***

"Thank Susan for the monkey-faces," Di said, reaching for another. "I never got the knack of making them exactly like hers."

"Ah, well, you were sabotaged," Shirley said, running a broad thumb over the Ladies of Llangollen as they strolled down the curve of his teacup.

"Sabotaged?"

Di squinted at Shirley over the Aster House dining table, her bobbed copper curls glowing in the light of the gas lamps. Shirley had tried to convince her and Sylvia to convert Aster House to electricity, but both averred that they got plenty of electric light at the hospital, thank you very
much. The lamps did give the place a cozy air, especially in this damp, chilly season. Tonight, the warm circle of light reminded Shirley of the Sundays they had spent here as a foursome, Sylvia regaling them with the endless, baffling ways patients found to injure themselves, Carl giving his updates on the roseate terns, Di trying out one vegetarian recipe after another. She wasn't a bad cook. It wasn't her fault her monkey-faces were never quite right.

Sylvia chuckled, reaching for another cookie. "What intrigue! Is there a dark secret behind the famous baked goods of Ingleside?"

"There is," Shirley said, smiling enigmatically into his cup.

"Well, out with it!" Di demanded.

Shirley paused as if deciding whether to reveal a terrible truth. "The secret to the famous baked goods of Ingleside," he said slowly, "is Rollings Reliable Baking Powder."

Sylvia cackled and Di slapped the table, setting the Ladies of Llangollen ringing against one another.

"It is not!" she declared. "Mother won't have the stuff in the house."

"Course not," Shirley agreed with a barely straight face. "That's why Susan keeps it in an unmarked tin in the pantry."

"You're lying!"

"Am I?" Shirley asked, lips quivering with the effort of suppressing his mirth. "Tell me, you and Mum and Nan and Rilla, you can all bake pretty well, as long as it's pies and shortbread and things that don't need to rise much, right? But what about lighter things? Silver-and-gold cake? Cream puffs? They never come out quite right, do they?"

Di pressed a palm over her open mouth as Sylvia dissolved into a helpless puddle of heaving laughter beside her.

"Baking powder?" Di said, eyes wide in not-quite-mock horror.

"Mum always did insist on buying the inferior stuff," Shirley shrugged. "So Susan let you all use it. But when it came down to business, there was no way she'd let Mum's prejudice tie her hands."

Shaking her head, Di nicked the half-eaten cookie from Sylvia's plate and held it up for inspection. She took a cautious bite, rolling the crumbs across her tongue.

"I never thought about it," she said. "I always buy the stuff in the blue can because that's what we always used at home!"

"What you always used at home."

Di threw the last bite of cookie across the table at her brother. "Treachery!"

Shirley ducked, grinning as Di joined Sylvia in laughter.

When the trio had laughed themselves to tears and back again, Sylvia pushed back from the table.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, clutching at her side as she caught her breath. "Oh! That's enough for me tonight, I think. I've gone loopy."
"Leave the dishes," Di said as Sylvia stood and stretched. "I'll take care of them before I come up."

Sylvia bent to give Di a kiss goodnight, interrupted by a residual giggle.

"Don't keep her up too late," she admonished Shirley on her way to the door. "We've both got the early shift tomorrow."

When Sylvia had disappeared up the stairs, still audibly repeating *baking powder* to herself, Shirley slipped into the sitting room for a moment, returning with the bottle of cognac he had kept back as a gift for Di. Both Blythes polished off the dregs of their tea, replacing it with generous pours of the best St. Pierre could offer.

"Still running rum, then?" Di asked, unsurprised.

"It's hardly rum," Shirley said, as if the bottle might take offense. Di sipped appreciatively. "Why do you do it? You don't have to."

Shirley frowned down at the golden liquid in his cup. The easy answer was that the money was good. Easier to explain than the exhilarating frisson of fear that came with flying over the dry provinces with a load of contraband. Certainly easier to explain than the fact that seeing Mrs. Howard from time to time reassured him that he hadn't just imagined the other life, fast receding into the mists.

"I need another plane," he said.

"Business is going alright, then?"

Shirley drained his cup. "It's fine. I had more clients this year than last. Word spreads."

"And the rest of it?"

Her eyes were green and sharp, like their mother's when she was cutting up a poem, exposing its guts. Incisive. Shirley had tried to beg off discussing "The Waste Land," complaining truthfully that all the references and polyglot lines had flown over his head. But his mother had kept on looking, prompting, prodding, and before he knew it, Shirley was listing all the ways that Eliot echoed Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" in his structure and his flowers and his hermit-thrushes, and a glimmer of triumph flashed in the green eyes. Now Di would find him out as well, though he did not mean to hide from her.

"It's harder than I thought it would be," Shirley admitted.

"What is?"

"Living there."

"Is anyone giving you a hard time?"

"No," Shirley reached for the bottle again. "Not really. I told Susan, you know. About us. She was . . . surprised. But she's been great ever since."

"She did once resolve to be a heroine," Di smirked.

Shirley's face twitched, giving Di the brief shape of a smile, though he didn't really feel it.

"What's wrong, love?" Di asked, reaching across the table for his hand.
There were easy answers and hard answers, and Shirley groped for words for any of them.

"I always worried about keeping us safe from other people,” he said at last. "I never thought we could just fall apart."

Di drew her breath in through her nose, but spoke gently. "Are you? Falling apart?"

"Maybe. A little. I don't know." It seemed a terrible thing to admit aloud, as if saying it made it more true.

The pressure of Di’s hand on his was steady and strong, and Shirley reflected that his sister had brought many people through peril.

"Do you want advice or sympathy?" she asked.

"Little of both?"

"Alright, here's the advice," Di said, shaking back her red curls. "What you have with Carl is worth fighting for. You're strong: if you can't find a way, you'll make one." She smiled, or at least her face rearranged into an expression of tenderness. "But you also need to live your own life, not martyr yourself. You have to be honest and decide whether you can bear to go on living on the Island. I know I couldn't."

Shirley chewed his lip, blinking back a burning sensation in his eyes.

"And the sympathy?" he asked.

Di squeezed his hand anew. "You'll always have a place at Aster House if you want it. Both of you. You alone. You and someone else. You're always welcome here, Shirley."

The burning intensified, but did not spill over. "You don't mind if I stay for a few days, do you? Now? I just . . . I just can’t go back there right now."

"The spare room’s all made up."

"Just til Saturday, maybe?"

"Stay as long as you like."
April 1926

Una paused on the bottom stair, balancing the washbasin against the turned-oak newel. Rosemary had fallen asleep at last and Una meant to replace the towels and washwater while she had the chance. Dr. Blythe had assured them that it was a passing bug, nasty but not dangerous, and that rest and tender nursing would set Rosemary right in a matter of days. Of course, Una would be happy to stay at the manse another day or two. She had already phoned Mrs. Palmer to say that she wouldn't be in on Sunday to tend the altar, and that no, Rosemary was in no danger and there was no need to send Father Kirkland around, thanks be.

Una thought that Dr. Blythe had gone home an hour ago and was thus surprised to hear his voice coming from the study, followed closely by Father's urgent half-whisper.

"... afraid so."

"But he didn't tell you himself?" That was Father, his voice sounding thin and strained.

"No. Nothing like that," Dr. Blythe said. "Only ... Anne has suspected for a while now, and I've been watching them these last few months. I'm quite certain she's right."

Una might have moved along then, not wanting to breach whatever confidential discussion might involve a doctor and a minister, if not for Father's anguished question.

"Are you sure? Carl?"

Una nearly upset the washbasin.

Not trusting her hands to remain steady, Una set the basin on the stair and took a single step toward the study door as noiselessly as a little gray mouse.*

"Yes, I'm sure," Dr. Blythe replied. "I haven't seen anything ... incriminating. Not exactly. But . . . ."

"They're friends . . ." Father protested, but trailed off.

Dr. Blythe's voice was solemn, but gentle, as if he spoke of a death. "I'm sorry, John. I knew I had to tell you."

Father took a long, shuddering breath and Una had to stop herself from going to comfort him.

"They'll grow out of it, surely. It's only a passing phase."

Dr. Blythe cleared his throat. "Anne thinks it goes back to Redmond."
“Redmond?”

“I’m sorry, John. I didn’t suspect anything at the time.”

"Can we stop them?" Father asked in broken, anguished tones.

"I don't see how."

"Isn't there any sort of treatment? A cure?"

Dr. Blythe's voice turned graver still. "I've been reading everything I can get my hands on. It seems there are certain . . . experimental . . . procedures. But it's grim stuff, John. I'd never recommended . . . not to anyone . . ."

"I'm sure I've heard of gentle options," Father said. “Spiritual counseling? Hypnosis? Psychoanalysis?"

"Perhaps," Dr. Blythe said vaguely. "I'm following a few leads in the literature. But my understanding is that the available treatments are unreliable. That some of them, well . . ."

Dr. Blythe hesitated and Una strained to hear.

"Just tell me, Gil. We can dispense with euphemism at this point."

A pause, and then Dr. Blythe cleared his throat. "Any sort of manipulation, whether it be psychological, medical, or . . . well . . . surgical . . . is risky. I've read about a few promising cures, but there are also plenty of reports of . . . damage."

"Damage?"

"Insanity. Suicide." Dr. Blythe had gone so quiet Una could barely discern his words, but he went on speaking. "The boys have already been through so much, John. They may be fragile, especially Carl with his attacks. Anne doesn't want me to try anything at all. But I know there must be some way to help them."

"They could go to prison," Father said softly. "For life."

"We won't let that happen."

"Do you think we might convince them to try to live normal lives? Get married? Start families?"

Dr. Blythe coughed. "Would you really do that to an unsuspecting woman, John?"

"They're good boys. I remember thinking when Carl enlisted what a bonny, clean, handsome lad he was.** They'd make better husbands than most."

There was another long pause. "You know it would be Una, don't you?" Dr. Blythe said evenly. "Not some nameless, faceless girl. Shirley would marry Una."

When John Meredith managed to answer, he sounded faint. "You're right. Forgive me for even suggesting it."

"You're just trying to help, John. And it's nothing I haven't thought myself. But things are bad enough. We can't drag anyone else into this mess. Especially not someone innocent."

"Of course not. You're right. I'm sorry."
Una had heard enough. She padded silently back toward the stairs and carried the soiled basin into the kitchen. She watched the wastewater swirl away down the drain, thinking hard.

Father couldn't do anything, nor could Dr. Blythe.

But Una could.

"No. Absolutely not!"

"But Carl," Una pleaded, "it would solve so many problems!"

"I said no!"

They sat at the enamel-top table in the sunny sanctum of the kitchen on the Lowbridge road, facing one another over cups of rapidly-cooling tea.

Una straightened her back and resolved not to give in without making her point clear. "Just think, Carl," she said. "Shirley could live here always. He wouldn't have to go back out to the airfield alone and no one would be able to say a word about it."

Carl shook his head emphatically. "No. It wouldn't solve anything. And it would create new problems."

How could she make him see? If Father and Dr. Blythe were preparing to get involved, there was no telling what sort of plan they might devise. Couldn't Carl see that things would be better this way?

"We wouldn't . . ." Una faltered, color rising in her cheeks. But she had thought through her plan in every particular, and she meant to show that the offer was no ill-considered whim. "We wouldn't have to . . . really . . . be married."

Carl caught her drift and blanched. "Christ, Una."

She pressed her lips together, but did not scold him for irreverence. "We wouldn't," she said with finality. "But you could be safer. You could be together."

Carl dropped his head into his hands, elbows propped either side of his teacup. "Look, Una, I appreciate what you're trying to do. Really, I do. But even if it would work — and it wouldn't — you can't swear false vows. Stand up before God and lie? No."

"I rather think that's between me and God," Una said quietly.

"Well, this is between me and you. And I say no."

"And Shirley? Shouldn't he get a say?"

Carl fixed his sister with his clear blue eye, no trace of amusement there, not even deep, deep down. "No, Una. Don't even mention this to him."

"But it could work."

"No!" Carl cried, losing patience. "It wouldn't be fair to any of us! Not to Shirley. Not to me. Definitely not to you." He pushed back from the table and crossed his arms over his chest, though whether he was creating a barrier between them or holding himself together, Una could not have said.
"You needn't worry about being fair to me," she replied.

"No? What happens when you fall in love?" Carl demanded. "When you want to get married for real and not as a sham? I couldn't steal that chance from you, not even if I thought this was a good idea. Which it isn't."

Una looked down into her teacup, swirling dregs floating formless and unreadable. "I'm never going to marry," she whispered.

"Don't say that." Carl softened, arms unclenching, anger running off to puddle in the downcast corners of his mouth. "There's someone out there for you, Una."

"There isn't."

Carl shook his head, as if a performance of conviction were the same as persuasion. "I don't believe that. Not a bit. Maybe it seems impossible, but your happiness is still ahead of you."

"I am happy," Una said, though the declaration went no deeper than her words. "I have St. Elizabeth's. And I have you. That's enough."

"Is it?"

Una stood up from the table more precipitously than was her wont. It was not like her to rattle teacups in their saucers, nor to permit a sob to escape, even when she had turned her face toward the wall.

Carl rose as well and closed the distance between them in a single silent step. He pulled Una into an embrace and hung on for a few moments of wordless misery, not much lessened by the sharing.

"I want joy for you, Una," he said into her dark hair.

"And I want it for you," came the reply, muffled by Carl's shoulder.

"You've done so much already," he said. "I can't let you give anything more."

Una pulled away enough to wipe her eyes with the heel of her hand. "I think Shirley deserves the chance to hear me out," she said. "He's practical."

Carl's grasp on her tightened momentarily, a desperate spasm, not a caress. Una could not see his tears, turned blind side toward her as he was, but she could feel them as he spoke.

"No, Una, please. Please don't. It makes sense; I know it does. But... please. Don't ask Shirley to marry you. I... I couldn't bear it. Please."

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Shirley was elbow-deep in engine grease when the midnight-black Rolls-Royce Phantom slithered into the drive. He knew most of the autos on the eastern tip of the Island — the delivery trucks and Ford Model Ts and even a few Cadillacs like his father's V-63. Nothing like this, though. Shirley cast an appreciative eye over the sleek chassis, the gleaming chrome appointments, the audacious Spirit of Ecstasy poised in perpetual flight on the bonnet. Not an Islander, that was for sure. Maybe the summer renters were starting to bring their autos over with them.

Susan will love that.

Shirley wiped his hands on the rag in his cover-all pocket as the Rolls slowed to a stop. The driver was obscured by the dazzling reflection of midday sun on its windshield, but Shirley assumed it
would be someone worth cleaning up for. The Yanks with cottages down the shore were some of his best customers, willing to pay top dollar for tours and simple flying lessons. Besides, anyone who drove that stunning machine might have a thing or two to say about engines.

The driver emerged in his own sweet time. Tall, expensively dressed, with the lithe stride of a tropical cat. Not an Islander either. Shirley squinted as the man removed his sunglasses, then felt the bottom fall out of his stomach.

Wilkie.

"Hello there, philos," Wilkie said, the old, sly grin stretching his gaunt features.

Shirley stared. Wilkie was thinner. Older than he should have been, with flecks of gray in the dark, pomaded curls. It had only been four years since the day he'd come to say goodbye, au revoir, auf wiedersehen, at the start of his truncated grand tour. Could that possibly be right?

Shirley wanted to say, You're alive! You came back! It's a miracle!

Instead he asked, "What are you doing here?"

The question was too sharp and Shirley winced at his own tone. Wilkie, however, was undeterred.

"Came for you, didn't I?"

"How did you find me?" Shirley asked more neutrally, still unable to settle on a register that could corral his scattered impulses.

Wilkie reached into his pocket and fanned out three or four tattered envelopes. "You wrote."

"You didn't."

Wilkie closed the gap between them and leaned against the plane, too close, making Shirley recall their first meeting: the tree on the quad, the invitation, the touch of Wilkie's knee, uninvited, against his own.

"Ah, well, not much to write home about, I'm afraid."

At this distance, Shirley registered the subtler changes in his face. Eyes outlined in a rim of shadow, skin weathered by sun and tobacco, cheeks sunken like shell craters under superficially regrown grass. But still Wilkie, still that magnetic smile, the spark of challenge in the amber eyes.

Wilkie slapped the creased, finger-stained envelopes against Shirley's forearm with every pretense of joviality. "Not like you! Big news! Back to Glen St. Mary! Could have knocked me over with a feather when I read that. You'll forgive me if I ask why."

"You know why."

Wilkie rolled his eyes melodramatically.

Shirley nodded toward the Rolls Royce. "It seems that your family took you back."

"Oh, that." Wilkie waved dismissively. "Nah. They disowned me. There were lawyers and everything. The deal is that I renounce my claim to any inheritance in return for a fat deposit in my name in a Swiss bank account. And, of course, the stipulation that I disappear forever. That way, they can just forget that I exist."
"I'm sorry."

"For me? Don't bother. Be sorry for my brother. He has to stick around and marry whatever pug-faced heiress my mother has sunk her talons into. I'm pleased to be shut of them and on my way to new adventures."

"And you're just dropping by for a visit, are you?" Shirley asked, carefully casual.

"I'm here because I have a proposition for you, fly boy."

*I'll bet.*

Shirley crossed his arms over his chest and waited, striving for indifference.

"My father always did hope the Huns would spare him the trouble of having to deal with me," Wilkie smirked, "and I mean to see that they do. I'm still headed to Berlin. Come with me."

Shirley scoffed. "To Berlin?"

"I'm not kidding."

"You certainly are."

Shirley began to turn away, but Wilkie reached out and caught him by the wrist. "I'm not. Come with me. Leave the boondocks behind and come live a little."

Shirley shifted away from Wilkie's hand, not recoiling, but moving away nonetheless. "I think you're forgetting something."

"What?"

"Carl?"

"You mean Carl the cop?"

"He's not a cop," Shirley flared up hot, then checked himself. Where had that come from? "He manages wildlife," he said, approximating calm.

Wilkie lolled against the fuselage. "Blaaaggghhhh. Well, bring him along if you must. Berlin's a nonstop party — dancing til dawn, drag shows, masquerades — Meredith will love it."

"Doubtful."

"Well then leave him here and come with me." Wilkie reached out and stroked Shirley's cheek with the back of his hand. "You're wasted here."

With a tremendous effort, Shirley took a step backward. Three steps would have been better. But he managed one.

Wilkie threw up his hands in frustration. "God! You're maddening, you know that? The two of you. You're the most domesticated queers on the planet. Out here in the sticks, squandering your lives playing hide-and-seek with the church ladies! And what does it get you? Are you happy? Living out here on the edge of nowhere like a fuckin' leper? Alone, I presume? Look me in the face, Shirley, and tell me you're completely, unreservedly happy here."

An impossible command. He couldn't and Wilkie knew it.
"Well, I'm not in prison," Shirley said curtly.

"Fuck you."

"Getting less likely every minute."

Wilkie let out a bark of laughter that ended in a derisive growl. "You think you're smarter than I am? That I deserved what I got? Fuck you, Shirley. You think you can protect yourself by acting all respectable. That maybe if you just stay quiet enough and duck your head enough you can keep yourself safe. That you can keep Carl safe. Well you can't. All it takes is one misstep — one indiscreet moment or one person you piss off enough that he goes blabbing all around town."

"Like you?"

Shirley saw the shoulders shift, knew that Wilkie might throw a punch at any minute. It did not worry him overmuch; he was fairly confident that he could take Wilkie in a fight. Especially Wilkie in this mood: wild, erratic, emotional. Shirley only hoped that he was not too far gone that way himself.

"Why did you come here, Wilkie?"

"Like I said. I came here for you. To offer you a hand out of this halcyon hellhole. Meredith too, if he wants it; I don't care. Let's go. All of us. Away from here. Somewhere where you wouldn't have to sneak around. Somewhere where you could actually live out in the sunshine instead of scraping by in the shadows."

"Sounds nice. If you ever find it, do be sure to send me a postcard."

Wilkie squinted. "You know, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were scared."

"Pffft."

"You are." Wilkie took a step forward and Shirley shied. "You're scared. The unflappable Flight Commander Shirley Blythe, RAF, DFC with bells and whistles. Scared."

An unfamiliar pressure built in Shirley's chest, a ratcheting tightness that scorched upward into his throat, threatening to escape as tears or fists or volume or any of those other things that burst out of people when they were not entirely in command of themselves. It was distinctly uncomfortable.

Shirley rounded on Wilkie with a blistering look that would have cowed anyone who had anything to lose. "Of course I'm scared, idiot!" he growled. "Anyone would be. Scared people come back alive. Brave just means dead."

Wilkie stood his ground and spat. "Keep telling yourself that. I never thought you were stupid. But if you could come through the War believing that you could keep yourself safe by doing the right thing or acting the right way, you're jingle-brained."

"And alive."

"Are you seriously telling me that you — you — are going to spend the rest of your life here? With Carl Meredith? For God's sake, why?"

Vibrating with the effort of it, Shirley pushed his anger down, swallowed it, dampened the live coals. "Someday, Wilkie, you'll actually love someone. And then you won't need an explanation."
Wilkie sneered. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"Fine. Great. Thanks for the visit, asshole."

Instead of stepping back, Wilkie stepped forward. There could be no hiding the fury, the desperation, and the desire in his eyes, not in total darkness, and certainly not here, in the blazing midday sun, in the open expanse of the unshielded drive.

"Shirley. Come with me."

When it came, the kiss was softer than Shirley had expected. He thought that anything from Wilkie must be as he was: volatile, acerbic, dangerous. As it transpired, only the last was true.

Shirley had imagined Wilkie's lips often enough. Too often, in truth, but that had seemed safe when he was behind bars in another country. Now, with his hands pulling Shirley in by the hips and his tongue searching as Shirley opened to him, it wasn't safe at all.

Wilkie tasted of coffee and cigarette smoke and places far, far away. At first sip, he was astonishing; at second, intoxicating. Over the years, Shirley had pushed him away and away again, but now he pulled him closer, one hand at his throat and another in the dark waves of his hair. Pressed together like this, thigh to thigh and chest to chest, they fit like gloved hands, moving in unison to the same commands of muscle and sinew. For the briefest of moments, Shirley glimpsed a brazen flash of supernova, scorching spectacularly against the void before collapsing into itself, darker than dark, emptier than empty.

... to court destruction with taunts, with invitations ...

Panting, Shirley pulled back, but Wilkie had him by the coveralls, warm breath and sandalwood inescapable as they stood eye-to-eye.

"Shirley," Wilkie said, like another kiss. "You and me. Together. We could be great."

Looking back into the amber eyes, Shirley allowed himself one honest appraisal of the man who had seen everyone at Redmond and had made a place for them all in the half-light, who had survived God only knew what in prison, who, whatever else he might be, was a brother officer and a friend. More than a friend. Philos.

"You don't need me to be great," Shirley said.

Wilkie's throat bobbed wretchedly. "Please."

"No."

It was barely a whisper, but it was final.

Wilkie backed away, stumbling so that the red dirt of the drive mussed his crisp black trousers. He blinked hard. "Fine," he croaked. "Well, don't come crying to me when you change your mind."

"Wilkie . . ."

"I'll do just fine in Berlin without you."

"Wilkie . . ."

Wilkie had reached the auto, gripping the door with pale and bulging knuckles. He risked one last look back.
Shirley swallowed. ". . . take care of yourself."

Wilkie snorted. "Say hello to Meredith for me," he sneered, disappearing behind the sun-dazzled windshield.

Shirley stood perfectly still as the Rolls-Royce revved up and pulled out. Much too fast. Careening toward the road, it left parallel skidding divots and raised a cloud of red Island dust, intangible, temporary, like that fleeting feeling of choking pressure, not yet settled back to earth.

Notes:

*Rainbow Valley, Chapter 33: "Carl is — Not — Whipped" It's not the first time Una has eavesdropped in that study.

**Rilla of Ingleside, Chapter 17: "The Weeks Wear By"
Unable to Love

Chapter Summary

Content warning: homophobia, quotations from period medical texts relating to sexuality and conversion therapy

April 1926

Shirley was not certain why he had been summoned to Ingleside. It wasn't that he minded, especially not on these dank evenings when spring seemed to be stuttering in reverse. He didn't mind fending for himself, not really. But nothing he cooked for himself was ever exactly the way Susan made it.

No Susan tonight, though. Her widowed sister-in-law was ill in Charlottetown, and Susan had gone to tend her for the week, bringing with her a basketful of remedies that had raised the eyebrows of several Doctors Blythe.

Jem was out as well, called to the fishing village to ease old Aggie Russell into the world to come. That left Shirley with his parents, Faith, and the little Blythes, who needed next to no prompting to tell Uncle Shirley all their little adventures. One of the neighborhood cats had recently had kittens under the veranda and Faith had promised that Wally could keep one, though he hadn't yet decided between the tabby and the calico. Sam had discovered his Uncle Walter's old study platform up in the apple tree that looked into Sam's bedroom window and extracted a promise that Uncle Shirley would help him repair it for daily use.* Jemmy gabbled along happily, no doubt describing events of great consequence in her little world, to which Shirley paid duly earnest attention.

After dinner, when goodnights had been said all around and Faith had herded her littles upstairs for the next installment of *Treasure Island*, Shirley's father turned to him with a grave expression.

"Shirley, will you come into the library for a moment? There is something your mother and I wish to discuss with you."

Shirley was instantly wary. The library was not a place for pleasant chats. He had not been punished often in his childhood, having been shielded by Susan's righteous indignation in all but the most flagrant offenses, but there had been a few memorable scoldings, all of them delivered over the massive mahogany desk, witnessed by the shelves of sacred ledgers. How strange to be summoned there again, as if he were still six years old and had offended Mrs. Elder Clow by obstinately refusing to answer her questions at dinner.

Unsure what to expect other than discomfort, Shirley settled himself into one of the leather armchairs facing the desk. Despite the gloom outside, the room was warm, with a robust fire dancing in the hearth. A single blue-covered book lay on the blotter, reminding Shirley of the day when he had spilled lilacs over one of the medical ledgers and Una had glimpsed his fear. But that was a long time ago, and he was no longer a child.

His parents did not sit, which Shirley took as a bad sign. Instead, his mother stood awkwardly by the side of the desk, hovering in an unsettled and unsettling manner while his father perched on the
edge with such a transparent imitation of casual ease that it was unclear why he bothered.

"Shirley."

"Dad."

His father took a deep breath. "Son, we, that is, your mother and I, we have something very important, that is to say, very delicate to discuss with you."

What was all this? Shirley couldn't remember ever having seen his father flustered into dithering verbiage. He had a lifetime of experience delivering bad news; it wasn't like him to trip over his own tongue. Shirley had an inkling of where this might be headed, but wasn't keen on volunteering to participate.

"You may not be surprised to learn that we have known, that is to say, that we have suspected, for some time that there may be a reason that you have never shown any particular interest in settling down. That is to say, in getting married."

Oh, good.

Shirley turned inquiring eyes to his mother, who looked resolutely at his father, not at him. He did not think that he was imagining the rosy blotches streaking her pale cheeks.

His father paused, as if allowing space for Shirley to fill, but any hopes in that vein went sorely unrealized. As far as Shirley was concerned, his father could talk until he ran short of either breath or nerve, but he would get no help from this quarter.

"I've been doing some reading," his father continued, tapping the blue book with all five fingers as he spoke. "Quite a lot of reading, actually. And I think this book explains things well. It's succinct. Scientific. And sympathetic."

Wordlessly, Shirley held out his hand for the volume. The cloth binding bore no title, the very subject concealed behind a demure and silent cover. He let the book fall open in his hand to reveal the title page: *The Homosexual Neurosis* by Dr. William Stekel (*for sale only to Members of the Medical Profession).*

Scanning the table of contents, Shirley let out a low whistle.

*The Narcissism of the Homosexual*

*The Neurotic's Inability to Love*

*Homosexuality and Sadism*

*The Social Causes of Homosexuality*

*Attachment to the Mother*

*Various Therapeutic Measures*

*The Path Towards Cure and the Conditions for Recovery*

"Dr. Stekel explains . . ."

Shirley held up a still hand to silence his father and turned the pages gingerly. He skimmed a few paragraphs that would have made him angry if he had let them. Instead, he deployed a stony
indifference, letting the words pass under his eyes without being absorbed.

"The question rises whether he is at all capable of loving. One may point out that in a certain sense he does love his mother, father, some friend or that perhaps he even has a 'sweetheart.' But it only seems that he loves them! The truth is that he is unable to love."

Shirley let the words skim over the surface of his mind like skaters on an icy pond, gliding steel-bladed across a frozen barrier thick enough to protect the hidden life below.

Flipping the pages, Shirley saw that Stekel's text alternated between these grim pronouncements and explicit sexual histories of the good doctor's patients. Very explicit.

"... he reveled in the thought of permitting himself to be besprinkled with the spermatic fluid by his beloved male friend; he had a craving membrum erectum amati viri fellare . . ."

"You read this?" Shirley asked, his brows ascending to a lofty height. "Both of you?"

Every visible inch of his mother's skin was a livid scarlet. "Yes. Well, Dr. Stekel makes many informative observations . . ."

"He certainly does," Shirley muttered, tossing the volume carelessly back onto the desk. "Usually you have to buy a fella a drink if you want to hear that sort of talk."

"Shirley!" his father exclaimed. "You will not speak that way in front of your mother!"

If Shirley had been less practiced in the art of self-discipline, he would not have been able to answer in his usual neutral tone. "I quite agree," he said soberly. "In fact, let's not talk about any of this at all."

"I will not tolerate that sort of vulgarity . . ."

"Really, Gilbert, it's alright . . ."

"Oh, yes, I'm the one being vulgar . . ."

Shirley's father was on his feet now, the fictive ease of the desk-sitting abandoned. He ran a hand through the salt-and-pepper of his curls, standing a few on end as he brought his voice back to a range that gave his words a veneer of professional detachment. "Shirley. Listen. Dr. Stekel is one of the premiere researchers in the world. His methods for treatment are . . ."

"No."

"You need to hear this, Shirley."

"No, I don't."

His mother wrung her hands. "Please, sweetheart. Just listen. We only want to help. To keep you safe . . ."

Shirley met her sorrowful gray eyes and saw that she really did believe that she was helping. But whatever tender shoots of fellowship had grown up between them recently were shriveling by the moment.

"Do you really agree with all this?" Shirley asked, unable to keep his voice completely free of dismay.
His mother bit her lip, but met his eye. "There have been times in the past when your father and I have argued over medical matters," she said, "and I've learned that he's generally right in the end. If there's a treatment that might work, it's our duty to tell you that there is a chance."

Shirley felt a profound disappointment. No matter how kind-hearted or free-thinking or well-educated she was, his mother still saw him as damaged. She truly thought she was being kind while insisting that he was broken.

"I am sufficient as I am," he said, unblinking.

His mother, flushed before, went white as marble. "A line of poetry isn't a convincing argument," she murmured.***

Shirley scoffed. "You don't really believe that."

"We love you, Shirley," she said quietly, tears welling in her eyes. "Perhaps we've failed you in some ways. I've failed you . . ."

Her tears annoyed him. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing to mourn but their ignorance. He resented the implication that he should have to comfort his mother as if she had suffered a blow. Still, she was crying. It wasn't a ploy — her hurt was real — but Shirley grudged her the demand on his kindness as much as he grudged his father the demand on his civility.

"You haven't failed me, Mother," he sighed, resigned.

"Dr. Stekel says that it is impossible to instill goodness through fear," she said, wiping moist eyes. "He writes that the only true educational levers are love and a good example. I've always believed that. You aren't in any trouble, sweetheart. We would never punish you. We only want to help you."

"Listen to me Shirley," his father said, a note of pleading in his voice. "Dr. Stekel isn't a butcher. He strongly opposes any medical or surgical intervention. He argues strenuously against any sort of punishment. He even campaigns for decriminalization!"

"Bully for him."

His father was undeterred. "Dr. Stekel has conducted extensive research. He has found that homosexuality is a state of arrested development — a sort of perpetual infancy — in which childish urges fail to develop into mature, healthy forms of love. It isn't your fault. You . . ."

"You should stop now." A sharper edge had crept into Shirley's voice, but his father barreled past without noting it.

". . . Dr. Stekel has developed a type of psychoanalysis that helps patients overcome their immature inclinations and learn to love in an adult manner. There is an analyst in Kingsport who is willing to . . ."

"No."

"Dr. Stekel's recommended treatment . . ."

How much longer was this going to go on? Shirley wasn't positive that he could maintain his calm much longer.

"Shirley?"
"What?"

"Will you go to see the analyst?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Shirley could feel the outer edge of his patience, sharp under his toes like the lip of some underwater ledge.

"Because I'm not ill."

His father riffled the pages of the book, scanning for a line. "Dr. Stekel even predicts your reaction," he said. "Ah, here it is: We see the wound but the patient will not, cannot, see it. He may go so far as to claim that he has no wound and is well; that he was born with the ties that bind him; or else that he came with that wound into the world."

"Sounds about right."

The book snapped shut. "Shirley, let us help you," his father said in the kind, firm tone he had used to bend a thousand recalcitrant patients. "It's not your fault, and Dr. Stekel's methods have helped many homosexuals overcome their problem and develop the capacity for mature love."

Shirley felt unutterably weary. "I've heard more than enough. Don't speak of this to me again."

"But sweetheart . . ." his mother pleaded.

"No!" His patience was gone and he couldn't keep the annoyance out of his voice any longer. "I'm twenty-seven years old. I'm not a perpetual infant, whatever that's supposed to mean. I'm not going to an analyst. And I'm done talking about this."

Gilbert squared his shoulders and cleared his throat. "Perhaps you'll change your mind if Carl agrees to go."

Shirley's heart skipped a beat — or, if that be a physiological impossibility, he thought it did.**** The syncope cleared his voice of all emotion, leaving only a perfect, deadly calm. "Don't you dare mention this to him."

"I won't have to," his father replied gravely. "John and Rosemary are speaking to him over at the manse. We decided that it would be best . . ."

Shirley cut him off, hand slashing the air. "They have him there right now?"

"We thought it would be better if each family . . ."

Shirley was halfway to the door already.

"Shirley, this conversation isn't finished!" his father called after him.

Shirley already had a hand on the doorknob, but he turned back with a mutinous glare. Stalking back across the room, he stopped when he was nose-to-nose with his father. Shirley was pleased to find that he had a slight height advantage.

"Then let me finish it," he said in an impossibly unruffled tone. "Don't talk to Carl. Don't talk about Carl. And if you have any more brilliant ideas about how to 'cure' either of us, you can."

****
Shirley made a sudden motion that made his mother gasp. But he did not touch his father. Instead, his hand darted to the desktop, plucking Dr. Stekel's *The Homosexual Neurosis* from its place on the blotter. "Well, after reading this," he said, flipping the book into his palm, "I'm sure you have a very detailed understanding of where you can stick your opinions."

Before either of his parents could reply, Shirley turned on his heel. On his way past the hearth, he dropped the book into the flames, sending up a shower of sparks.

Carl sprinted down the veranda steps and across the narrow strip of lawn that separated the manse from the old Methodist graveyard. Perhaps he would have made a plan if he could have formed a coherent thought, but he was sunk deep in a buzzing cloud that admitted only one imperative: *get to Ingleside.*

It wasn't helping that his shirt seemed to be shrinking as he ran, collar constricting around his throat, cloth turning to iron and squeezing the breath from his chest. His breast pocket thumped against his chest, the tiny weight of the pinned wings hammering with every step. Carl clawed at his tie as he stumbled down the well-worn path past the big tamarack tree and the old Bailey garden, desperate for oxygen as he plunged into Rainbow Valley. His brain was so fogged that he barely registered Shirley barreling toward him until they crashed together in the middle of the wooden footbridge over the brook, locking one another in a desperate embrace.

Clinging, they swayed together, Carl not even caring that the arms wrapped tight around him were crushing what little air was left from his lungs.

"They . . . you . . . didn't . . ." he gasped.

Shirley relented immediately, holding Carl by the shoulders at arm's length. "Breathe," he urged. "I'm fine. I was coming to make sure you were alright."

"I . . ." Carl panted, "was coming . . . to make sure . . . your dad . . . was alright."

A smile twitched in the corners of Shirley's mouth, relaxing him a fraction of a degree. "Well, I did consider laying him out, but in the end I only burned his book."

"Book?"

"Your dad didn't have one?"

"No . . . wish he had . . . might have helped him . . . get to the point faster."

Carl sank onto the bridge-planks and tugged on Shirley's trouser leg for company. Shirley hesitated, looking back toward Ingleside and up the other long slope that led eventually to the manse. But it was dark and chilly and besides, let anyone try to come for them at this particular moment and see what happened.

Chest still heaving, Carl yanked at the strained knot dangling at the end of a badly stretched loop of tie, but only succeeded in pulling it tighter in his frustration.

"Let me," Shirley said, lifting the tie over Carl's head and going to work on the shrunken knot. Carl acquiesced, concentrating on breathing slow, even breaths as Shirley picked at the fabric, long fingers coaxing the silk with little tugs until the loops relaxed and slipped apart.
"Thanks," Carl said, draping the slack tie around his neck like a stole.

Beneath them, the brook rippled gently, its soft eddies rimed with moonlight. The murmur of water over the rocks resonated through Carl's body, slowing his heart, expanding his lungs. He leaned against Shirley's shoulder, wanting to ask what had happened at Ingleside, but not sure he was ready to hear it.

His own evening had been plenty to grapple with on its own. Carl had been surprised when his father and Rosemary had invited him to dinner on a night when they knew Una would be out late at an Altar Guild meeting. But with Rosemary recovered from her fever, Carl was happy to pop over for a catch-up. Perhaps he and his father would finally have a chance to discuss his article.

Over lemon pie with whipped cream, John Meredith had begun to speak in indecipherably nested clauses. Carl might never have ferreted out the point he was circling so ineptly if Rosemary had not stepped in with her usual composure.

"You aren't in any trouble, Carl," she said in a tone that immediately triggered the part of his brain dedicated to fleeing wolves and volcanoes and lightning storms.

Carl relaxed into the panic, knowing that resisting would only bunch him up, making him tight and fragile when he needed to be resilient.

Thankfully, there had been no talk of hellfire nor damnation, only an insistent refrain that they wanted to help him and more than a few sentences that began with, "Dr. Blythe says . . ."

By the time Carl had worked out that Dr. Blythe was probably saying aplenty at that exact moment, he worried that it was too late. Why hadn't he known that Shirley was going over to Ingleside tonight? When had they stopped knowing the details of one another's days? One another's weeks, come to that?

He had excused himself precipitously, not even making excuses, leaving his father and Rosemary gawping after him.

Now he was sitting on the footbridge, with Shirley beside him, warm and solid and unharmed, at least physically.

"Tell me about the book?" Carl ventured.

Shirley did not answer immediately. When he did, his voice seemed frayed. "What are we doing, Kit?"

"Doing?"

"Why are we here? What are we trying to accomplish?"

Carl wished he could have said he didn't know what Shirley was talking about. Suddenly, parents and analysts and incinerated books seemed like droning bees with stings too short to reach anything vital.

"We're being together," he answered faintly.

"And how's that going?"

It was the sort of question that contained its own answer, requiring nothing but silence to confirm.
When the pause had stretched beyond acceptable limits, Shirley said, "I had a visit the other day. From Wilkie."

So this was how it would end. Carl might have prepared himself better. If he were honest, it had probably been a long time coming. Would Shirley even have come to the Glen at all if Wilkie had been a free man? Doubtful. There was nothing for him here. That had been true all along, even before tonight's ambush. And then they'd lost track of one another. No that wasn't quite true. Carl had lost track. He wasn't quite sure how it happened — he would put his head down to tabulate data or write about migratory patterns and reemerge a week later, expecting Shirley to be just where he'd been before. That was stupid. Nothing ever stays where you leave it.

And now Wilkie. Not even a surprise, really. Carl couldn't stand up to Wilkie on any measure, and knew it. He wasn't rich or handsome or interesting. He wasn't going to New York or Berlin or anywhere Shirley wanted to be. He had exactly one thing in his favor, which was that the Glen St. Mary Presbyterian Church had unintentionally located him in little Shirley Blythe's vicinity back in the days of eel-fishing. Just a fluke. If they hadn't met until Redmond, Shirley would never even have bothered to learn his name.

"Oh?" was all Carl managed to say.

"He wanted me to go to Berlin."

Oh.

"Did you want to go?"

"Yes."

Alright, well, no use crying. Not here anyway. Save it for later, if possible. Probably not possible.

"When do you leave?"

Shirley shifted beside him, gaze palpable even though Carl could not meet it.

"You really think I'd go?"

"You hate it here, Shirley. It's not a big secret."

The shoulder beside Carl's sagged. "I hate it here because there's no place for us," he said. "I miss Kingsport. I miss walking home with you and watching you write and having to steal the covers back."

Definitely not possible.

Sniffling, Carl was still able to find a smile. "Do you remember our first night at Mrs. MacDougal's?"

"Do you mean the part when a beetle crawled across my face in the middle of the night or the part when you shoved me onto the floor?"

"I wasn't used to sharing a bed! Jerry always made me sleep alone."

"Jerry is clever."

They shared a few humor-tinged breaths, but that hardly seemed enough.
"Is it stupid to want to go back in time?" Shirley asked.

Carl tried to name his tone and settled on *wistful*, which was not generally an adjective he associated with Shirley. *Wistful* was for people who felt so powerless to get what they wanted that they convinced themselves that they didn’t really want anything at all. Shirley was rarely helpless and he didn't make a habit of denying what he wanted.

“No. It’s not stupid.”

Shirley was quiet a long time before he whispered, “I’ve got to get out of here.”

It couldn’t be the tie cutting off his air, but Carl was still choking when he asked, “To Berlin?”

“No. Not Berlin. Just somewhere else. Maybe Kingsport for starters. Just for a little while. Will you . . . will you come with me?”

Carl blinked. “To Kingsport?”

“I know it’s a bad time with nesting season and all, but . . .”

“Yes,” Carl cut him off. “Yes. I'll go with you.”

“Not forever. Just . . . until we've figured things out better.”

A lifelong project, but Carl wasn't about to quibble. Hope was rushing in like a tide, obliterating all transient objections. “Kingsport,” he said definitely. “Yes. When do you want to leave?”

“Well,” Shirley said, considering. "If we swing by the house long enough for you to grab some clothes, I could probably have us in the air in an hour. To Kingsport by midnight."

"Right now?"

"Gotta take Di up on that offer sometime. And it's probably better if I don't cross paths with my dad for a while."

"What about Una?"

"Leave her a note."

Carl paused, but he had to ask or he'd go on wondering. "What about Wilkie?"

Shirley didn't answer right away, but that was alright. A glib reply would not have suited. "Maybe in another life," he said at last. "I hope he finds his happiness in Berlin."

Shirley stood up, brushing dirt from his trousers. Carl took the hand he offered, holding it even after he had gained his feet.

Shirley looked down at their intertwined fingers and, his face softening. He ran a thumb along the curve of Carl's hand and murmured, *He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me.*

"Is that Whitman?"

"How'd you guess?"

"Hardly a guess. You quote Whitman the way Una quotes the Bible."
That got a smile, tender but not wistful, having no reason to regret unattainable things.

"I love you, Kit. I really do."

"I love you, too. I'm sorry if I ever made you doubt it."

"Nah. Never."

The moon stood witness to their kiss, with only the susurrus of marsh grass for applause.

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Notes:

* *Anne of Ingleside*, chapter 23. If Walter's apple tree is outside Sam's window, Sam has Rilla's old room.

**Wilhelm Stekel, *The Homosexual Neurosis*. This book was translated into English and published in Boston in 1922.

***Paraphrased from the argument in *Anne's House of Dreams*, chapter 29: Gilbert and Anne Disagree. Gilbert quotes a couplet of Tennyson in support of his argument and Anne objects to the tactic, leading to her canon statement that poetry isn't a convincing argument. Shirley has given Anne a line from Whitman's "One Hour to Madness and Joy." Other quotations in this section are from *Anne's House of Dreams*, *Anne of the Island*, and Stekel.

****Rilla of Ingleside*, chapter 4: The Piper Pipes

*****Walt Whitman, "On the Terrible Doubt of Appearances"
(I'll See You In) C-U-B-A*

1926-7

The wallpaper in Aster House’s spare room was green and gold paisley, even uglier than the old cabbage roses at Mrs. MacDougal’s. But it wasn’t a plain white wall and this was not Shirley’s narrow, empty bed. Carl’s legs were tangled up with his under the covers, his back warm and solid against Shirley’s side. Carl had pulled the top quilt around him until he was barely visible, just a tuft of golden-brown hair sticking above the covers to catch the early morning light. That was alright. Shirley didn’t need to see him. He only needed to roll onto his side and tuck Carl more closely into the curve of his body, closing his eyes once more.

28 April 1926

Aster House, Kingsport, NS

Dear Una,

I'm sorry to have left so unexpectedly and without waiting to tell you in person. I hope you found my note right away and did not worry too much. Please forgive me — it was an emergency.

I don't know whether you may have spoken to Father and Rosemary since last night, or what they may have told you. The truth is that they confronted me and tried to persuade me to see an analyst. I refused. I'm alright — please don't worry. The bigger problem is that Dr. and Mrs. Blythe confronted Shirley at the same time, and it did not go quite as gently as my own conversation. I don't think that the Blythes are a danger to us, at least not in the way one might expect. But it is necessary to put a little distance between us and them at the moment.

We are staying at Aster House. Di and Sylvia are taking good care of us and we are alright. We will probably stay a month, though perhaps longer — I can't say for certain yet.

I mean to go over to Redmond next week and set up a meeting with Professor Michelson to talk over some of my findings. It's actually a good opportunity to use the college library — there are plenty of references I've been meaning to look up and can't at home.

The thing that weighs on my mind most is you. I'm so sorry to have left like that, Una. Please don't think it had anything to do with you. You've only ever been comforter and protector to me, and I'm sorry if I spoke too harshly about the matter you raised. You were only trying to solve a problem I have yet to puzzle out myself. Thank you for trying.

I am enclosing a blank cheque on my account at the Crawford Savings & Loan in Lowbridge. You can draw it at any time. It isn't much, but it should keep you until I have a better idea of the future. I have written to the Department asking for emergency leave, but it is all a muddle. For now, I'm just trying to walk softly. I will write again as soon as I have anything to tell.

Love always,

Carl

P.S. Di and Sylvia send their love to you, and Shirley sends both love and apologies.
1 May 1926

Ingleside, Glen St. Mary, PEI

Dear Shirley,

Thank heavens you are alright. I was very glad to get your letter, though very sorry that you needed to send it in the first place.

I knew something was catawampus as soon as I returned from Charlottetown because your mother had taken to her bed and no one would say anything plain. It did not take me long to corner your father and get a bit of the story out of him, though he was reluctant to tell me the kernel of it. Finally, I up and told him that he needn't worry about telling me anything I didn't know already and then gave him a piece of my mind on the matter. He looked as confused as a duck hit on the head and made some apologies, though I told him it wasn't me that needed them. He can go without pie for the rest of his life as far as I am concerned.*

Of course, he hasn't much appetite, at least not since Di telephoned. I do not know what she said to him, but he spent the rest of the day in the library and I did not try very hard to coax him out.

Not that you need to worry over that. You are safe at Aster House and I hope you are having a nice time there. I am sending along a pound of fudge for the four of you, which should be enough, but let me know right away if it isn't.

Stay as long as you like, but know that I will be real glad to have you back. Sam and Wally have been asking after you and I am not sure what to tell them, so I only say that you love them and will come see them when you are able. I hope it will not be too long, but I will understand if it cannot be too soon.

Please give my love to Carl and to Di and Sylvia.

Love,

Susan

1 May 1926

Lowbridge, PEI

Dear Carl,

I am very glad to hear that you are safe and well at Aster House. Please return my love to all there and thank Di and Sylvia for their hospitality. Matthew 25:35 (and subsequent) is of weight with me.

Please do not worry about me. I will not deny that I was surprised to come home to an empty house, but I understand that it was not a time to stand on ceremony. Thank you for the cheque. I have put it somewhere safe and do not intend to cash it, as the larder is well stocked and I have no other immediate needs. If it becomes necessary to discuss other arrangements, we will do so at the proper time. For now, I am keeping very busy. It is easy to do, as Amelia Newgate finds her twins quite overwhelming and absorbs all the help I can offer.

I should tell you that I went up to the manse the day after you left and found Father quite as wretched as he was on the day he could not whip you over the incident with the eel. I promised
him that I would tell him when I had word from you, and I hope it is alright if I share news of your safety (though I will not tell him your location if you do not wish me to).

I am glad to know that you are able to get work done in Kingsport. It strikes me that if you find the library there useful to your work, it may be prudent to make a habit of visiting. Perhaps in the winter, when you are seldom on the water as it is. Think on it.

Do take your time. I will be alright until you return.

All my love,

Una

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4 May 1926

Aster House, Kingsport, NS

Dear Una,

I had a letter from Father today. Don't worry that he knows where I am — Di telephoned Ingleside to read the riot act, so it isn't exactly a secret, and it would have been alright in any case. We're not hiding, just re-fitting and re-organizing. I have not opened Father's letter yet, but I mean to. It is quite thick and I suspect it says rather a lot, but I find myself wishing we could let the whole episode be forgotten and go back to talking about anything else. Impossible, I know. I will read it, I promise, and respond if I can.

My meeting with Professor Michelson was grand. We lost a whole afternoon talking over my article and recent efforts to expand the National Parks. He has been corresponding with a British animal ecologist who is currently on expedition in Hudson Bay; Michelson thinks our work may be of mutual interest. I look forward to our introduction, having been reminded on this visit how beneficial it is to hash things over with a knowledgeable colleague. Professor Michelson even hinted that I might collaborate with him on editing a volume updating Charles Gordon Hewitt's _Conservation_. That would be a worthy project, and one well suited to the colder months.

With that in mind, I brought up the suggestion of winter visits over supper last night. The idea was met with immediate enthusiasm from our hosts. Sylvia insisted that we stay from New Year's until the first thaw. I don't know whether I can secure approval for such a change from the Department. I am still waiting to hear about my emergency leave, and rather suspect I may no longer have a job to fret over. But I will try to live up to Sylvia’s motto and not go borrowing trouble. It is quite true that a month or two of library study in the winter would be better than my solitary writing at home. Given the low demand for cold-weather tours of the Island, I suspect a winter holiday would not be a particular hardship for Blythe Aviation either.

Shirley agreed that it sounded like a good idea, but I don't know that it was not enough for him. I don't know exactly what to do. We have to find some way of living that is sustainable for both of us. I can never be an eagle and he can never be a penguin, but there is such a thing as a seagull and they get by no matter the circumstances.

As ever, I am conscious of my responsibilities to you and will take every possible measure to avoid making hardship for you. That blasted wood stove takes enough attention in fine weather, let alone a cold snap. Why ever do you prefer it? I wouldn't leave you alone in the house for any length of time if I can help it. If we come to Kingsport in the winters, would you consider coming along with us? I'm sure Di and Sylvia wouldn't mind. I know you have responsibilities at St. Elizabeth's. But
think on it.

Love always,

Carl

5 May 1926

Aster House, Kingsport, NS

Dear Susan,

Thank you for the fudge. We all appreciated it very much. Di agreed that it was the real Susan brand and nothing either of us could come up with would be quite the same. Did I ever tell you that I let her in on the secret of the baking powder? Don't be cross — she thought it was a fine joke.

We are getting along well here. Carl is using the Redmond library and getting a little work done. I am not working at all, only reading and walking around the city. The stores here carry all the latest in radios and I have been looking for options to replace the little crystal set I built. The newer radios are usually sold in cabinets, but I should be able to pick up all the operative parts separately and assemble them myself.

We have made a habit of going to the moving pictures. Last week we saw Ben-Hur and yesterday The Lost World. There are three movie houses in Kingsport, which is good for variety, although it seems that one or the other is always playing a war movie, which we avoid. I'm afraid that means our next outing will be Phantom of the Opera, which is Carl's choice, though I would see The Lost World again. I do not know how they filmed the dinosaur models, but it was a marvel.

I know you will want to know when I am coming back. I do not know what to tell you. Carl and Di have suggested many reasonable options, but none has given me the sense of elation I felt flying away from the Glen. If I were alone, I might go on flying and never look back. But I'm not alone and don't want to be. That's been half the trouble. I don't know yet what solution we will find, only that we will find one. Whatever it is, I will write you.

Say hello to Sam and Wally for me, and give a kiss to Jemmy as well.

Love,

Shirley

From:
A. Blythe
Ingleside
Glen St. Mary, PEI

To:
Shirley J. Blythe
Aster House
Greenwood Ave.
Kingsport, NS

*RETURN TO SENDER*
1 June 1926

Aster House, Kingsport, NS

Dear Una,

We have come to a decision.

It is our aim to come back to the Island in time, but not right away. We mean to travel for the rest of the year, flying south — like geese, I suppose, rather than gulls. The idea would be to come home with the flocks next spring, hopefully refreshed and ready to implement our scheme of overwintering in Kingsport in future.

There are two major concerns with this plan. The first is your welfare. I can't leave you alone a whole year, Una, and I hate to ask you to move home to the manse. You have always been too willing to sacrifice and I am so completely indebted to you in every way that am loath to ask anything more. I would not ask now, except that I think this may be our only chance to salvage ourselves. Nothing short of that emergency would make me ask you to take on any hardship. I am wretched just writing this because I know that you will always give more than you have and it feels dreadful to let you, let alone request anything so monumental as moving house. Tell me to go jump in a lake, Una. I deserve it.

The second concern is much less. I have still not heard from the Department, but I have written them again asking for a year’s leave. If they do not grant it, I will simply quit. It seems unlikely that they will approve, particularly as I didn't give a very specific reason for needing the leave and they have held my health against me in the past. If they approve my request, that is well and good, but even a perfect job is only a job in the end. Besides, Professor Michelson and I have had a few more chats about writing together — giving up this job may be a blessing in disguise.

I believe that we can make this work. Perhaps that makes me a fool, but I must go on believing it.

Love Always,

Carl

4 June 1926

Lowbridge, PEI

Dear Carl,

You write of debts. There is only one outstanding debt — to love one another — and that can never be paid in full. Romans 13:8

Go south like the geese, Carl. I will be here when you return. I will stay in the house this summer for the sake of the garden. When the weather turns, I will go to Mrs. Palmer. If you could see her tears when I asked if I might board with her in the winters, you would see that your joy only begets more joy. If you should ever desire a dip in Pelham's Pond, it will not be at my insistence.

All my love,

Una
“For you,” Sylvia said, holding out a fist-sized rock.

“Thanks,” Carl said, blinking up from a pile of notes. “What is it?”

“It’s a rock.”

Carl felt that he had missed something. He did, occasionally, when he was heads-down in his work, but he was trying to be better. He had to be better. He’d even carried his alarm clock down to the dining room table, setting it to ring in plenty of time for him to clear his papers and help with supper. There was no way he had missed the alarm, but perhaps Sylvia had been speaking to him and he hadn’t noticed?

“A rock?” he echoed.

Sylvia snorted and gestured first to the open window and then to the drift of notes that had fluttered to the floor.

“Oh,” Carl said sheepishly. “Sorry. I’ll close the window.”

“The window’s fine. You just need a rock.”

Together, they gathered the papers into a haphazard pile on the corner of the desk. Sylvia anchored them with the rock, letting the edges ruffle in the June breeze.

12 July 1926
Havana, Cuba
Dear Di,

Thank you for everything. Really. When we left Four Winds, I had no thought beyond getting out, and you gave us a safe place to land. I don't know what we would have done without you. Sylvia, too. Give her our love.

We have arrived safely in Havana and will stay here several weeks. After that, we may go over to Venezuela — apparently Nellie Fletcher is on expedition there and Carl is going to see whether we can't catch up with her. He's sent off a letter to her base camp today, so we shall see.

For now, we are playing tourist. You never saw an ocean like this, Di. It's hard to believe it's connected to the one back home. Carl met a dolphin, so you may never hear from him again.

I'm including a business card from our hotel so that you may write us here. Don't fret over funds — there are more than enough soft American businessmen at the card tables here to keep us in the black indefinitely.

Love,

Shirley

[Postcard with palm trees and beach]

To:
Sam, Wally, and Jemmy Blythe
Ingleside, Glen St. Mary, PEI
Canada

Dear Sam, Wally, and Jemmy,

Have you ever seen a coconut? I have. They grow at the top of tall, skinny trees with no branches. There are lots of coconut trees in Cuba.

Love,

Uncle Shirley

8 August 1926

Aster House, Kingsport, NS

Dear Shirley,

I am beyond glad to hear that you are arrived safely and having a good time.

We are both intrigued by your description of Cuba. Tell me, do you think it would be hospitable to two ladies traveling "alone"? We have not had a vacation in years and were thinking we might enjoy a trip to Europe next summer, but had not considered Cuba. I'm afraid neither of us is much of a hand at cards, but do you think we'd find it enjoyable otherwise?

Don't stop reading when I say I have had another letter from Dad. An apology this time, if a limited one. I have tried arguing with him on medical grounds, but fear that that is a dead end, he having any number of credentialed experts on his side. However, I made rather more headway in our last exchange, explaining to him that he can believe as he likes, but if he ever speaks to you in that manner a second time, I will never darken his door again. I think that is the best leverage we have: our presence or absence. It has at least gotten his attention, and if it has not changed his mind, at least it has him apologizing for his manner.

As for Mother, I do not know what to say. I cannot wholly blame her for supporting Dad as a matter of spousal loyalty. I know that is not an excuse, but I think that her apologies are genuine. You don't have to forgive her or even open her letters, but if you ever wish to give her a second chance, I think that she is truly sorry.

I am forwarding a letter that looks like it is the reply from the Department of Marine and Fisheries. I hope that it is good news, whatever that might mean in this case.

Always remember that we love you and that you're welcome back at any time. Sylvia is already redecorating the green bedroom for your winter sojourns, so you may count that as a binding contract.

Yours in solidarity,

Di

P.S. Sylvia here. Indeed, I have not begun redecorating. I am only in the planning stages. The green room still has that awful paisley wallpaper and I have been looking for an excuse to get rid of it for years. In any case, the only actual addition I have made to the room is a small crate, which I have been slowly filling with lone socks, bits of notepaper, and pencil stubs Carl left all over the house. I expect I'd find ears if they were not so firmly attached to his head. Do look after my absentminded friend, won't you? Tell him that the neighborhood squirrels are desolate and
congregate forlornly on the garden wall awaiting his return. All my love. S.C.

From:
A. Blythe
Ingleside
Glen St. Mary, PEI

To:
Shirley J. Blythe
Guanabo Hotel
Havana, Cuba

*RETURN TO SENDER*

1 October 1926
Caracas, Venezuela

Dear Una,

Hello from Venezuela! We were very much delayed on account of the tremendous hurricane this past week. We were perfectly safe — Havana was not hit — but reports of the destruction in Florida are grim. We meant to stay in Venezuela only a few weeks and then head up to Key West, but now I think that we may winter here.

Part of the attraction is the company. Nellie is very well. She sends you her love and apologizes profusely for being a poor correspondent, by which I gather she means that she only writes to you at every possible opportunity, given that she's off sketching beetles in the mountains five weeks out of every six.

If she is indeed lax in her letters, you may not have heard her news: she is engaged to marry a Dutch entomologist from Curaçao. The wedding will be at Christmas, and she was very quick to invite us to stay for the festivities.

Bram is a jolly chap. The first night here, we got to talking ants over dinner and before I missed a minute, it was midnight. He adores Nellie, that much is plain. He tried to show us his favorites among her watercolors from their most recent expedition and ended up going through the lot, which must have been 100 or more.

Di forwarded the a letter from the Department, saying that the circumstances of my request were very irregular, but they expressed some dismay at letting me go. I am to report to the head office in Ottawa on March 1, 1927, where I imagine I will be scolded, but I have some small hope of being reinstated. The timing makes me suspect that they are holding out the possibility of getting me back to work in time for nesting season. My data for 1926 will be a mess, but it can’t be helped. I do miss the Gulf, even here among the tropical reefs. I'll see a scarlet ibis wading here and admire its beauty, but find myself wondering how the puffins are getting on at home.

How are things in Lowbridge? Are you thinking of shutting up the house soon? I have sent a letter to Mr. Crawford at the Savings & Loan instructing him to let you draw all you need from my account. The pension money should be accruing there and I haven't touched it in months, so it should see you through the winter alright.

Give my love to Faith and Jerry and Bruce, and all the children when you see them. I am writing to
Father and Rosemary as well, so no need to tiptoe around the subject.

Love always,

Carl

[Postcard of Curaçao harbor]

To:
Gilbert and Victoria Ford
405 Russell Hill Rd, Toronto, ON
Canada

Dear Gil and Victoria,

Have you ever seen a shark? I have. It was a whopper, too — a bull shark as big as a horse. Don't worry, though — I was in a boat.

Love,

Uncle Shirley

“. . . because Cornelia says she’s sure this one will be a girl, but I’m certain it’s a boy. Just you watch. I told Miller that I want to name him Elliott and he says to me, suit yourself, Mary, and you’ll suit me. That’s a real nice sort of a husband to have and I . . .”

Mary prattled on comfortably as she packed Una’s groceries into a crate. Her growing belly had slowed her feet, but not her tongue, but Una didn’t mind. She had already put many hours of handwork into a tiny white dress for Mary’s newest baby, which would be both as well dressed and as well loved as any baby in Four Winds. Between Amelia’s twins and Mary’s expanding brood and the frilly little parcel she had just sent off to Charlottetown and Ingleside expecting a new addition sometime after Christmas, Una had been elbow deep in baby clothes for months. She was glad to help, of course.

“. . . colder these days. Are you going to shut up your house soon?”

This seemed to be a genuine question, given that Mary paused for an answer.

“Yes,” Una said. “At the end of the month. I’ve just been to the post office to ask Mr. Proctor to forward my mail to Mrs. Palmer’s in Lowbridge.”

“Any news from Carl?”

Una smiled. “I had a nice long letter on Tuesday. They’re in Venezuela and Carl has found someone to talk bugs with.”

“Well, that’s real nice for him,” Mary said stoutly. “I always did like it when he would tell me about his ants and things. I remember once . . .”

Una dug through through her handbag for the money she owed Mary, careful not to crumple any of Shirley’s mail. She did not like the appraising look Mr. Proctor gave her at the post office whenever she picked up Shirley’s letters, but she couldn’t just leave his mail at the post office to be pawed over. It was usually just business correspondence, but there were sometimes postcards as
well and it wouldn’t do to leave those lying about. Not that they ever said anything. Today’s postcard was a lovely photo of the Brandenburg Gate with nothing written on it except Shirley’s address. Una had no idea who had sent it and didn’t care to know. All that mattered was that Shirley had deputized her to collect his mail while he was away, and she would do that without fail. Let people think what they liked.

Una found the money and handed it over to Mary, who was off again.

“. . . be long now, I don’t think. I suppose I’ll pop before Nan in any case. Jem’s bet me a cent I won’t, but I think he’s mostly trying to rile me up and anyway, we’ll both go before Faith. It’s real nice that the children are all so close in age . . .”
Dear Gil,

I am sending you a Christmas gift that I hope will be more unusual than what Santa often brings. I am reliably informed that it is called an elephant beetle, and I'm sure you can see why. It was collected in the forest here in Venezuela, where there are many large and alarming insects. At first I thought I should send you a picture, but figured you would rather have the real thing instead. Don't go scaring your sister with it.

Love,

Uncle Shirley

[Postcard with tropical fish of Curaçao]

To:
Beatrice, Cordelia, and Portia Meredith
16 King's Square, Charlottetown, PEI
Canada

Dear Bea, Dellie, and Portia,

Merry Christmas! I am on a beautiful island called Curaçao. It is very hot here, even at Christmas time. Do you think Santa can come to a place where there is no snow? I hope so! I am thinking of you lots and hope I will see you soon.

Love,

Uncle Carl

5 January 1927
San Juan, Puerto Rico

Dear Una,

Nellie Fletcher is now Nellie Meijer, and a happier bride you never saw. It was a small wedding in Curaçao, which is perhaps the loveliest place we have seen so far. The buildings are all painted bright colors and the sea is like clear turquoise glass and the beaches white as salt. I assure that your tablecloth was much exclaimed over for the quality of its workmanship, and will find an appreciative home on Nellie's tea table when she and Bram return from their wedding tour (though I suspect they will not take it on expedition with them). They mean to make a home base in Curaçao permanently and continue their joint work cataloguing the insects of the south Caribbean coast.

With Nellie and Bram off on their new adventure, it was time for us to move along as well. Florida is still in dire condition, so we came to Puerto Rico instead. I would tell you that it is beautiful, but I would be repeating myself. All of these islands look as if they were illustrated. Each day is very pleasant — in fact, it is exactly as pleasant as the day before. Barring hurricanes, nothing changes much from day to day or season to season. In fact, the whole idea of seasons seems irrelevant here. As I write this, it is 79 degrees and sunny in the first week of January. It will be 79 and sunny tomorrow and the day after that. I am told that in the summer, it may be 85 and sunny. I can hardly complain about it. But I miss the Gulf in its moods.
I should not complain. We are well and happy and enjoying exploring a new place. There is a beach near here that is famous for sea turtles, and I mean to go and see them when I have the chance.

Tell me all about Christmas. Did you go up to Ingleside or stay with Mrs. Palmer? Bruce must be back from Redmond — how is he enjoying his studies? Has he decided if he wants to go to St. Columbia or not? I suppose there are other seminaries. How is Faith getting along? She must be very near her time by now. I had a letter from her in November, but nothing since — please tell her I am thinking about her. And how is Jerry? Last I heard from Father, he was trying that big insurance fraud case, but I never heard how it turned out. Did he get a conviction?

I love you all and will write often. Please do write me — we'll stay here in Puerto Rico long enough to get letters.

Love always,

Carl

P.S. I am sending home a watercolor Nellie gave us as a parting gift. It is of a pair of Orinoco geese that hung around our campsite in November. They are very striking birds. You will notice that it is difficult to tell the males from the females, their plumage being so much alike, as is common in many geese.

From:
A. Blythe
Ingleside
Glen St. Mary, PEI

To:
Shirley J. Blythe
Estrella del Mar Hotel
San Juan, Puerto Rico

*RETURN TO SENDER*

Carl held the snapshot reverently, turning it over as if the writing on the back might have changed.

January 1927

Sam, Wally, and Jemmy Blythe with Baby Cecilia

From the photo, Baby Cecilia seemed to be a baby much like other babies, but Susan’s latest letter had gone into great detail, from the shape of her ears (“quite as nice as her father’s”) to the likelihood that she would be as redheaded as her sister (“does not seem to be the case, as I suspect she will take after her mother”). From all accounts, Faith and Cecilia were both doing well and the rest of Ingleside was pleased as punch. The Charlottetown Merediths were due to visit soon — perhaps had already visited by now — and Susan had even hinted that the Fords might come in from Toronto to make up for missing Christmas. She promised to send a photo of the whole family together.

“Alright there?”

Carl looked up from the photo to find Shirley looking at him curiously. He had to squint against
the bright sunlight, even under the hotel awning.

“Sure,” Carl said.

“I was thinking maybe we could go beachcombing later. The tide’ll be all the way out in a couple of hours.”

Carl tucked the photo back between the pages of his book. “Sure. That sounds good.”

2 February 1927
San Juan, Puerto Rico
Dear Susan,
Thank you for sending word of the newest addition to the family. We both enjoyed the snapshot of the children.
Carl has been looking at it rather a lot. It’s plain enough that he's ready to go home.
We will have to go to Ottawa for Carl’s meeting with the Department first. Expect us home sometime after the first of March.
Love,
Shirley

Shirley looked up over his Ottawa Citizen every time the little bell on the café door chimed, but still no sign of Carl. That wasn’t a good sign. His meeting had been at noon and here it was past two. Wasn’t this a yes or no sort of situation?
Shirley allowed the waitress to pour him another cup of coffee and returned to his paper. It was difficult to concentrate on boundary disputes between Quebec and Newfoundland with the bell startling him every other minute.
The coffee was running low again when Shirley looked up one last time to find Carl striding through the door with a giddy grin plastered across his face.
“It’s alright, then?” Shirley asked superfluously as Carl unwound his scarf and settled into the seat across from him.
“Yeah. It’s alright. They gave me a good tongue lashing, but I’m reinstated. They want a full report on this year’s nesting season.”
“That’s great,” Shirley said, and meant it. “Did they keep you waiting?”
“Nah, I was in and out in half an hour.”
Shirley frowned and double-checked the wall clock, which showed that he was not mistaken. Carl was still beaming. He tugged a brown paper parcel out of his coat pocket and slid it across the table.
“The clerk said they could do a rush order, so I waited for that,” he said, nudging the package past Shirley’s coffee cup.
“What’s this?”

“Open it.”

Shirley undid the wrapping and opened the box. Inside, he found a wristwatch, its cheerful, round face glowing up at him like an abstract portrait of Carl’s delight. It was not an expensive watch, just an Ingersoll Radiolite of the sort advertised as a bargain in department store circulars. But Shirley was already lifting it out of the box with admiration, inspecting the radium dial and turning it over in his fingers. There were fresh-cut initials on the back: SJB and TCM.

“It’s not fancy,” Carl apologized, “but I thought the radium would come in handy in case you had to fly at night again.”

Shirley didn’t need to ask what he meant. He hoped it wouldn’t be necessary to flee again, but he couldn’t promise it. The past year had been . . . well, it would be hard to settle back to life at the hangar after waking up next to Carl every morning. But he'd always have this token, their initials against his skin wherever he went.

Notes:

*Irving Berlin, "(I'll See You in) C-U-B-A" (1920).

**"Susan had conscientiously spanked all the other Blythe children when she thought they needed it for their souls' good, but she would not spank Shirley nor allow his mother to do it. Once, Dr. Blythe had spanked him and Susan had been stormily indignant. 'That man would spank an angel, Mrs. Dr. dear, that he would,' she had declared bitterly; and she would not make the poor doctor a pie for weeks." Rainbow Valley, chapter 1: "Home Again"
Muggins the Sky Terrier

December 1929

On Christmas Day, Carl waited by the door, bouncing on the balls of his feet. It was one of those overcast winter mornings when the lack of darkness proved that the sun must be up, even if it was impossible to locate it precisely in the flat uniformity of a pearl-gray sky. Carl peered anxiously down the Lowbridge Road, expecting to see Shirley's truck pull into view at any moment. It had snowed on Christmas Eve, but not enough to block the roads. Besides, Shirley had chains on his tires and could definitely get through. Any minute now.

There would be plenty of celebrating today, with Ingleside packed well beyond capacity. The place would teem with little Blythes and Merediths and Fords in the throes of holiday exuberance, with feasting and laughter and probably a squabble or two before the pudding was eaten and the last carol sung.

For now, it was silent. Or would be, but for the faint mewling from Carl's flannel shirtfront. He pressed a hand over the solid little body curled snugly against his chest. A face peered back up at him, black eyes bright against tweedy tufts of grizzled fur, one silky ear folded in quizzical disarray. The little terrier had spent the first several weeks of her life snuggled up in a basket with her brothers and sisters in the warmth of a kitchen down at Harbour Head, but had clambered over them to investigate Carl when he had gone to select one of the pups. She had spent the night curled against his chest, the tiny flutters of her heart reminding him irresistibly of Cricket.

A crunch of snow outside and Carl looked up to see the black pickup rumble to a stop. It was difficult to contain his grin, but he tried, pulling his shirt more snugly closed as Shirley gained the porch.

"Merry Christmas!" Carl exclaimed, throwing the door open before Shirley had a chance to knock.

"You, too," Shirley said, gone slightly wary at this exuberant greeting. More wary still when he went in for a hug, only to have Carl back away, hunching his shoulders protectively in a gesture that Shirley had long ago learned to interpret as the presence of some fragile fellow-mortal secreted in one of Carl's pockets.

"Who's your new friend?" he sighed, pulling the door shut behind him.

Carl could barely speak for grinning. "Not mine. Yours."

With a flourish, Carl reached into his shirt and extracted the pup, all scrabbling paws and waggling tail, her solid little body vibrating with reflected excitement.

"Mine?" Shirley asked, brows raised. "You got me . . . a dog?"

"You would have preferred a rat?" Carl said, depositing the dog into Shirley's not-quite-waiting arms.

"I'm not sure," he said regarding the fuzzy creature with skepticism.

"Oh, come on," Carl said, a flicker of doubt kindling. "Dogs are very good company. Though rats are, too, come to that."
It had not seriously occurred to Carl that Shirley might not want a dog. It had seemed such a good idea — a loyal companion who never demanded conversation. Now, watching Shirley lift the squirming pup, considering it critically, Carl worried that he had misjudged.

"If you don't want her, I'll keep her," Carl said, deflating. "I just thought . . ."

Shirley blinked. "Did I say I didn't want her?"

"Well, do you?"

Shirley did not answer right away. Instead, he brought the creature up to his face, scrutinizing her nose-to-nose. His inspection was met with the frantic licking of a small pink tongue, accompanied by a series of joyful yips. A smile unfurled across Shirley's face, extinguishing Carl's worries as it spread.

"That's settled then," Carl said, clapping his hands and resuming his own grin.

Shirley tucked the puppy into the crook of his arm and groped for a handkerchief to wipe his dog-dampened face. Carl rushed to his aid, applying his own flannel sleeve and taking the opportunity to deliver a proper greeting of his own. Under a veneer of toothpaste, Shirley tasted of tea and bacon and something freshly baked.

"Merry Christmas," Shirley said, eyes still closed as Carl released him.

Carl waited for him to open them again before asking earnestly, "Do you really like the dog?"

Silly to ask when the laughing twinkle in the brown eyes was all the answer he needed.

"I do," Shirley confirmed. "Though we'll see how I feel when she's ruining my furniture."

"You can train her up," Carl said, scratching the pup’s chin. "Terriers are very smart. And loyal. I think you'll get on famously."

"What about Di and Sylvia? Do they know they'll have an extra visitor for the New Year?"

Carl waved the objection aside airily. "I wrote to them weeks ago. Di's thrilled because she's been bothering Syl to get a dog for years and Syl's happy because she thinks having a dog visit for three months will make Di see reason."

They spent the next several minutes lavishing attention on the puppy, whose appreciative writhing sunk her ever deeper into the bend of Shirley's elbow. He cradled her tenderly, letting her gnaw on his knuckles while Carl rubbed her belly.

"Do I smell . . . steak?" Shirley asked, wrinkling his nose. "In this house?"

"We had to feed her something," Carl shrugged. "I think Una was glad to have an excuse to cook meat for once."

"Is she going to church with you?"

"Una? No. She went to St. Elizabeth's with the Newgates. Then she's going to Mrs. Palmer's for dinner. She'll come to Ingleside after." Carl paused. "You know, you could come to church with me. If you wanted to."

Shirley grimaced. "I'm happy to give you a ride, but . . ."
There had been a time when Shirley had still gone to church, if only, Carl suspected, to mollify Susan. That had all stopped after what Carl still thought of as The Talk. In addition to the yearly sojourn to Aster House, there was no more church for Shirley. Carl still attended every week, excepting only those winter months in Kingsport, and even sat with Rosemary most of the time, having no pew of his own.

Carl and his parents had navigated the aftermath of The Talk mostly by pretending it hadn't happened. Whenever Father and Rosemary invited Carl to dinner or tea at the manse, they pursued other topics with a determination that Carl was happy to adopt. Within a few months of the Caribbean excursion, things seemed to settle down to a "normal" that was pleasant enough, if not entirely comfortable. Carl suspected it was only awkwardness that made his father flee any room that Shirley walked into, though the explanation did not lessen the sting. Perhaps it was for the best that Shirley stayed home on Sunday mornings.

In contrast, Shirley did not speak to his parents at all. He still went to Ingleside at least once a week, hearing Susan's news over the kitchen table or testing balsa wood gliders with Sam and Wally or taking Jemmy and baby Cecilia on rambles through Rainbow Valley to give Faith an hour's peace. On these occasions, he met his parents' greetings with perfunctory politeness, at least when the children were present. He rebuffed all other overtures with merciless efficiency, avoiding his parents when possible, ignoring them when not. This uneasy stalemate had hardened over the past three years, both sides entrenched and wary with a blasted field of mines and barbed wire between them. Even when Mrs. Blythe had sallied forth with various offerings of peace, she had found no weaknesses in the line. *The iron had entered into Shirley's soul* and he ground every hopeful overture to dust beneath his heel.

"Will you be alright today?" Carl asked cautiously. "After last year . . ."

"I can't stop her giving me books," Shirley said, dismissive of both his mother and the unread Yeats that had found its way into the St. Elizabeth's donation box. "But I don't think she'll try to draw me into another literary conversation."

No, Carl thought, shivering at the memory of Shirley's frigid resistance last Christmas. Individually, each demurral was irreproachable; collectively, they were glacial. In the end, Nan had ridden to the rescue with a spirited opinion on Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" that had given everyone a chance to paper over the chasm.

"You don't have to stay long," Carl said.

"It'll be fine," Shirley said. "You know how Susan pulls out all the stops for Christmas. And I want to see Gil. Besides," he smiled down at the pup, who gave a tremendous yawn, "you've given me the best shield possible. It'll be all dog talk, all day long."

Carl had to concede that this was probably true. A puppy was the next best thing to a baby for focusing everyone's attention on a neutral topic.

"Got any good dog names?" Shirley asked, stroking the pup's silky ears. She began to yawn, worn out by the morning's excitement.

"Lots," Carl grinned, reaching for his coat.

Mrs. Palmer held the cut glass butter dish just out of Una’s reach, forcing her into startled eye contact. It wasn’t like Mrs. Palmer to force anything at all, but she had made herself very clear at tea the other day. It was past time for Una to speak frankly to Father Kirkland and if she didn’t ask
at Christmas Dinner, Mrs. Palmer would ask on her behalf. It would be just the three of them gathered around the bayberry candles and Mrs. Palmer’s very best lace tablecloth. A perfect opportunity.

Una gave a slight nod and took the butter dish.

“Father Kirkland?”

The elderly priest looked up from his turkey. He had a solemn, wizened face and was not a sparkling conversationalist, but Una had always considered him a friend. When she had been considering leaving Father’s church and joining St. Elizabeth’s, he had offered both welcome and caution, urging her to consider the consequences fully before she committed herself to the change. God’s calling was rarely an invitation to comfort.

Una set down the dish and darted a glance at Mrs. Palmer, who urged her on with a slight widening of the eyes.

“Father Kirkland,” Una began more definitely. “I have been hoping to ask you something. I have been reading about . . . about . . .” she dug her fingers into her skirt as ballast, “. . . about deaconesses.”

“Deaconesses?” he echoed, testing the word as if it were unfamiliar.

“Oh, yes, deaconesses!” Mrs. Palmer agreed heartily. “Miss Meredith has told me so much about the excellent work deaconesses do, Father. Marvelous, I say.”

Father Kirkland set down his fork. “I’ve heard of deaconesses. We didn’t have them in my day, of course. I have never quite understood the need for them.”

Una had not released her skirt. “Deaconesses do good work. They work in schools and hospitals and care for the poor.”

“I don’t doubt that. But you do all that, Miss Meredith, and without any need to wear a habit or take vows.”

“I . . .”

It had been a very good idea to do this at Christmas Dinner, with Mrs. Palmer there for support. Una knew she would not have persevered if her friend had not been there, cheering her on in silence over the roasted potatoes.

“I . . . would like to. Take vows, that is. Become a deaconess.”

Father Kirkland’s face gave nothing away. Una rather wished it would, but there was no clue in his posture or the set of his mouth to indicate whether he might be an ally.

“What would that entail?” he asked neutrally.

“I would have to study,” Una said, encouraged that he had not refused outright. “There is a period of reflection, and then at least two years of study. I would go to a Mother House or . . . or perhaps it could be arranged so that I could take correspondence courses here . . . if you would agree to oversee my studies . . .”

Una’s nerve faltered as the priest’s lips tightened, but she pressed on.
“If you asked the Bishop for permission, I could be placed here, at St. Elizabeth’s. I would take my vows and continue on with my work as I have been.”

“That would be wonderful,” Mrs. Palmer chirped. “All the parishioners have come to rely on Miss Meredith, as you know, Father. I’m sure everyone would benefit if she took the deaconess training.”

“Would they?” Father Kirkland asked. “Would studies and vows really make you more effective in your work, Miss Meredith? Or would they only take you away from us? I’m afraid I don’t have the time to take you on as a pupil, and sending you away to a Mother House for years of study hardly seems a good use of your time, even if you do mean to return at the end.”

There was sense in that. Una nodded and felt it as a shovelful of ash coming down over the coals she had nursed along ever since reading Lewis’s notes.

What does Una think about this? I don’t see why women shouldn’t have leadership roles. There are deaconesses in the Bible — Paul’s Letter to the Romans calls Phebe “the servant of the church at Chenchrea” (Romans 16:1) and that’s just what deacons were, too — find that Churchman article for Una. For she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also, etc.

“I would like to study,” she said quietly.

“God’s call is rarely to our liking, Miss Meredith. Would becoming a deaconess help others? Or would you do it only to please yourself?”

Una saw it was hopeless. Perhaps he was right. What was the point in going away to study for years and only come back to do what she had been doing perfectly well all along? She nodded and kept her head bowed.

“No,” Mrs. Palmer said sharply. “Father Kirkland, I’m sure Miss Meredith’s studies would be a great help. She could . . . uh . . . offer guidance! I’m sure the people would trust her with their spiritual afflictions as well as their other troubles.”

“Priests offer spiritual guidance,” Father Kirkland said definitively, taking up his knife and returning to the meal that Una and Mrs. Palmer had cooked. “I value the work that you ladies do in the Altar Guild and in the parish, but women and men have their separate roles. Saint Paul tells us that women in the Church must be in submission, not leadership, and . . .”

“But . . .”

“And,” Father Kirkland said, speaking over Mrs. Palmer, “and that has worked well for this parish for as long as I have been here. If you wish to go away to study in Montreal or the States, Miss Meredith, I cannot stop you. But I do hope that you will go on as you have these past ten years. Have you not been happy?”

“Very happy,” Una murmured. She did not look up to see what frantic signs Mrs. Palmer might be trying to convey. It was done.

***

It was already dark when Una tapped lightly on the kitchen door at Ingleside. No one answered her knock, which was understandable, judging by the tumult on the other side of the door. A chorus of feminine voices in various octaves was accentuated by the clatter of plates and cutlery, though the meal must be long since finished. Una asked for the strength to be cheerful and pushed open the door.
"Una!" Rilla jumped up from the crowded kitchen table in a blur of green velvet and ruddy-brown curls and ran to embrace her. "It's lovely to see you!"

Behind her, Nan held court at the table, a Good Housekeeping cookbook open at her elbow and a curious assortment of trimmings spread before her: lettuce leaves, canned pineapple rings, a bowl of maraschino cherries, another of whipped cream, and a dozen ripe, yellow bananas. She was flanked by half a dozen little girls in their holiday best. To her left, Jemmy and Cecilia Blythe fidgeted on the bench, while little Victoria Ford placed a lettuce leaf daintily on the plate in front of her. To Nan's right, her own three lassies flashed pearly little smiles at their Auntie Una, their matching plaid taffetas swishing against their legs as they waved. Una waved back, privately thinking that Shirley was quite justified in never being able to tell them apart, with their identical silky brown hair and dark, flashing eyes. Carl's trick of remembering that they were named alphabetically by age was a very useful shorthand, at least when they were close enough together to compare by height.

"Auntie Una!" exclaimed Beatrice, who, at six, had set herself apart from her younger sisters by losing one of her front teeth. "We're making Candle Salad!"**

"Candle Salad?" Una asked, exchanging her coat for an apron. "I don't think I've ever had it."

Jemmy Blythe peeked out from under thick red curls, which were more than a match for the solitary velvet ribbon meant to hold them away from her forehead. "Auntie Nan has a recipe in her book," she said. "She says if we follow the steps, we'll make a candle!"

"And eat it!" piped up Cordelia Meredith, giggling behind her pudgy hand.

Una slid onto the bench beside Cecilia. She put an arm around her youngest niece, hoping the child's bright zest for Christmas might lift her own spirits. "Are you going to make a candle too, Ceci?"

Cecilia pointed across the table, exclaiming, "Banana! Banana!"

"Yes, we have plenty of bananas," Nan said, consulting her cookbook. "But first, we must build our bases."

Nan led the little girls through the preliminary steps, directing them to place lettuce leaves flat on their plates and rest a pineapple ring on top. Next came the bananas. Una helped Ceci peel hers, while Rilla assisted three-year-old Portia Meredith.

"So this is the candle part?" Rilla asked.

"Yes, that's right. You cut the banana in half and stand it up inside the ring, like this," Nan said, demonstrating.

"Oh," Rilla said, a faint flush rising under her creamy complexion.

Nan did not notice, being preoccupied with Cordelia's banana, which required another round of trimming before it would stand erect. Una had better luck with Ceci, mostly because her youngest niece had already devoured more than half of her banana, leaving only a stubby end that was in no danger of toppling.

"Next comes the whipped cream," Nan said. "I saw a different version of this recipe that said to use mayonnaise because it would look more like wax. But I think the whipped cream will taste better."

"Like this, Mummy?" Victoria Ford asked, adding a dollop of whipped cream to the tip of her
When no answer came, Una looked up to see Rilla biting her lower lip and turning a very pretty shade of pink.

"Umm . . ." Rilla faltered, "I . . . I think so."

"Just let it drip down the side a bit," Nan said, unconcerned. "And when the wax is done, you can take a maraschino cherry and pop it on the top for a flame."

At this opportune moment, Carl stepped into the kitchen, carrying half the crumb-speckled dessert plates from the dining room.

"Hello, ladies," he said brightly. "How are you getting on with your . . . your . . ." Carl stopped in his tracks, blinking hard and tossing his head like a fly-bothered horse. His mouth gaped open as if he meant to finish his sentence, but he shut it again, swallowing conspicuously.

"It's a candle, Uncle Carl!" Bea explained, dropping a cherry onto the peak of her dessert.

"I . . . I see that," Carl choked, bypassing Rilla's crimson and heading straight on to purple.

The kitchen door swung open again, admitting a dish-laden Faith mid-sentence.

". . . is broken, so we'll have heat up water on the stove to wash OUCH! Carl, why are you just standing there?"

"Mummy!" Jemmy exclaimed. "I made a candle!"

Faith took one look at her daughter's plate and exploded in a whoop of laughter that rattled the dishes in her hands. Carl joined in, spluttering with the last futile effort to keep his calm intact. Rilla did a better job of it, confining herself to muffled chuckles, while Faith and Carl egged one another on until they both sank to the floor, howling.

The commotion brought Di running from the dining room. "What's happened?" she demanded.

Faith and Carl were patently incapable of speech and Una was not exactly sure what the joke was, so it fell to Rilla to gasp, "... candle ... salad ..."

Di surveyed the table, her expressive copper brows pointed in her twin's direction. "Nan ... what ... why are ..."

Nan, seeming to have cottoned on to the joke that still eluded Una, had gone pale rather than pink. "There's no picture in the cookbook," she said defensively. "I was only following the directions!"

"A fine time to forget you have an imagination!" Di muttered.

"Don't you like our candles, Auntie Di?" asked Victoria, big gray eyes round in her tiny face.

Di aimed a surreptitious kick at helpless Faith and put on her stoic doctor face. "They're ever so clever, sweetheart. What lovely Christmas candles."

"Perhaps we should clean up," Nan said, rising abruptly from her seat. "I'll help with the dishes."

"Can't we eat the candles?" Cordelia squeaked.

"Of course you can, lovey," Di said, patting her niece's sleek brown head.
This was a foregone conclusion in Ceci's case, her candle salad having been reduced to sticky smears and a residual lettuce leaf. The others soon followed suit, destroying the evidence that any such thing as a candle salad had ever been assembled in the Ingleside kitchen.

"I'm sorry," Nan said, directing her apology to Una and Rilla, rather than to the tear-splotted siblings only now picking one another up off the floor. "I should have thought . . ."

"I suppose it wouldn't be Christmas without some sort of kitchen scrape," Di said, green eyes twinkling despite her outward composure. "We'll just forget this ever happened."

"Not likely!" Faith blurted, setting Carl off on another round of cackling.

Una was not sure exactly what to do, though it was plain that no one would explain the matter with so many eager little ears in the room. Deciding that the best course of action was to carry on as normal, she wiped Ceci's face with a corner of her apron and addressed the other children.

"Did Santa bring you presents?" she asked, and when they answered that he had, "Will you show them to me?"

"Come upstairs," Jemmy urged, taking Una's hand. "We've been playing in my room. I got crayons and a tin circus train, and Ceci got a stuffed giraffe, and Victoria has a new tea set for dolls, and . . ."

In a flurry of velvet and taffeta, the little girls abandoned the table, leading Una by hand and skirt as she balanced Ceci on her hip. When the kitchen door swung shut behind them, Carl and Faith were still hiccuping to one another.

"Candle Salad!"

"It's perfectly disgraceful!" Susan declared, jabbing at the front page of the Charlottetown Guardian with a knitting needle. With Christmas and its myriad culinary demands over at last, Susan could rest on both her laurels and her leftovers long enough to catch up with the week's news. She had never quite given up the habit of newspaper-reading, though she would grudgingly admit that the new-fangled radio did allow one to sew and keep up-to-date at the same time. However, Dr. Blythe objected to having his radio cabinet stabbed when Susan was vexed with the state of the world, so the Guardian remained a daily staple at Ingleside.

"Anything in particular?" Dr. Blythe asked from the table by the Christmas tree where he and Jerry were arrayed either side of a chessboard.

"Look here," Susan said, reading the headline to the room at large: "SENSATIONAL CASE IN THE POLICE COURT."

"Susan is this really appropriate . . ." Anne cautioned with a furtive look toward her grandsons.

Indeed, Sam and Wally had paused the tussling game they had been playing on the hearthrug with Shirley’s new pup, all ears pricked in interest. Even Gil Ford, lolling on the couch behind a recent issue of Flying Aces magazine, looked up over the top of his page.

Shirley did not react. He knew the story already and sat impassive as Susan recounted how Willard Tanton, son of a leading Prohibition advocate, had been caught stashing nine gallons of rum in his father's basement and been fined three hundred dollars. The judge and the Chief Prohibition Inspector promised that Mr. Tanton Senior would also face charges, though these had been delayed, owing, no doubt to the festive season.
"It's all anyone can talk about around the courthouse," Jerry said, sliding his bishop across the board. "Most people didn't think they'd press charges against the father, but Chief Inspector Haywood is relentless."

"Serves him right," came a sullen muttering from the corner armchair where Ken Ford had been doing a decent impression of reading. "Hypocrites. They show a respectable face to the world while they condone chaos at home."

Shirley focused on the puppy, who had rolled over on her back, paws churning the air as she wriggled under his gentle scratching. What was the best way to describe her fur? Wiry, though quite soft on the belly, and somewhere near the color of wheat interspersed with brown and gray, making him think of Harris tweed. Maybe _Harris_ would be a good name . . .

"I doubt Tanton will get more than a minor fine," Jerry said. "The real damage is to his reputation, of course. Splashed all over the front page of the _Guardian_ like that. No one will ever trust him again."

"And they shouldn't," Ken agreed.

Shirley risked a covert peek at Ken. He had been in a foul temper since arriving in the Glen, and before that, too, Shirley suspected. No mystery there; between the London stock market crash in September and the American crash in October, many businessmen were having a less-than-merry holiday. Even in the Glen, farmers had been heard to mutter over the falling prices of onions and potatoes. But the harvest of 1929 was already safely sold, and there was plenty of time for prices to recover before the next crops went in. Shirley had no idea just how much money Ken had lost already, but judging by the shortness of his temper and the tightness of Rilla's expression even at Christmas dinner, it was probably a lot.

"There must be some more cheerful news, Susan," Anne said with forced lightness. "Wasn't there a new church opened in town on Christmas Eve?"

"Romish," Susan grunted dismissively. "But see here, the Pensions Act is to be revised so that more of our boys qualify for what's due them. Well, if Mackenzie King does right by the pensions, the Liberals will have my vote and no mistake."

"I'm all for pensions," Jerry said, shaking his head, "but a poor economy will hurt more veterans than any pension will help them. Just look at your front page, Susan. Wheat prices plummeting, rampant racketeering, and King doing nothing at all. Give me Tories any day."

The talk then turned to Ottawa more generally, a subject that sent Gil back to his _Flying Aces_ and Sam and Wally to lavish their attentions an appreciative pup.

"Why doesn't she have a name, Uncle Shirley?" Wally asked as he scratched a twitching ear.

"Haven't thought of one yet," Shirley shrugged. "I've only had her a day."

Sam leaned down to rub noses with the dog and got a euphoric lick in return. "Where'd you get her?"

Shirley's lips twitched. "From Santa Claus, of course."

Sam's brow gave a skeptical wiggle that made him look unnervingly like his mother in spite of hazel eyes. Wally, however, was still a believer at seven, as all of Ingleside still adhered to the old rule that children should _posses their heritage of fairyland as long as they can_.****
"I've got one for ya, Uncle Shirley!" said Gil, dangling his magazine over Shirley's shoulder. "Right here. Page 352. The Sky Terrier."

"Sky Terrier?"

"No, that's not the name. See? It's a story about the 20th Squadron RAF at St. Marie-Cappel and their fearless mascot, Muggins."

"Muggins?" Shirley choked.

"Yeah, see? Muggins wanders into the aerodrome one day and adopts the squadron and they start calling themselves the Terriers after him. They even paint little dogs on the sides of their Spads."

"The 20th's insignia was an eagle," Shirley said, frowning at the pulp paper, "and they mostly flew Bristols . . ."

"It's just a story, alright?" Gil grumbled, snatching the magazine back.

Shirley checked his urge toward pedantry; no sense in making the kid feel like he was preparing for an exam.

"And what becomes of Muggins?" he asked by way of apology.

Gil's scowl lifted by degrees as he raced through the unlikely plot. ", . . and then Baron Von Glückner captures Muggins, but spares Captain Gorman's life on the promise that they'll fight it out one-on-one in the air over Saint Omer the next morning and then Muggins helps out Gorman by . . ."

Shirley interrupted with an upraised hand. "Why don't you read it out," he said. "It will be easier to follow that way."

Gil obliged, reading aloud with surprising fluency for a boy just gone nine. He kept his voice low enough that he did not interrupt the conversation on the other side of the room, which had turned inevitably toward the economy and other such uninspiring piffle. Sam and Wally hung on Gil's words, bursting into nervous giggles at the healthy sprinkling of hells and blast its and damns that lent the story more real danger than any number of fictionalized Barons in their red triplanes ever could. There was also liberal abuse of "the Jerries," which Gil rendered in a conspiratorial whisper so as not to catch the attention of their uncle, who was now explaining the concept of agricultural commodity futures to a stone-faced Susan.

When Muggins leapt to Captain Gorman's aid in the climactic dog-fight by sinking his little terrier teeth into Baron Von Glückner's neck, Sam and Wally gasped with awed delight. Then the red Fokker was going down down down, and Muggins with it! Wally covered his open mouth as the triplane plowed into the ground with a rending, grinding, snapping crash that rang in Captain Gorman's ears as he sent up a silent prayer for Muggins. Of course, from his position, Gorman couldn't see that Muggins had hopped out of the cockpit and leapt over the side a few seconds before the Fokker crashed.

The boys were too occupied in cheering Muggins' miraculous escape to note Shirley's odd coughing fit, from which he recovered in time to enjoy the denouement, featuring a hospital visit from Captain Gorman's commanding officer: King George wants to pin a medal on your chest — the old D.C.M. . . . The frogs want permission to clamp a Medaille Militaire or some such thing on your manly bosom, but I still think you're a damned fool. I'm not so sure yet that I won't put you to a court martial.
"What, no D.F.C.?” Shirley muttered, though his nephews ignored him in their raptures over a very satisfying end to such a thrilling tale.

"Whattya say, girl?” Gil said, leaning low over Shirley's shoulder to rumple the pup's ears. "How d'ya like Muggins?"

The ecstatic yipping was more than adequate answer.

Notes:

*Anne of Green Gables, chapter 15: "A Tempest in the School Teapot"

**Nan has Good Housekeeping's Book of Good Meals (1927). Image search at your own risk.

***Susan is reading the December 23, 1929 edition of the Charlottetown Guardian.

****Anne of Ingleside, Chapter 12

"Easy there, Sam," Shirley cautioned from the rear seat of the plane. He shouted to be heard over the whir of the propellor as he tried to calm Muggins, who was standing on his lap with her front paws on the instructor's controls, slapping him with her wagging tail. "You want to turn in a wide, controlled arc. Nothing too sudden."

Sam Blythe stuck a pointed pink tongue through his lips, biting in concentration as he brought the plane around at the end of the landing strip. It wasn't a flashy aircraft, just a simple parasol-wing homebuilt that Shirley had fitted with a modified Ford Model A engine. But designing, building, and testing it had occupied Shirley's attention, which was a blessing.

It was more than that, though. With the economy still in tatters and not getting any better, there were far fewer tourists on the Island. Add to that Nova Scotia's repeal of Prohibition in 1930, and Blythe Aviation's cash flow had slowed to a drip. Shirley would not have been overly concerned on his own account, but there were rumblings of belt-tightening at the newly renamed Department of Fisheries as well, and a 40% pension was nowhere near enough to support three adults. That's why the homebuilt had a hollow section and a big enough fuel tank to reach the States, where Prohibition was still the law of the land.

No rum-running today, though. After a suasion campaign that had been going great guns since the craft was still a sketch on his drafting board, Shirley had finally agreed to let all his nephews have a go taxiing to and fro on solid ground, on the condition that they follow his instructions scrupulously. Sam, Gil, and Wally had grinned their delight, then tripped over one another racing for position, wriggling into the front seat like a pile of puppies with Muggins yipping at their heels. Sam had claimed the seniority of his eleven years, a tactic to which Wally had long ago resigned himself, but which Gil Ford resented openly.

"You're doing it all wrong!" Gil shouted over the whirr of the propellor. "Just look at where your feet are!"

Shirley craned his neck to see over the boys. Gil was quite right — Sam's foot position was all wrong — but it wasn't Gil's place to instruct him.

Shirley reached forward and tousled the golden hair roughly. "Your turn next, Ace," he called. Then to Sam, "Watch your feet, Blythe!"

Sam adjusted, straining with concentration until the sweat pouring down his neck was not merely the result of the midsummer heat. The plane jolted its way back toward the hangar, a feat, Shirley thought, considering that there wasn't a single stone or divot anywhere on his runway. But Sam brought them in safely, even when Shirley's attention was captured by the tall man standing in front of the hangar, stance wide and combative, arms folded resolutely over his chest. Muggins spotted
him as well, placing her paws on the lip of the cockpit and barking until Shirley hushed her.

"You did it!" Wally shouted as Sam brought the machine to a halt.

Even Gil congratulated his cousin, though he looked up sharply when Shirley cut the engine. "Wait, don't shut 'er down, Uncle Shirley! It's my turn now!"

Shirley did not answer, being too preoccupied with the visitor, whose steely gray gaze withered any joy Shirley had felt in the lesson.

"Gilbert!" Ken Ford called to his son. "It's time to go."

Gil's elation crumpled into dust. "Aw, rats, Dad! It's my turn next! Can't I just stay a few more minutes?"

"No backtalk, young man," Ken warned.

Shirley didn't want to interfere, but his heart went out to the boy, who had been vibrating with excitement since the moment Shirley had promised him a go. "Maybe tomorrow, Gil," he said, hoping to soften the blow.

Ken looked up into the cockpit, meeting Shirley's eye with a glare of such unexpected loathing that Shirley recoiled. "No, not tomorrow either," he said. "You're spending entirely too much time out here alone, Gil."

"I'm not alone!" protested outraged Gil. "I'm with Uncle Shirley! And Sam and Wally and Mugsy . . ."

"Go get in the car," Ken said in a tone that Gil recognized as unassailable.

Disentangling himself from his cousins, Gil climbed down from the plane, scowling but silent. Shirley followed, motioning for Sam and Wally to stay where they were. Similar admonishments had no effect on Muggins, who leapt to the ground to twine herself through Gil's legs as he slunk over to his father's Cadillac.

"The boys are just having a bit of fun, Ken," Shirley said.

"Well I don't like it," Ken said, rounding on him, voice low and dangerous. "Them spending the whole summer all the way out here in the middle of nowhere. With you."

He said no more, but his meaning was clear. He held Shirley's eye and did not look away, his glare an open challenge and an accusation.

If there had not been so many little eyes on them, Shirley might have taken a swing at him. The injustice of Ken's implication was enough to make the edges of his vision turn molten, but there was nothing he could do about it without making a bad situation worse. It might be satisfying to sink a fist through the center of Ken's face, but it wouldn't help Gil any.

Instead, Shirley took a large step backward and plastered a grotesque smile over his features.

"Good to see you, too, Ken," he said heartily, loud enough that all three boys could hear. Then, waving to Gil in the car, "Bye, Gil! You're welcome to come back any time!"

Ken stalked toward the car, pausing at the door to cast one more baleful look at Shirley.

What had happened? Had there been some high-profile arrest in the news? Had someone made a
joke that rubbed Ken the wrong way? Impossible to say.

Shirley was quite certain that all the siblings had worked out the truth years ago, and Cuba had rather confirmed things. Heck, Di assured him that Faith had known about her and Sylvia since college days, and had run interference for them once or twice when Nan got inconveniently curious.

This was different. Whatever had spooked Ken, he would raise Gil as he saw fit, no matter the injustice.

Shirley kept on waving until the Cadillac pulled out into the road, Gil's golden head pressed against the window. Muggins ran after, barking as the car raised a cloud of red dust in the drive. Shirley turned back to Sam and Wally, attempting to maintain a cheerful demeanor. There was confusion in the hazel eyes and the green, but no way he could explain what had just happened.

"Well, I guess it's your turn, Wally," Shirley said. "Are you ready?"

Wally's freckled face cleared as he scooted to the center of the seat. Sam turned to squint once more at his uncle, but received only bland pleasantry in reply.

Shirley did not drop the act until the propellor was roaring and the boys hooting with delight as Wally juggled the plane down the grassy runway. He had always hated dangers that couldn't be fought, but how did you fight an insinuation? It wasn't even a slander, just a filthy, unspoken lie. The vibrations of the aircraft resonated on the frequency of his rage, but he tamped it down, swallowed it, tried to clear his mind even as fury writhed against his ribs.

"Uncle Shirley!" Wally called. "Am I doing it right?"

"You're doing fine, Wally," he answered. "Just hold steady. You'll be alright."

It was past ten o'clock when Shirley's bedtime reading was interrupted by a distant knock from the downstairs office. Muggins hopped down from the bed and bounded across the little apartment, whining and barking as she paced before the door. Shirley marked his place in *Popular Mechanics* with the latest German postcard — this one featuring a nightclub called *Eldorado* — pulled on trousers, and hurried down the stairs to investigate.

Shirley was not certain what he had expected to see when the door swung wide, but it certainly wasn't Gil Ford, carrying a bulging knapsack, stormy face red with Island dust and tear tracks.

"Gil!" he exclaimed in surprise.

"You said I could come here if I wanted," Gil sniffed. "I'm never going back! Never!"

Shirley stepped backward, letting his nephew step into the office. He gestured toward the low blue couch in the waiting area, but Gil was already halfway to the stairs. Before Shirley could assemble an objection, he was up and through the apartment door.

The initial confusion was wearing off and Shirley's mind was beginning to outline the contours of this delicate situation. Gil Ford was in his apartment, late at night, alone, and upset. Oh, this was very bad.

Chewing the inside of his cheek, Shirley followed Gil into the apartment, swinging the door open to its limit and leaving it that way.
"Why don't you sit down, Gil," he said, motioning to the kitchen table with one hand and reaching for the heavy fisherman's sweater hanging behind the door with the other. It was absurdly warm to wear anywhere but on the water or in a plane, but Shirley pulled it hastily over his undershirt, wishing he had several more.

Gil obliged after a fashion, collapsing into one of the kitchen chairs, legs splayed and arms thrown across the tabletop. Muggins took up watch at his side, ears twitching nervously as Gil spat the grievances he had rehearsed on his star-lit bicycle ride.

"My dad hates me," he declared, convinced of both the truth and the singularity of this revelation.

"I don't know about that," Shirley said, going the long way around to get Gil a glass of water without passing behind his chair.

"He does! He says I can't learn to fly. That it isn't safe. I'm not afraid!"

*Well that makes one of us.*

"You can't go against your father, Gil," Shirley said, the words forced and gritty on his tongue.

"But he said I can't come here anymore! How will I ever be a pilot if I can't learn to fly? Can't I live with you, Uncle Shirley?"

Shirley set the water glass down in front of Gil and followed it with a plate of shortbread from the glass dome.

"Have a snack," he said. "I need to make a phone call."

Standing with the receiver in hand, Shirley thought absurdly of the war, and of the empty-bellied suspense of the seconds before the person on the other end of the line spoke. Would Susan still be awake? Maybe Faith? Jem would be alright . . .

The receiver clicked and a calm, familiar voice said, "Dr. Blythe speaking."

*Any port in a storm.*

"Dad. Hi. It's Shirley."

"Shirley?"

"Yeah. Listen: Gil Ford just turned up on my doorstep. Seems to be running away. I thought Rilla might have called you looking for him."

The line crackled, the space between the receivers bright with tiny explosions.

"No. She hasn't," Dr. Blythe said. "They must not realize he's gone yet."

"Alright, well, can you come get him?"

"He's there right now? With you?"

Shirley gritted his teeth. "Yes. He's sitting at my kitchen table."

"Alright. Keep him there. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

Gil Ford was not, in fact, sitting at Shirley's kitchen table. He was on his feet, goggling at his
uncle, red-rimmed eyes filling with tears.

"You sold me out! Snitch!"

"Gil . . ."

"You said I could come here any time! And now you're sending me back?"

"Gil . . ."

"I thought you would understand! I don't wanna go back! He never listens to me!"

Tears streamed down Gil's face and Shirley wanted nothing more than enfold him in a hug, reassure him that fathers didn't always know best, that he, of all people, understood that, and that things wouldn't always be the way they were right now.

But someone would ask — Ken would ask — did he touch you? And if Gil said "he hugged me," that was it. They were done. It would be fists or prison and certainly never Gil again, shrieking with joy as the wind whistled over their wings.

Shirley wrapped his arms around himself instead and tried to sink into the wall.

"I know he doesn't, Gil. And I know it's hard. But you have to get along with your parents, at least for a few more years."

"But it's not fair! Uncle Jem and Aunt Faith let Sam and Wally come here anytime they like. I didn't even get my turn!"

Affection for the child swelled like an inrushing tide. His innocent outrage was as heartbreaking as his belief in justice.

"You're right," Shirley said. "It isn't fair. I don't want to send you back, but if I don't, there's no chance of changing your dad's mind."

"He won't change his mind, no matter what," Gil muttered.

"Maybe not. But you won't be ten forever. I know it seems like a long time, but you'll be grown soon enough, and make your own choices."

Gil glowered, stormy petulance drawing his golden brows together and twisting his cherubic face into a scowl that desperately wished to be fearsome. "I wish I were grown right now! Then I'd never have to listen to anybody! I could do what I want and no one could stop me! Like you, Uncle Shirley."

There was nothing to do but laugh. God, what a farce.

"What's so funny?" Gil asked, perplexed.

Shirley tilted his head back, still laughing, unable to explain the overwhelming absurdity of this guileless assessment. Gil's simple faith that Shirley led a better, freer life was both gut-bustingly hilarious and completely uncorrectable.

"Don't grow up too fast," Shirley said, wiping away a tear with the heel of his hand.

"Why not?"
Shirley sighed, searching for a way to buy them time. "Because I need someone to keep me up to date on *Flying Aces*. Tell me, what's the latest with the Hell-Cats?"

Gil brightened. There had indeed been a new installment of the Hell-Cat novels in his most recent issue of *Flying Aces*. He had lent it to Wally, but only after committing the plot to memory in such detail that he was still explaining it when headlights flooded the stairwell beyond the open door.

Shirley's parents swept into the little apartment, his mother dressed in an old flannel shirtwaist, her hair in a loose braid that was still bright red, though threaded through with silver. She hurried past Shirley to embrace her grandson, patting him soothingly and asking after his comfort.

Dr. Blythe stayed with Shirley by the wall. He was silent at first, watching his wife check Gil over for any overt hurts. Not finding any, she took the seat beside him and began to prod for the story of his troubles.

Dr. Blythe cleared his throat. "What happened?"

Shirley kept his arms folded across his thick-sweatered chest, testing his rusty voice against the years of silence. "Just what I told you. Gil knocked on my door. I let him in, then I called you right away."

*Please believe me. Please believe me.*

The wheels of his father's mind were visible in his furrowed brow. "You're an awfully long way from the old Elliott place," he said slowly. "Why did Gil come here instead of to Ingleside?"

"He likes planes, Dad."

*Please believe me. Please believe me.*

Dr. Blythe was silent, looking his son up and down. Shirley consciously dropped his arms to his side. He'd done nothing wrong and had nothing to hide.

"Yes," his father said at last. "He does like planes, doesn't he? Any idea why he ran away in the first place?"

Shirley relaxed a fraction. "There was . . . an incident. This afternoon. I was letting the boys taxi the plane. Ken showed up and dragged Gil off before he got his turn. From the sound of things, he's forbidden him from returning."

Over the table, the same story in a rushed and childish voice: ". . . so Sam got a turn and then it was supposed to be my turn 'cuz I'm next oldest, but then Dad came and said I had to go right that very minute and it's so unfair . . ."

Dr. Blythe frowned.

*Please believe me.*

"It's awfully late," Dr. Blythe said. "We should take Gil home."

"I wanna stay!" Gil pleaded, looking to Shirley, who only shook his head. The boy dropped his gaze, but not before Shirley glimpsed the mutinous misery there. It didn't matter that it was the only way.

"It's alright, Gil," his grandmother soothed. "We'll talk with your parents. You won't be in trouble."
Gil allowed himself to be coaxed from his chair, too dispirited to pat Muggins goodbye. He shuffled toward the door, pausing only to give his uncle one last look of dismal reproach. Dr. Blythe followed, patting his grandson on the shoulder and nudging him toward the Cadillac waiting in the drive.

"Thank you," Anne said, wrenching Shirley's attention from Gil's disappearing form, "for keeping him safe."

"Of course."

"You did the right thing calling us. Your father will smooth things over with Rilla and Ken."

She stepped toward the door, and Shirley knew that as soon as it closed behind her, the matter would be completely out of his hands forever. Whatever the fathers decided in their paternal council would be the law of the land.

"Mum?"

She turned back, surprise written clearly on her delicate face. Shirley wished he had a more persuasive petition to offer, but he could do nothing but throw himself on her mercy.

"He likes planes, Mum. That's all."

His mother hesitated before she crossed the floor, paused before she reached up to kiss his cheek. The touch was light as the brush of a butterfly's wing, but he felt it long after she had disappeared into the night.

Shirley stood at his kitchen counter brewing a pot of coffee. It was not like him to sleep late, nor to require a jolt of caffeine, but he had lain awake until nearly dawn. Would it do any good to go over and try to reason with Ken and Rilla? Probably not; it might even escalate things. But how could he just abandon the kid? Gil's look of despair at his betrayal had cut deeper than anything Ken might insinuate. Not even Muggins' hopeful tail-wagging seemed to help.

Shirley had just taken the first bitter, bracing sip from his cup when he heard the unmistakable crunch of tires in the drive. Muggins raced for the door, scrabbling with excitement. That was unusual enough, the little terrier being somewhat skittish around clients. Shirley pulled on a clean shirt and followed Muggins down the stairs to the office, buttoning as he went.

The big picture window at the front of the office gave Shirley a fine view of the Cadillac that had just parked in the sun-baked drive. Not Ken's, though.

Dumbfounded, Shirley cracked the door and Muggins pushed her way through, barking eagerly as Gil Ford tumbled out of the passenger's seat. She couldn't have pulled him to the ground without his enthusiastic cooperation, but Gil was happy to oblige, tussling with the little dog as if she were a worthy adversary. The older man unfolding himself from the driver's seat grinned at his namesake's boisterous energy, then turned toward the door.

"What's all this?" Shirley asked.

His father removed his hat, ruffling the steel-gray curls beneath. It was impossible to pretend that this was a casual visit, but he did a creditable job.

"I heard that Gil here didn't get his turn to drive yesterday," he said. "I talked to Ken a bit last night. He won't budge on Gil being out here unsupervised. So I volunteered to chaperone."
Shirley's desire to launch Ken Ford into the sun was tempered by this unexpected development. The insidious accusation was still there, and he hated to dignify it through compromise. On the other hand, Gil was here, rolling in the red dust with Muggins and laughing like a loon.

"Chaperone? What does that mean?"

Shirley's father reached in through the open window of the Cadillac and drew out a folded newspaper.

"I've got my newspaper. If I recall, you have a couch in your office?"

"Yeah."

"Well then, I'll just catch up with the election results while you and Gil have your joyride. News from Charlottetown is that Premiere Lea's out and the Conservatives are in."

Shirley stepped aside wordlessly, letting his father pass into the dim cool of the office. Dr. Blythe made himself comfortable on the couch in the little seating area where clients waited for their lessons and planned their tours, propping his feet on the coffee table and unfurling the exuberant headline: *Great Victory Achieved.*

Shirley peered past the resolute visage of Premiere-elect James D. Stewart, glowering from the front page.

"Dad?"

His father lowered the paper, brows raised in question.

Shirley cleared his throat. "There's coffee. Upstairs. If you want it. I just made a pot."

Dr. Blythe's shoulders relaxed. The hazel eyes glimmered with something fervent, though he restricted his actual words to the refreshments on offer. "Thanks. I'll get myself a cup. You boys have fun."

Shirley stood in the door, poised between wanting to say more and not knowing where to begin. But perhaps they already had.

"Come on, Uncle Shirley!" Gil called from the sunshine. "Mugsy says she wants to ride in front with me!"
"Wait, listen to this one," Carl grinned, making Sylvia look up from her darning, already smiling in anticipation. "Faith writes, 'Jemmy scandalized the Glen this week by climbing onto the roof of Miller Douglas's store and sitting astride the ridgepole, greeting everyone who went in with a cheerful wave until Mary came out and shooed her off. She says she was honor-bound to do it, having lost a forfeit to Libby Drew. It would have ruffled enough feathers in any case, but the outrage was heightened by her decision to wear some of Wally's old trousers and no shoes. I asked her about it and she said she wasn't a fool and wasn't going to sit a roof in skirts, and besides she needed her toes for gripping. I can't say I can fault her logic . . .""

Sylvia snickered, her round-cheeked face rosy in the amber lamplight of the Aster House sitting room. Across from her armchair, Carl occupied one corner of the squishy sofa with Shirley draped across the rest, his head lolling in Carl's lap as Carl read through the pile of letters from Ingleside and Charlottetown and Curaçao, his free hand lazily tracing the waves of Shirley's hair.

"Sounds like a chip off the old block," Di said, carrying a tea tray from the kitchen. She set it down on the coffee table, then shooed an inquisitive Muggins for the sake of the lemon pound cake.

"Both blocks, I'd say," Carl agreed. "Here: 'I tried to get out of scolding her by making Jem do it, but he couldn't keep a straight face either, so we gave it up as a bad job.'"

"Those children are as wild as you Merediths used to be," Di said. "Ceci's the only one who can keep still for three minutes together. If it weren't for Susan . . ."

She was interrupted by the trilling of the telephone, which must always be answered promptly in a doctor's house. As Di was the only one standing, she stepped into the hall to do the honors, allowing Muggins to establish an optimistic salient closer to the refreshments.

"Hard to believe Jemmy's nearly eleven," Sylvia sighed, turning her stocking right side out and inspecting her work. "Does Faith say whether they've decided on a school for Sam yet?"

"Last I heard, they were planning on sending him to the new high school in Lowbridge," Carl said, folding the letter. "No sense in getting a teacher's license from Queen's if he doesn't intend to use it. If he goes to Lowbridge, he can live at home."

"Poor kid," Shirley said, earning himself an affectionate swat from Carl.

There was no chance to retaliate. Di stepped back into the sitting room, face paper white, the stiffness of her posture bringing the conversation to a crashing halt. Shirley sat up quickly, scattering Carl's letters over the floor.

"What is it, Di?" Sylvia asked, though all Di's attention was focused on Shirley.

"We have to go to Ingleside," she said faintly. "Tonight."

"What's happened?" Carl asked.

Di shook her head. "Shirley . . . I'm so sorry . . ."
Una perched on the Ingleside sofa next to Shirley, balancing a cup of steaming tea on her black crepe knee.

"Shirley?" she called gently, hoping to focus his vague, faraway expression into attention. "Have a sip of tea, won't you?"

Shirley blinked, seeming to notice Una for the first time. He took the cup from her hand and held it steadily enough.

"Thanks," he croaked.

As Shirley touched the tea to his lips, Una surveyed the room, frowning. The house was crowded, half the Glen having come to pay their respects. Men in dark suits, speaking in low voices; women clustered in knots by age, rehashing the details of the service. Of course John Meredith had prayed very well, he always did, you know. But those Blythe children really were far too old to be blubbering like that. You could excuse it in the girls, perhaps but young Dr. Blythe really should have a word with his boys . . .

Una searched the room until she found Faith consoling Sam and Wally by the hearth. True, they were red-eyed, but wasn't that a testament to the woman who helped raise them? The girls had gone to bed a quarter hour ago, tear-stained Cecilia clinging limpet-tight to her father's neck as he carried her up the stairs, and Jemmy following after, red braids quivering in time with her sobs.

The other children had weathered the day better, but only, Una suspected, because they were visitors to Ingleside, not residents. Jerry and Rosemary had taken the girls back to the manse, leaving Nan to trade mutual condolences with her sisters, while Leslie and Ken had escorted Victoria Ford to the House of Dreams in an effort to relieve the overcrowding. Gil had flatly refused to accompany them, ensconcing himself in a nook by the bookcase and staring round-eyed toward the sofa.

Where was Carl? Ten minutes ago, he had gone out to pull Shirley's truck around to the front of the house — perhaps he was waiting out in the drive. Una hoped he would have sense enough to come back inside; she doubted if she could coax Shirley into standing, let alone putting one foot in front of the other.

A flash of auburn against the sea of somber tones made Una turn to find Mrs. Blythe settling herself onto the sofa on Shirley's other side.

"Shirley, darling," she said, resting a gentle hand on his back. "Why don't you stay here at Ingleside tonight? The guest room is all made up. Let us take care of you."

Shirley merely stared into his tea.

From the corner near the window, a tinny creak of mirthless laughter broke through the din. "It was the most outrageous thing," whined Sophia Crawford. "She chased the poor man with a frying pan. A frying pan! Couldn't just refuse him like most women would. But that was Susan Baker for you. She had a terrible temper."

"She didn't," Shirley whispered, so low that only Una heard.

"What was that, darling?" Mrs. Blythe asked, leaning closer.

"Susan," he repeated. "She was . . . very understanding."

Mrs. Blythe stroked Shirley's back in long, arching caresses. "Of course. She would have done
anything for you, sweetheart."

"She did," he replied. Then, inconsequentially: "She never really believed that I could bake. But I can. From watching . . ."

Sophia Crawford's cackle cut him off. Una looked up sharply and sought Faith's eye, communicating all that was necessary in a single imploring look. Faith caught her drift and hurried off to intervene by any means necessary, up to and including locking Sophia Crawford in the china closet.

"Where do gravestones come from?" Shirley asked no one in particular. "Is there a store? Do you order them from a catalogue?"

Una saw Mrs. Blythe swallow deliberately, and gave her a little nod of encouragement.

"Well," Mrs. Blythe murmured, "when Aunt Marilla died, I went to Charlottetown. There's a monument carver there and you can tell him what you'd like written on the stone. But we don't need to worry about that right now, sweetheart." She patted his back, but Shirley frowned.

"We should do it soon," he said, voice steady, but ever so quiet. "She needs a gravestone."

"Whenever you like, darling."

"And flowers. We should bring her flowers."

A memory came to Una and she did not have to force a smile. "I remember that you once told me that Susan loved tulips," she said. "Big and showy, so they'd stand out in the kitchen. But not fragrant, so they wouldn't interfere with the cooking."

Shirley stared. "Yes. Tulips. She loved peonies, too, but only outside."

"We'll transplant some for her," Una promised. "From the Ingleside beds. She'd like that."

"And calceolarias."

"Of course."

"I should have been here," Shirley murmured. "I shouldn't have been so far away . . ."

Una placed a slim hand on his arm. "None of that, Shirley. You were here for years and years. Susan knew how hard that was. She didn't grudge you your winters."

Mrs. Blythe stiffened slightly at this assessment, but it was only the truth.

"I should have been here," Shirley repeated. "To say goodbye."

"It was an apoplexy," Una said reasonably. "Even if you had been at your apartment, there wouldn't have been time. She was here one moment and gone the next."

"I should have been here."

He was beyond reason and there was nothing to be done but to get him home. Oh, where was Carl?

An icy draft swirled into the room and Una looked up to see Carl, cold-flushed and slush-spattered, wearing a woolen coat and carrying another, weaving briskly through the crowd. He slowed his pace as he reached the sofa and knelt on the floor in front of Shirley, sparing not a single glance for
either Una or Mrs. Blythe.

"Hey," he said, seeming not to care who saw him put a hand on Shirley's knee. "I've got your coat. Let's get you home."

Shirley said nothing, but the touch focused his attention as nothing else had, and he began to breathe louder than he had been speaking. Una plucked the teacup from his hand as Carl draped the coat over his shoulders and helped him to his feet. They cut a swath on their way to the door, mourners scattering before them like skittish crows.

Una rose and made to follow them, but Mrs. Blythe stood and touched a hand to her elbow. "Una, dear, I really think he should stay here tonight. Isn't there anything you can say that might convince him?"

Una looked through the open door and into the hall, where Carl was helping a compliant Shirley on with scarf and hat.

"I think he just wants to go home," she said.

Mrs. Blythe wrung her hands, her gray eyes sparkling with unshed tears. "He shouldn't be alone tonight."

Una cocked her head. Of all people, Mrs. Blythe should have known that a family wasn't made by birth or law. But then again, she hadn't always done right by the lonely children who found their way to Ingleside, whether they arrived via soup tureen or stork, had she? As a ten-year-old, Una had not blamed Mrs. Blythe for leaving the question of Mary Vance's future in her own starved, chilblained hands, but now that she was grown, it had taken an awful lot of prayer to extinguish that anger.*

A spark flared and Una had to take a breath. She loved Mrs. Blythe, truly. But how was it possible that she could know the facts and still not grasp the truth? She might love Shirley as an individual, and even act the gracious hostess to Carl, including him in the wide circle of the family as Una herself was included. But there were no pictures of Carl on the bookcase at Ingleside, nor of Sylvia either. Their birthdates were not written in the Blythe family Bible; they had received separate, individual invitations to Dr. Blythe's 72nd birthday party last year. At the funeral, when Father had asked the congregation to pray for Susan's loved ones, Faith's name had followed Jem's like exhale and inhale. Nan and Jerry, Rilla and Ken, as natural as breathing. Di's name dangled, suspended, waiting for oxygen that never came; Shirley's barely made it past Rev. Meredith's lips.

Wishing that she could impart the gift of clear sight with a touch, Una pressed her own slender hand over the nervous fingers and held Mrs. Blythe's gaze. "He won't be."
"I'm sorry," she whispered. "It's only . . . Gil Ford is here."

"Gil?" Carl rubbed his eye imprecisely with his half-awake hand. What time was it?

"He said he biked out to the hangar, then came here and saw the truck . . . ."

Carl gave a little groan. "I don't know . . . I don't want to wake him . . . ."

Too late; Shirley was stirring.

"Just stall, alright?" Carl said.

When Una had vanished beyond the closing door, Carl went back and crouched beside the bed.

"Hey," he said gently. "How're you feeling?"

Ordinarily, Carl enjoyed watching Shirley wake. Not that he got the opportunity very often; Shirley was habitually up with the lark, alert the moment he opened his eyes. But there was no joy in watching the sequence of emotions play over his features as he realized his surroundings and the reason for them.

"Ugghhh," Shirley moaned, covering his face with broad, brown hands.

Carl leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. "I'd say go back to sleep, but there's a visitor here for you."

"I don't want to see anybody."

"It's Gil Ford."

Shirley peered out from behind his bulwark. "Gil? Here?"

"Apparently he's been tracking you all morning."

One deep breath and then Shirley was sitting up, tossing back the old tobacco stripe quilt, reaching for his trousers. "How did he know I was here?"

"The truck's here," Carl shrugged.

"But how did he know to come looking for it?"

"I guess he saw us leave last night," Carl said, pulling a clean shirt from Shirley's suitcase and handing it over. "Everyone did."

Shirley groaned a groan native to hangovers and other sorts of remorse. "Shit. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm not."

There was ice-filmed water in the wash-stand pitcher, and Carl marveled for a moment that Una had remembered to fill it when she re-opened the little gray house on such short notice. There were clean towels, too, and crisp pillowcases that smelled only faintly of the lavender in which they had been packed away. Carl never thought of things like soap or matches or clean handkerchiefs until the moment he needed them, and did not often wonder how they came to be placed exactly where he expected them to be. Watching Shirley wash sleep from his face, it struck Carl that Una had been here first, imagining every little necessity, arranging invisible things with attention and care. Even now, the scent of cinnamon buns wafting from the kitchen implied kindling split and
firewood carried and a day that had started long enough before dawn that the dough had had time to rise.

Shirley dried his face and pulled on the thick green cardigan Susan had knit him for Christmas. He didn't need help fixing the cowl, but Carl helped anyway.

"Say hi to Gil for me," Carl said, smoothing the unrumpled cable knit over Shirley's back.

"Come say hi yourself."

"I'll just stay here. Out of sight, out of mind."

Shirley registered his disagreement with a brief kiss, then slipped out the door to meet his nephew, Muggins tagging along at his heels.

Carl burrowed into the still-warm hollow of the bed, thinking of the little brown owls that made their homes in gopher dens. They could dig their own nests if needs must, but it was much easier to settle into a ready-made home. Most animals would defend their nests to the death, and Carl wondered whether burrowing owls found their tunnels empty, like hermit crabs, or if they devoured the original inhabitants. Starlings did that, stealing nests and killing the broods they found there to make room for their own. Then, of course, there were cuckoos, who laid their eggs in other birds' nests and fobbed off the raising of their chicks. Were they clever or wicked? Una would say it was the wrong question and focus instead on the warbler feeding the cuckoo chick even after the interloper had destroyed the warbler's own eggs.

Half an hour later, Carl was still musing on the habits of brood parasites, but finding it increasingly difficult to focus. Shirley's watch on the nightstand told him it was getting on toward noon and between the persistent aroma of fresh cinnamon rolls and the necessity of visiting the washroom as soon as possible, there was no chance of dozing.

He crept to the door, listening to the rise and fall of voices in the sitting room beyond. Too low to listen in properly, but Shirley seemed to be holding up his end of the conversation. That was good.

Carl's bedroom was at the back of the house, on the first floor. Una had the upstairs to herself: a little bedroom under the eaves and an even smaller sewing room that looked out over the garden. It was an old house, and the upstairs had been a loft before the previous owner had replaced the ladder with a steep, fisherman-built staircase, every riser a different height. Una had insisted that Carl have the downstairs bedroom, and he had often been glad of the space, though its location just off the sitting room was proving to be a problem at the moment. There wasn't much to the little house — front hall, yellow kitchen, sitting room, tiny bathroom — and no way to emerge from the bedroom inconspicuously.

Evidently, Gil meant to stay, and desperate times call for desperate measures. Carl dressed in a hurry, layering one of Shirley's sweaters over his own, and wishing he hadn't left his boots in the front hall. Not wanting to ruin his slippers, he went barefoot, holding a clean pair of socks and hoping the snow was not too deep.

It wasn't. Barely an inch, though that was more than enough to freeze Carl's feet the moment he lowered himself out the open window. Gil biked in this? Carl sucked his breath in through his teeth and scooted around the side of the house and up through the front door. Una hurried out of the kitchen to meet him and clucked at the state of his feet.

"Settled in for a chat, haven't they?" Carl said as he pulled on dry socks.
"It's good," Una said. "Gil's helping."

She went back to the kitchen, leaving Carl to tend to his ablutions. By the time he emerged from the bathroom, Una had fixed him a plate of eggs and set a place at the kitchen table so that he could eavesdrop at his leisure.

"... into the cadet corps," Gil was explaining. "We drill and have lectures on how to read maps and use signal flags. I'm a pretty good shot; I finished first in my class when we competed against the upper school boys."

"That's great," Shirley said. "We could set up a rifle range this summer if you like."

"That'd be swell! I heard Mum telling Grandad that we'll come back as soon as school lets out. That's not so very long."

Carl smiled to himself as he spackled his toast with butter and blueberry preserves. Gil might not be very subtle, but he was sincere, and that counted for a lot.

The conversation wandered and so did Carl's attention. Should they go back to Kingsport or cut their trip short this year? Shirley might want to stay to set Susan's affairs in order, go through her things, see about a gravestone. Or maybe he'd want to go back to Aster House right away to grieve in peace, away from well-meaning questions and condolences. Either way, whatever he wanted...

Carl snapped back to the conversation when he registered Susan's name. Gil must have asked about her, and Shirley's voice had grown husky as he answered.

"... would have pleased her, I think."

Gil sounded tentative, but unafraid. "Sam told me she used to say she was as much your mother as Grandmother is."

"She did say that. It was true, too. It's... hard to explain."

The voices were low enough that Carl had to stop chewing in order to hear. If he hadn't, he wouldn't have caught Gil's halting reply.

"I think I understand a little."

There was no more talk after that, though a certain creaking of cushions suggested an embrace more than awkward silence. Una gave them a moment, then went in, bearing a fresh platter of cinnamon rolls as excuse. She emerged with a soft smile on her face, reassuring Carl as she offered him the plate. By the time Carl had selected a bun for himself, the conversation had started up again: baseball and English class and did you hear about Amelia Earhart's solo flight from Hawaii to California? Susan would have clucked and reminded them that if the Almighty had meant us to fly he would have provided us with wings.** But somehow, when Carl imagined her saying it, he thought she would be smiling.

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Notes:

*Rainbow Valley*, chapter 9: "Una Intervenes"

**Rilla of Ingleside**, chapter 26: "Susan Has a Proposal of Marriage"
Cecilia Blythe may have been only ten years old, but she had already mastered the mysteries of hard- and soft-boiled eggs and moved on to chicken salad. It was a good, thing, too, as Jem was quick to point out. At the end of the summer, Dr. and Mrs. Blythe would be retiring to the little white House of Dreams by the shore, and it was a good idea to have at least one person at Ingleside who knew which end of the stove was up.

“Do you think it’s alright, Auntie Una?” Ceci asked, poking at the contents of her bowl with a wooden spoon. She was the very image of her mother, all warm golden eyes and crimson cheeks under honey-brown ringlets, but anxious scrutiny was an expression that rarely appeared on Faith Blythe’s face. Ceci, however, liked things done properly and cared when they were not up to scratch. “Susan’s chicken salad was never this . . . wet.”

“It looks delicious,” Una assured her. In truth, the chicken salad was slightly gloopy, but it would still make passable sandwiches. Besides, there was a good chance that everyone would be too excited to eat.

Una was showing Ceci how to dress a salad of cucumbers when the sound of a car door in the lane brought them to the kitchen window. Jerry was standing beside his car in the sun-splashed drive, extending a hand to Nan, while Bea, Dellie, and Portia tumbled out of the back seat in a swirl of skirts. The girls were in high spirits, laughing as they retrieved their suitcases from the trunk and shrieking with delight when Wally and Jemmy descended upon them from the veranda. Sam followed more sedately behind his siblings. He greeted Jerry with a handshake that was entirely too solemn for 16, leaving both Jerry and Nan struggling to keep their faces straight until he turned away.

“Why don’t you take off your apron and go say hello,” Una prodded Ceci.

When she had gone, Una carried the lunch things into the pantry and shut the door firmly. After all, you never really knew exactly how many cats and kittens the Blythes had roaming around the place at any given moment, and Wally had been known to come home from an excursion to the fishing village with an unexpected dog a time or two.

By the time Una went out to join the merry party, Faith and Jem were there as well, hugging Jerry and Nan and chatting with as much animation as the children. Dr. and Mrs. Blythe were exclaiming over the girls, while Sam attempted to wrest a hatbox away from Dellie in a fit of underappreciated gallantry.

The plan was for Jerry and Nan to stay for lunch before they whisked Jem and Faith away on the first leg of a very long journey. From Charlottetown, the four of them would take the ferry to the mainland and then the overnight train to Montreal. There, they would board a luxury ocean liner bound for France.

They were calling it the “Vimy Pilgrimage,” the government-sponsored trip that would bring more than 6,000 veterans, Silver Cross mothers, and guests to France for the dedication of the Canadian National Memorial on Vimy Ridge. Una had seen pictures of the sculptor’s model in a magazine: two pillars of white granite stretching into the sky from the top of the ridge, surrounded by sculpted figures representing Truth and Justice and Peace. At the edge, gazing over a preserved stretch of
ground still pitted by shell craters, stood the twenty-foot figure of Canada Bereft, the grieving mother, mourning all 60,000 of her fallen sons. The massive base supporting the structure was inscribed with the names of over 11,000 Canadian soldiers who had disappeared into the filth and terror of the Western Front and never been seen again. They were all there, hand-carved and alphabetical, every last one.

According to Faith, Jem would not have gone if it were up to him. He kept up with Emil Gagnon and a few other comrades by post and wore his service badge quietly on his lapel on Armistice Day, but in the main, Jem would rather leave the speech-making and wreath-laying to Jerry. Besides, Dr. Blythe was finally ready to retire, and Jem did not want to take a month’s holiday just when patients were getting used to the change.

“Not that it’s exactly a pleasure cruise,” Faith had said with a grim twist of her lips as Una helped her pack hiking boots and rain gear.

But Jerry had wanted to go, and Jem had taken one look at his hopeful face and asked Dr. Blythe whether he mightn’t consider retiring at the end of the summer rather than the beginning. Dr. Blythe agreed, insisting furthermore that all the young fry be left at Ingleside for a good old-fashioned summer of spoiling just as the Blythe children used to have in Avonlea. That settled things.

They had invited Carl and Shirley to go along, of course. Carl had turned the color of a cave-dwelling amphibian and Shirley had reminded Jem that, technically speaking, he wasn't a Canadian veteran at all. Jerry disputed this on its merits, which distracted everyone long enough for Carl to recover. And though many other Silver Cross mothers were planning to make the trip, feted and honored on their way to see the only memorial their lost sons would ever have, it was impossible even to broach the subject with Mrs. Blythe. In all the weeks of preparation, she insisted on referring to the excursion vaguely as “your trip to Europe” and leaving it at that.

No one had asked Una to go. That was just as well. It saved her having to say no, of course she had no interest in going and why would she?

They were all heading up to the house now, Portia gabbling to Ceci about all the fun they’d have sharing a bedroom and Bea deep in conversation about school with Sam. Mrs. Blythe had linked arms with Nan and was smiling a real, genuine, starry-eyed smile as they followed the children up the veranda steps.

“Hello, Una,” said Jerry, stepping up beside her and pulling her into a hug despite her protests that she was certainly covered in flour and would spoil his suit.

Una pulled back to take a good look at her brother. Years of good living under Nan’s adoring hand had added a prosperous, contented roundness to his figure, and he looked as relaxed and pleased as he usually did. Una still wasn’t entirely convinced that it was a good idea to return to a place where you had nearly been killed, but Jerry would have Nan at his side, and Jem and Faith as well, not to mention all the veterans of the old battalion and abundant prayers from every corner of the Commonwealth, her own included. He would visit the old battlefields and receive the King’s blessing and cheer along with his brothers-in-arms when Canada Bereft was unveiled. If that was what would make him happy, Una didn’t need to understand to approve.

“You’re looking forward to your trip?” she asked.

“Very much,” he assured her.

***
Early on the morning of the 26th, Shirley arrived at the little gray house just as Una was wheeling her tricycle out to the road.

“You aren’t staying to listen?” he asked.

Una shook her head. “Church.”

Shirley shrugged as if he might have expected as much. The whole country was observing the day, some in pilgrimage, some in prayer, and many by gathering around the radio. Una knew that her father had canceled Sunday School and delayed the service so that his congregation could listen to the dedication ceremony, which was being broadcast live from France. Father Kirkland was of a different mind. He would hold his Sunday morning service at the proper time and people could just read about the speeches in Monday’s newspaper. After all, newspapers had been good enough during the War, hadn’t they? Una had volunteered for Altar Guild duties so that no one else felt obliged to attend.

“There are scones in the pantry,” she told Shirley as she swung onto the seat. “Help yourself.”

As she pedaled away, Una had the uncomfortable sensation of being watched, but she did not turn around. Carl had already invited her to stay and listen to the broadcast half a dozen times and she didn’t want to be asked again. Even Ceci’s offer to listen with the children up at Ingleside held no appeal. All Una wanted was to go to St. Elizabeth’s in peace and quiet and not think about anything at all.

This proved next to impossible. Were Jerry and Faith already at the monument right this very minute? Was their hotel very far from the site? Did many people show up? Would they have good weather for the ceremony? Would they have a chance to inspect the monument closely? Would they find his . . .

Una shook herself. This had to stop. With dogged determination, she began to hum the first hymn that came into her head. That would help. It always did.

*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord . . .*

It was much more difficult for her mind to wander when it was pegged to lyrics. As she pedaled past Pelham’s Pond, Una began to mouth the words, just as she had many times before when she needed strength to get through a day that was just *too* hard.

*When through the deep waters I call thee to go*  
*The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow . . .*

When she reached the end, she began again. Past roadside tangles of dewy roses, past stands of raspberry cane and sugar maples in the full glory of their summer green, Una pedaled and whispered. After a mile, she felt calmer, lulled by the unending loop of the wheels and the verses. Around and around, without clear beginnings or endings, the song took on a dreamy, automatic quality that swept the clutter from Una’s mind.

After two miles, she reached the fork where the main road continued on to Lowbridge and the old wagon road branched off to run along the back edges of the potato fields. It wasn’t even a proper road, only a rutted track that was convenient for bringing up the draft carts to spread kelp or pick up the harvest. There were no houses down this way, only acres of potatoes. Una had never ridden down it before, but if she stayed on the main road, she would be in Lowbridge in no time at all. She recoiled at the prospect. Una did not want to be around people. She did not want to greet them or smile at them or hear about their troubles. She did not want to listen to the solemn speechifying on
the radio nor to Father Kirkland’s impeccably appropriate prayers. She didn’t know what she wanted, but her tricycle seemed to, and Una let it turn itself down the old wagon road and away from everything.

For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

A fringe of bright ferns feathered the edges of the bumpy track, beckoning her onward. Overhead, a canopy of boughs formed a tunnel of greens and flashing yellows. Una rode and rode. She jostled over the ruts, gulping the damp, leafy-scented air between verses. Somewhere, someone had probably noticed her absence by now, but for once, Una did not care. She was not in the world at the moment and it would just have to get along without her.

Una might have pedaled until her legs gave out or the long July day ran its course, but whatever was calling her onward had a better purpose in mind. When she had ridden a long, long way farther than she had ever ridden before, the trees stopped abruptly.

So did Una.

Her song ended in a little gasp.

A few yards in front of her, the wagon road petered out to nothing, swallowed up by a meadow. And what a meadow! There must surely be grass there somewhere, but it was impossible to see any under the vast carpet of sunshine-yellow buttercups dancing with the sheer joy of high summer. Beyond, the endless blue of the gulf stretched to the horizon, contrasting so strongly with the buttercups’ vivid hue that it made the jewel-bright stained glass of St. Elizabeth’s miraculous roses seem like a watercolor.

Una felt a *queer little chill of some mysterious dread.* It was the sort of shiver she sometimes felt looking up into the vaults of All Saint’s Cathedral or standing too close to the cliff-breakers, or once, just once, when she had been kissed.

Would the buttercups disappear if she touched them? She would not have been surprised if they had. Nor would she have been surprised if they had transformed into doves and flown away, or snaked their tendrils around her wrists and pulled her down among them and dragged her away to stand before the queen of a faerie realm. But no, they were only ordinary buttercups in extraordinary profusion. A gift, not an illusion. When Una’s hand hovered over them, they reflected the light back up onto her pale skin. When she waded in among them, she glowed.

***

“I brought you something from France,” Faith said over tea in the Ingleside kitchen some weeks later. “A souvenir.”

“You’ve already given me all that lovely Brussels lace,” Una protested.

Faith shook her head. “This is different.”

She drew a small, flat box out of her pocket and slid it past the shortbread. Una opened it, cocking her head when she saw the tissue-thin blossom inside.

“It doesn’t look the way it should,” Faith blurted. “In France, they grow along the edges of the fields and they’re such a bright, impossible red when the sun shines through them. Nan showed me how to press one, but it’s all wrong. When I picked it, it was redder than any red you ever saw. But it dried so pale. I still thought you might like to have it.”
Una could see what she meant. The poppy’s petals were so fragile and faded that it looked as if it had been plucked a very, very long time ago.

“Where is from?” she asked.

Faith adjusted her teacup. “We told you that we took a car tour after the ceremony? Down through the battlefields? Jerry wanted to visit a friend’s grave in Albert, so we went down along the Somme front and stopped at a few places . . .”

“And this is from Courcelette,” Una finished for her.

“Nan was cutting a few, and I thought you might want one.”

Una thanked her sister. Really, it was a very thoughtful gift. Still, when she went home to the little gray house that evening, she was not sure what to do with it. The fitting thing would be to slip it between the pages of *The Faerie Queen* near the old letter that had made the same journey from France twenty years ago. But there were already buttercups there, and for all they were so common, they were still as bright as they had been in the sunny meadow above the sea.

Notes:

*Rainbow Valley*, chapter 8: “Miss Cornelia Intervenes”
Carl couldn’t stop smiling. He liked church as much as anybody, except maybe Una, but services didn’t usually make him giddy. Neither was he a regular congregant at St. Columba’s United Church in Kingsport, though that might change now that it had a new minister. Carl grinned again he looked up at the pulpit, where Rev. Anthony Marckworth was exhorting his flock to let the peace of God rule their hearts.

Anthony looked nearly as pleased as Carl felt. His hair had grayed and his waist thickened since Carl had last seen him, giving him an air of wise solidity that Carl found deeply reassuring. The congregation seemed to agree, listening to the sermon with expressions of satisfaction. It was a tricky thing for a United church, getting all these erstwhile Presbyterians and Methodists to agree on a minister, but if there were any displeased factions at St. Columba’s, Carl could not pick them out of the crowd.

Over the years, Carl and Anthony had kept in touch in the way of distant friends, trading letters whenever a chance memento jolted Carl into remembering their correspondence. That’s what had happened at Christmas, when Carl was packing for the annual sojourn to Kingsport and came across Harry’s old peacock-blue scarf in the back of his closet. He had dug through the chaos of his desk to find Anthony’s last letter — had it really been two years? — and sent off a cheerful missive to the return address in New Brunswick. This sent off a chain of forwarding that stretched across three provinces and ended with a well-traveled reply being delivered to Aster House with news that the Marckworth family was living just a few blocks away. Several euphoric notes later, Carl had an invitation to church and Sunday dinner afterward.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Shirley had asked, but Carl waved him off. He and Anthony had only ever written letters that could be read aloud in any company, full of Sunday School doings and boating scrapes and the misadventures of dogs and children. Carl wasn’t sure what Edith might know or suspect and he didn’t want to put Anthony in an awkward position. Besides, Shirley didn’t have any use for church.

Carl did, though. Maybe not the way Una did, but he still loved the fellowship and the music and the old, familiar words.

When the final hymn had faded, Carl followed the congregation down the aisle, hanging back as Anthony shook hands and traded jokes. Edith stood beside him with a wispy-haired toddler on her hip and three boys who were doing their best not to fidget. Carl had a sudden, unexpected memory of Mother straightening his collar and praising him for standing so patiently as the congregation filed past. He must have been four or five, no older than the littlest Marckworth boy. It wasn’t a full memory, just a fleeting impression of a soft palm against his cheek and a warm smile that he should not have forgotten. Usually, unexpected memories descended on Carl like an ambush, but this one carried him into Anthony’s embrace on a tender updraft.

“It’s so good to see you,” Anthony beamed when they released one another.

“You, too,” Carl said. “It’s been too long.”

Close up, Anthony’s face was more lined than it had appeared at a distance, with deep grooves at the corners of his eyes that had been obscured by his glasses. But the eyes themselves were merry
with unrestrained joy.

“Carl Meredith, this is my wife, Edith,” Anthony said heartily.

Edith was short and round and very pleased to meet Carl, even if the tow-headed toddler squirming against her prevented her from shaking hands.

“I’ve heard so much about you,” Edith assured him. “You’ll have to tell us all about your birds over dinner.”

Carl laughed. “Only if you’ll tell me when you’ve heard enough!”

The little girl on Edith’s hip was Gladys, age two, who hid her face in her mother’s shoulder rather than return Carl’s gentle wave. Anthony introduced Carl to the boys instead, beginning with small David, who was now hopping from one foot to the other. This strange dance earned David an elbowed reprisal from his older brother — Paul, according to a second introduction — but Carl had nothing but fellow-feeling for the wee mite.

“And this,” Anthony said, gesturing to boy of twelve or thirteen, “is my eldest. Harry.”

“Very nice to meet you, Harry,” said Carl, shaking the boy’s hand while he dug his own fingernails into his other palm.

“Is it true that you’re a biologist?” Harry asked eagerly.

“I suppose so,” Carl said, surprised. “I monitor maritime wildlife for the Department of Fisheries.”

“Harry has a passion for biology,” Anthony said with pride.

“Do you really?”

“It’s swell!” Harry grinned. “At least, I like it better than algebra and French.”

Carl’s laughter bubbled over, joined by Anthony’s and Edith’s. It echoed around the foyer of the church, promising friendship and comfort. Just like old times.

Shirley skimmed a palm over the Tiger Moth’s fuselage. It was a training plane, not so very different from his old SE.5a, but updated in a hundred little ways. There were two seats instead of one, so that student and instructor could fly together, and a canopy to enclose the cockpit in bad weather. That would be awfully nice to have in the colder months.

All around, excited voices rose and fell in a continuous buzz. Aviation aficionados of all stripes circulated through the echoing hangar, inspecting the planes and prototypes on display as part of the Toronto Air Show. There had been flying demonstrations this morning, adjourning in the afternoon so that the crowd could see the latest models up close. All the major manufacturers had displays — de Havilland, Noorduyn, and even some of the companies from the States. There was a Vickers table as well, which Shirley had passed without pausing, averting his eyes from the engineer demonstrating an innovative cooling system. He told himself that he was just trying to keep up with Gil, who was bounding from one booth to the next, exclaiming over engines and wing placements and generally trying to demonstrate his expertise as loudly as possible.

Eventually, Gil had gravitated toward the Royal Canadian Air Force display, and was now gabbling to the young officer stationed at the recruitment table. Shirley took the opportunity to appraise the Tiger Moth. It certainly was lovely. The old flying boat would always have a place in his heart, and
he was justifiably proud of his homebuilts, but the Tiger Moth was new and sturdy and it was so easy to imagine himself in it, teaching Gil some new tricks or maybe just going for a long, long ride . . .

“She’s a beauty, isn’t she?”

Shirley looked up to find a uniformed RCAF officer beaming at him. The man was several years older than Shirley, grizzle-mustached and straining some of his buttons, with insignia that marked him as a Wing Commander of the Air Staff. A rainbow of medal bars on his breast proclaimed that he had flown in the Great War, though Shirley didn’t recognize his face. It was a friendly face, stretched in a wide grin as he patted the Tiger Moth’s wing with proprietary fondness.

“Finest trainer in the world. Made right here in Canada!”

“Yes, sir,” Shirley said, automatically.

“Bob McMullen,” the man said, extending a meaty hand.

“I’m Shirley Blythe.”

“Shirley Blythe?” McMullen’s shaggy brows dipped in momentary contemplation as he gripped Shirley’s hand. “Not Shirley Blythe the RAF ace?”

“That was a long time ago,” Shirley said.

The officer’s face cleared. “Well, I’ll be damned! Shirley Blythe! I’d have thought I would have met you at one of the reunions. What the hell have you been up to all these years?”

What indeed. Shirley was not particularly inclined toward regrets, but a day among bright-eyed engineers, test pilots, and RCAF officers had grated a nerve he hadn’t known was raw. What had he really done with all these extra years?

“I’m a flight instructor,” he said, not untruthfully.

“Excellent! Trans-Canada?”

“No. I’m independent. I have a flight school and charter service out in the Maritimes.”

McMullen looked pleased and Shirley tamped down the squirm of shame that came with making Blythe Aviation out to be more than it was. He got past it by looking over at Gil, who was gesticulating in his direction as he explained something to the recruitment officer.

“That your boy?” McMullen asked.

“My nephew.”

“Well, it looks like he’s eager to follow in your footsteps.”

*Please, no.* There was news, of course, of trouble in other parts of the world, with madmen and fools daring one another to cross lines in the sand. Everyone seemed confident that the diplomats would defuse things eventually. They had to, didn’t they, with the memory of the last war still horribly fresh at the center of every grieving family? Shirley wasn’t in the habit of optimism. Still, he could usually contemplate world affairs with detached equanimity, except when he counted up how long it had been since he’d had a postcard from Berlin, or when he imagined Gil in khaki — or Air Force blue, as the case may be. It was enough to set his stomach churning.
“He’s still in school,” he said.

“Does he fly?”

“Yes. I taught him myself. He’s good.”

“He’d have to be, with Shirley Blythe teaching him! There are rumors about you, you know. Did you really jump out of a plane with no parachute?”

Shirley bit the inside of his lip. “It wasn’t really as dramatic as it sounds.”

McMullen guffawed and clapped Shirley on the shoulder. “Tell you what, when we’re done here, you’ll let me take you and your boy for a drink. I want to hear all about this not-very-dramatic jump.”

Shirley cleared his throat to protest, but McMullen had already turned toward the Tiger Moth with a gesture of welcome.

“How about you climb up and I’ll show you a few of the new bells and whistles? You know, we requested special modifications from the manufacturers, so this is a custom RCAF machine. You take the instructor’s seat.”

Shirley could have refused, but McMullen was already climbing up toward the student’s seat. And truth be told, he did want to take a closer look at the plane. Gil flashed a thumbs up as Shirley nodded back, glad for once that Rilla and Ken were so dead set on the kid going to the University of Toronto. That would keep him busy for a few years and who knew? Maybe everything would be alright by then.

“You coming, Blythe?” McMullen hollered from the cockpit.

“Yes, sir,” Shirley said, and followed.

Notes:

I originally set out to write a 1939-1942 story with flashbacks, but the flashbacks got a little out of hand. Chapters 29 and 30 have brought each of the three main characters to the place they need to be to start that story. The next update will include both the prologue and the first chapter of the 1939-1942 story.

Like many of you, I am stuck at home for the foreseeable future, so I will try to get the next couple of chapters out on an accelerated schedule.
Shirley Blythe looked up at the sudden sound of many flapping wings. The congregation of seagulls, so placid a moment before, was beating the air, the birds squabbling frantically as they gained enough height to clear the top of the hangar, out of range of the gravel spraying from the skidding wheel of Gilbert Ford's bicycle. Their affronted screeching woke the little grizzle-coated terrier who had been sleeping in the shade of a broad canvas wing. Arthritic joints notwithstanding, Muggins leapt to her feet and bounded toward the boy, voicing her delight in a series of seagull-provoking yips.

"Uncle Shirley!" Gil cried, stumbling over the frame of the falling bike, but keeping his feet. He bent to greet the dog pawing at his knees, then asked, "Is that it?"

Shirley smiled to himself and wiped engine grease onto the rag hanging from the pocket of his cover-alls. "Sure is," he said, patting the pockmarked fuselage of his old Curtiss HS-2L with a nearly-clean hand. "Smoothest water landing you can make without your own feathers."

Gil rolled his eyes. "Not that old rubbish heap! The Cub!"

"Oh!" Shirley said, aping surprise. "You mean that?"

He gestured vaguely toward the edge of the landing strip, where a gleaming, chrome-yellow Piper J-3 Cub shone smugly in the August sunshine. Blunt wings stretched out either side of a rounded cabin painted an improbably primary shade, embellished along the sides with black racing stripes that ended in tiny zigzags of lightning. Perhaps these were meant to imply speed or agility. Paired with the Cub's eggy silhouette, the bolts conveyed only nervous energy. With a red nub in the middle of the propellor on its snub little nose, the Cub looked like nothing so much as a cartoon rabbit, poised to fly under the magical power of its fuzzy yellow ears.

"That," Gil scoffed. "Of course that!"

"Well then why did you ask?"

Gil ignored this and made for the Cub, eating up the distance with long, brisk strides that challenged Muggins to keep pace.

"Oh!" he moaned, reaching out a tentative hand to stroke the sunshine struts. "Hello, gorgeous."

"It's been here all summer," Shirley said, following his nephew unhurriedly. "Unlike some."

Gil groaned. "Dad made me work in his office. Two whole months! He said he wants me to learn about Business."

Shirley chuckled softly at the capital letter in the boy's tone. Ken Ford could try to make his golden-haired, spirited son into a Man of World, but first he'd have to get him to sit still for five minutes together. The only place Shirley had ever seen Gil completely attentive was in a cockpit. Two full months in Ken's office must have had him climbing the walls.

At the moment, Gil was fairly vibrating with excitement.
"Can I fly it? Please, Uncle Shirley, please?"

"You can fly in it," Shirley said evenly.

Gil's face fell. "Oh, come on. I can fly! You say so all the time. I'm a born pilot!"

"This," Shirley said, resting a strong, brown hand on the cheerful fuselage, "is not a toy."

"And I'm not a child!" Gil protested. "I'll be 19 next month. Oh, please, Uncle Shirley, I'll be careful!"

Shirley shook his head, impervious to his nephew's wheedling appeal. "Today, I fly; you observe. If you pay attention, maybe tomorrow . . ."

"Oh, I will," Gil said, already moving toward the hangar in search of goggles and flight jacket, shedding his rucksack as he went.

When he was far enough away, Shirley allowed himself a smile. It was to good have him back.

***

Half an hour later, a forsaken Muggins watched Shirley and Gil lift clear of the runway, climbing up, up, up into the brilliant blue of a clear summer afternoon. Shirley felt a bit cramped so close to the instruments, with Gil's knobbly knees tucked up nearly under his elbows. Still, the salt breeze blew crisply through the Cub's open cabin, cooled by the sun-dazzled waves of Four Winds harbor, mirroring the limitless possibility of the cloudless sky.

The Cub did not fly fast and it did not fly high. Five minutes after takeoff, they were barely at 500 ft, but that was no matter. No hurry. Shirley had been flying the Cub all summer, giving lessons and tours to the renters and sometimes just leaving the world behind for a while. Every time he went up, alone or not, he heard Walt Whitman singing in his ear:

> From Paumanok starting I fly like a bird,
> Around and around to soar to sing the idea of all,
> To the north betaking myself to sing there arctic songs,
> To Kanada till I absorb Kanada in myself

What would Whitman think of actual flight? Of this startling yellow absurdity hurtling through the heavens? Of this vast Canada? Shirley Blythe was not much of a one for yawping, but he resolved to sound one over the roofs of the world for good old Walt's sake next time he flew alone.

As the Cub swung out over the shore, Shirley spotted the unmistakable bulk of Bertie Shakespeare Drew's four black percherons, dark manes flying in the wind as they waded through the roiling surf. The storm that had pounded this coast three days past had long ago left the sky traceless, but the sea remembered. Waves crashed against the red cliffs down beyond the rock shore, sending plumes of foamy spray skyward, and even the beach-sea swirled and hissed, lapping at the horses' bellies as they dragged their traps through the swells. A storm like that tore the Irish moss from the underwater rocks and set it bobbing free in the churning sea. Then, the percherons would go to work, dredging it up from the tide in sopping traps so heavy that only the strongest animals could budge them. Bertie Shakespeare and his sons dried the stuff, baled it, and sent it off to a factory on the mainland where it had something improbable to do with canned food. They were beautiful animals, though, and Bertie was rightly proud of them.

Farther out over the harbor now and Shirley relaxed, setting the machine to cruise and looking back over his shoulder to check on Gil. His nephew flashed him a brilliant grin and a thumbs up,
evidently unbothered by the cramped quarters. Shirley pulled the Cub into a lazy circle, letting it drift slow and wide over the water.

An energetic tap at his shoulder made Shirley cock his head to listen.

"Look!" Gil shouted over the whir of propellor and the rush of wind. "Carl!"

The boy gestured to starboard, indicating the distinctive green hull of the *Sweet Flag* plowing the waves far below. Homeward bound, by the look of her.

*Good. He shouldn't have gone out yesterday. Sea still unsettled. Blasted birds.*

Shirley nodded back. Then, he dipped the Cub's nose and eased into a slow dive.

It wasn't a machine for aerial acrobatics, but it flew low and slow, perfect for buzzing by to say hello. Down and down, until they were barely 100 feet above the sea when they passed over the *Sweet Flag*. Carl must have waved because Gil was waving back, leaning so far out of the cabin that Shirley had to roll in the other direction to maintain equilibrium.

*I'll call later.*

Shirley turned toward the coast, aiming for the Four Winds light. From there, it was only a quick jaunt over to the mellow green house that Rilla and Ken had bought as a summer place after Cornelia Bryant passed. They might have preferred to take over the old House of Dreams, but that abode was occupied year-round now, a retirement home for the happy couple who had named it nearly fifty years ago. Anne Blythe had teased that Gilbert would never stop working unless he were physically separated from the Ingleside telephone. Leslie had come back for the party, of course, staying in a comfortable hotel with Persis' family, but with Owen gone, she had been happy to turn the keys over to her old friends. Provided, she said, that they looked after the roses.

Shirley craned his neck as they passed over the House of Dreams. Yes, there was Mother, the bright circle of her broad straw hat unmistakable amidst the green and partifloral of her beloved garden. She looked up at the Cub's whine and there went Gil again, insisting on testing the limits of balance.

Over the red harbor roads and toward the Glen. Past Ingleside, where the Blythe girls had already hung buntings and canopies for tomorrow's anniversary party. Rilla and Ken Ford had been married twenty years and planned to mark the occasion with a grand gathering of family, friends, and neighbors.

*Wasn't once enough?*

Well, that was a problem for tomorrow. For now, the Cub soared out over Rainbow Valley, over the manse, over the village. Farther on, its shadow fell over the neighborless little gray house on the Lowbridge Road before turning toward fields and woods and marshy places where reeds grew in thick, whispering stands. Home was down there somewhere, but they had broken free of its gravity, tethered only by the promise of a warm supper when sunset had put an edge on the nipping wind. But for now, the Cub sailed on, toward an indistinct horizon where the blue of sea and the blue of sky mingled, indistinguishable from one another.

***

"Can I really fly it tomorrow?" Gil asked, knees bouncing so that they rattled the teacups on Shirley's kitchen table.
Shirley scooped a short stack of letters out of spilling range and onto a nearby chair. The mail was the only thing out of place in the one-room apartment: clean-swept and sparsely furnished, the single bookshelf bearing one green volume and a regimented row of back issues of *Aerial Age Weekly*, the neat bed with corners tight enough to please both Susan and the RAF.

"That depends," Shirley answered, reaching down to scratch Muggins' ears as she sat beside him. "Tell me, what's a good cruising speed for that machine?"

"75 miles per hour," Gil answered without hesitation.

"And how high would you take it?"

"Oh, not over 1,000 feet. Though I notice you kept us very low today."

Shirley nodded. "And your RPMs at cruising would be . . ."

Gil squinted. "2150?"

"And on takeoff . . ."

"Lift the tail first. I know! I was listening!"


"I can fly it?"

"Tomorrow morning. Before the party. Be here at 8."

Gil's face split in the sort of grin native to toothpaste advertisements. He took another piece of shortbread from the plate in the center of the table and crammed it into his mouth.

Shirley buried his nose in his teacup to keep from grinning back. Gilbert Ford was entirely too pleased with himself already and it wouldn't do to praise him, even if Shirley had been the fawning sort.

"I read in the paper that the RAF is doing air defense tests," Gil said through a mouthful of crumbs. "Thousands of planes flying over Britain, just getting ready."

Shirley did not reply, glad of the shielding cup.

"Do you think there'll be another war, Uncle Shirley?"

"I hope not," Shirley replied. There was no ignoring the headlines, nor the none-too-reassuring reassurances broadcast over the radio. This wasn't like last time, when all the world had been ambushed by the guns of August. This time, it stalked them in the open, as a wolfpack circling a limping calf on the tundra, the inexorable noose closing no matter which way they dashed.

*Another war.*

"What was it like?" Gil asked, shining-eyed and breathless.

*What was it like? Even if there were words, they wouldn't make any sense to him.*

"I puked a lot."

"What?" Gil recoiled, not having expected any answer, let alone one so incongruous. But how
could Shirley tell him anything but the baldest facts?

Shirley shrugged. "Every time I got in a fight — a real fight — I'd puke when it was over."

Gil wrinkled his nose. But it was not every day that Uncle Shirley talked about the War at all, and Gil was not about to give up the opportunity to find out whatever he could.

"I read about you in *Flying Aces,*" he ventured.

Shirley snorted. "Was I Kerry Keene or Phineas Pinkham?"

"No, it was really you!" replied earnest Gil. "They publish real news, too, you know."

"Very old news, if I was in it."

"You were great," Gil breathed, gray-blue eyes alight.

"Was I?"

Gil appeared not to hear him. "They had your picture and everything. Thirty-four kills! You were a top-10 ace!"

"That's top-10 for Canada, not the whole RAF," Shirley demurred.

"Still!" Gil lolled theatrically over the tabletop. "I want to be just like you, Uncle Shirley."

"Don't let your father hear you say that," Shirley muttered.

"What? Why not?"

Shirley was brought up short. He did not often speak impulsively, and had to cast about for an acceptable reply to cover his mistake.

"You know why everyone thinks fighter pilots are young?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

"Because they don't tend to grow very old."

Gil scoffed.

"Your parents have big plans for you," Shirley persisted. "Being like me isn't any part of that."

"But you were so brave."

There it was again. That hero-worship. Flattering, to be sure, but Shirley did not need flattery. And this sort of thinking needed to be quashed without mercy.

Shirley shook his head. "No," he said. "Listen to me, Gil, this is serious. Everyone thinks a great pilot is brave. But they're wrong. A great pilot is meticulous."

He paused, checking to be sure that Gil was paying proper attention. The gray eyes were wide under their fringe of golden lashes; the boy hung on his every word.

Shirley spoke with grave deliberation, as if he could armor his nephew in good advice. "Every time you go up — every single time — you have to be in command of every detail. Aware of everything. Your surroundings. Your equipment. Your own body. You have to take risks, of
course, but small ones. Well-considered. If you get reckless in a fight, everyone will talk about how brave you were while they're attending your funeral."

A flicker of fear crossed Gil's face at this last.

Good. He should be scared.

"That goes for ordinary flying, too," Shirley said, sitting back, arms folded casually over his chest. "Don't be brave. Be precise. Every time. Is that clear?"

Gil nodded, swallowing at the same time, so that he resembled a golden prince only recently ransomed from froghood.

"Right. Tomorrow morning then?" Shirley asked, rising to clear away the teacups.

"Tomorrow morning," Gil answered in the soberest tone in his register.

It wouldn't do to send him off hang-dog, though. He was a good kid. And there was no war. Not yet. Maybe he wouldn't need the warning.

Shirley turned back from the dishpan and clapped a broad hand to Gil's shoulder.

"You're a born pilot, Gil. And I'll make sure you're a well-trained one, too."

"Thanks, Uncle Shirley."

The boy bestowed a convulsive hug, just as he had when he was a freckle-faced child, spending his summers flying balsa-wood gliders and begging for a ride in the Curtiss. Shirley held him for a moment, hoping against hope that they would have many a summer yet to let him test his wings.

***

When Gil had disappeared through the door with a farewell pat for Muggins and a promise to return at eight o'clock sharp, Shirley turned back to the dish basin. He rinsed the tea things and put away the plate of shortbread. Everything tidy now. Except . . .

Shirley retrieved the pile of mail from the kitchen chair. There was little enough of it — some circulars and bills and a note requesting a bird's eye tour of the Island. Once, there might have been an unsigned postcard from Berlin or a pristine issue of Der Eigene, useless to Shirley, who couldn't read a word of German. But it was the thought that counted. The last of those dispatches had arrived years ago — a postcard: You were right. No explanation necessary. At the time, Shirley had thought it was something to celebrate; five years of silence later, he could barely stand to imagine what it might really mean.

Shuffling to the bottom of the pile, Shirley drew out the only letter of any consequence.

Crossing to the telephone, he placed a call to the little gray house on the Lowbridge Road.

"Hello? Una? Yes, I'm fine. How are you? Listen, I saw Carl coming in when I was out over the harbor . . . No, that's alright, I didn't think he'd be home yet. I was just wondering: would it be alright if I came over for supper tonight? There's something I need to talk to him about . . . No, everything's fine . . . Yes . . . That sounds fine . . . Alright. I'll see you at six. Thanks."

Shirley hung up and sought the comfort of the old oak rocking chair that had stood so long by the window seat in the kitchen at Ingleside. Muggins trotted over and laid down before him, resting
her graying muzzle on his foot. It was a small weight for so great a comfort, but it did not change
the writing on the envelope. Sighing, Shirley ran a thumb over the eagle insignia in the corner:

RCAF: Royal Canadian Air Force.
Every flat surface in Una's sunny yellow kitchen was crowded with puff pastry. This included the table, the draining board, the chopping block, and each of the four chairs, which held cooling trays at a precarious knee-height that had nearly ended in disaster twice already. The only exception was the stovetop, where Una stirred a fragrant filling of blueberry compote in her largest saucepan.

At forty-three, Una Meredith was much as she had been at twenty: small and bird-boned, with wistful blue eyes and unfashionably long, straight black hair that she wore in a braid coiled at the nape of her neck. Long ago, Mrs. Dr. Blythe had foretold that Una would "make a most lovable woman," and indeed she had.* She was well beloved by her family and her neighbors and particularly by the widows and orphans of St. Elizabeth's, to whom she was a constant friend. Though always happiest in solitary prayer, Una could be counted on to set her hand to any task that needed doing, whether it be rocking a newborn, stitching a shroud, or spending a sweltering late-summer afternoon making 300 last-minute dessert canapés for Rilla Ford's twentieth anniversary party.

This had not been the original plan. Rilla had had her heart set on serving Susan Baker's famous wedding cake to her guests, but an exhaustive search of the Ingleside recipe cards and all Susan's scrupulously annotated cookbooks yielded nothing.

"She thinks I lost the recipe on purpose," Faith had groused yesterday, having escaped the flurry of activity at Ingleside for tea and sympathy at the little gray house. "As if I ever bake anything more complicated than biscuits. I don't think Susan ever wrote it down — you know how she liked to keep her secrets. In any case, it's lost now and nothing can be done about it. That's what I told Rilla, and if she doesn't believe me, she can go jump in the harbor."

"What will you do for dessert?" Una had asked, knowing very well where all this was headed. Thus, Una found herself stirring blueberry compote when the telephone rang on the afternoon before the party. She turned down the heat under her berries and picked her way through the minefield of pastry, expecting that it would be Faith with yet another "one last thing," or perhaps Amelia Newgate checking in. Therefore, the masculine voice on the other end of the line came as something of a surprise.

"Hello? Shirley?" she said. "I hope you're well . . . Yes, I'm fine . . . Oh, did you? He isn't home yet . . . Well of course you're welcome for supper any time. Is anything the matter? . . . You're sure? . . . I'm just finishing up some pastry for Rilla's party. But I should have supper ready for six o'clock if that's alright . . . I'm sure Carl will be home by then. I'll tell him we're expecting you . . . Alright, see you then."

Returning the receiver to its cradle, Una frowned at the telephone. There had been something in Shirley's voice that had been . . . well, not nervous — that wasn't Shirley's way — but something was . . . off. Not the party; Shirley wouldn't care about that one way or another. Perhaps it was just the weather — she had been anxious enough herself when Carl had declared his intention to go out in the aftermath of that terrible storm. But Shirley had seen *Sweet Flag* coming in, so he knew Carl was alright. That couldn't be it.

It was useless to speculate. Carl would be home soon and Shirley would come after, and in the
meantime there were several hundred pastry shells to pack away. Una sang to herself as she filled tin after tin.

Thus, Carl found her rocking an empty Crisco container and starting in on "All Creatures of Our God and King" when he came into the kitchen, mud-spattered and beaming at her choice. He had not picked up much of Una's theology over the years, but was susceptible to St. Francis of Assisi.

Like his sister, Carl Meredith had entered middle age gently, with still-thick hair that remained golden-brown, if perhaps a bit lighter than it had been, and laugh lines that did not fully disappear when his face was in repose. He had mostly avoided the soft and expanding middle that had begun to catch up with Jerry, as Una's table tended toward economy, rather than toward Nan's indulgent confections, current appearances notwithstanding.

Carl dropped his rumpled rucksack at the door and stepped behind his sister, wrapping sweat-stained arms around her waist and resting his chin on her shoulder.

"Had a good trip?" she asked, covering her tin protectively.

Carl gave her a stubbly peck on the cheek and desisted, if only to filch a pastry from the counter and munch it, grinning. "Excellent. I think some of the seabird populations are finally starting to recover from the Eel Grass Blight of '31."

Carl was, without a doubt, the only person on the Island who remembered 1931 primarily as a hard year for the eel grass. But Una was used to the oddities of his attention by now and said only, "Do try to eat the broken ones, won't you?"

He obliged, popping another puff into his mouth and grinning when Una shook her head at him.

"I thought you'd be in Lowbridge this time of day," Carl said through crumbs.

"I meant to be. But Faith was here yesterday tearing her hair out over the party, so I told her I'd take over dessert. Amelia is covering the Altar Guild duties for me. Oh, and Shirley's coming to supper tonight."

Carl brightened. "Is he? That's good. I saw him out flying with Gil when I was coming in. I'd have thought Faith would have dragooned him into helping up at Ingleside."

"Has to catch him first, doesn't she?"

"Ah, well, that explains why he was out over the water," Carl said, taking a third. "Nan and Jerry here yet?"

"They were due at the manse this morning. I was planning on stopping by after supper to see the girls."

"Great! I'll come, too."

"No, that's alright," Una said, hurrying to gather what puffs she could from the counter before they all disappeared. "You stay. I'll go."

"Una," Carl sighed, "you don't have to run out of your own house every time Shirley walks through the door."

"I know. But he mentioned that he had something in particular to discuss with you."
"Didn't say what it was, though?"

"No."

"Well, he certainly doesn't need another plane. A thousand dollars! To go joyriding with Gil, looking like a flying daffodil!"

Una smiled. "You should tell him that."

"What makes you think I haven't?" Carl broke off a piece of his fourth puff and dangled it in front of his jacket pocket until a wee, twitching nose poked out to investigate.

"Carl!" Una exclaimed. "We said no more rats!"

"It's not a rat," Carl said, indignant. "It's a mink!"

Una's eyes widened. "A mink?! You mean a vicious little weasel?"

"Shhh. You'll hurt his feelings."

Over the years, the little gray house had played host to a rotating menagerie of snakes, turtles, and rodents of every description. These were not properly pets, only occasional companions, particularly after the advent of Muggins. The rat ban dated to a particularly memorable Sunday memorialized in perpetuity by the bloodstains that never quite came out of the hall carpet.

"You'll have to get rid of it," Una said resolutely.

"I know," Carl said fondly as the mink sniffed disdainfully at his bloodless offering. "But I couldn't leave him out at the bird colony. He'd wreak merry havoc among the chicks, and with the population still recovering . . ."

Una waved her hand. "Just get rid of it."

"Don't you want to pet him?" Carl asked, scooping the lithe body out of his pocket. "He's so very soft."

Una acquiesced, agreeing that the mink was, indeed, beautifully soft, though also rather sharp-toothed and decidedly inconvenient. Satisfied with the justice of this assessment, Carl went to set his companion free on the shore of Pelham's Pond, promising that he would wash up on his return. That left Una to her packing and her singing, the joyful tune soaring above the melancholy words as she scooped blueberry compote into a jar.

After dinner, when Una had gone to the manse and the dishes had been returned to their rack on the wall, Carl and Shirley sat down to tea and a plate of those unfortunate puff pastries rejected as insufficiently symmetrical to appear at the anniversary party.

To the unpracticed eye, Shirley might have appeared to be sipping his tea with equanimity. Carl, whose eye was expert in many things, not least among them the mannerisms of Shirley Blythe, was not deceived. There was a certain pattern of movement — the strong, brown thumb tracing along the indigo scrollwork on the bowl of the cup, curve up, curve down, and back again — that never spelled anything but trouble. Carl had never called Shirley's attention to this particular tic. It was a useful omen and if he had known that it gave him away with such astonishing accuracy, he certainly would have squelched it through sheer force of will.
"How are the birds?" Shirley asked placidly.

Carl pursed his lips. "They're fine."

"That's good. Sea not too rough?"

"Did you really come over to discuss the weather?"

"No," Shirley admitted.

Curve up, curve down.

"Well, out with it then," Carl said. "If it's another plane, I don't know where you're going to put it. You can only fly one at a time. And between the old one and the homebuilts and that lemon monstrosity . . ."

"It's not a plane. Not exactly."

"Not exactly?"

"You've been following the news?"

Who hadn't? Impossible to avoid, even if you spent a good amount of time among the birds.

"I try not to, actually," Carl said, not quite able to maintain the appearance of nonchalance as he sipped his tea.

"But you have?"

Carl clicked his cup into its saucer. "Which bit? The Germans getting restless on the Polish border? The Soviets negotiating a pact? The Brits practicing blackouts? Prime Minister King promising that there's absolutely, positively nothing to see here, no siree?"

Shirley chewed his lip and sighed. "Yes. All of that."

"What about it?"

"There's a war coming. A big one."

Everyone knew it; no one said it. Trust Shirley not to care about the rules. He was still looking down, examining the dregs of his tea as if hoping to read the leaves. That, more than the imminent prospect of war, kindled the familiar flutterings of fear on Carl's periphery.

"Are you worried about Gil?" Carl asked.

"Of course I am."

Carl placed a reassuring hand on Shirley's shoulder, the answering warmth steadying his own nerves. "He won't go. Rilla and Ken won't let him."

The knot under Carl's hand did not relax in response to his caress. "Do you think our parents wanted to let us go?" Shirley murmured.

"We know better than they did. Gil won't go."

"I don't see how anyone can stop him. If it comes to war, they'll all go. Gil and Sam and Wally
"No," Carl said. "Jem and Faith won't allow it. They've given enough. We all have."

In the silence, the small, everyday sounds of the house expanded to fill the available space. A board creaked somewhere upstairs; wind rattled the metal chimney pipe behind the stove; Muggins snuffled on the hearth rug as she chased squirrels in her sleep.

The muscles of Shirley's arm moved, not toward an embrace, but toward his pocket. The envelope was folded in half, but he smoothed it as he laid it on the table between them.

Did the Royal Canadian Air Force have to use that particular insignia on its letterhead? It seemed unaccountably cruel to read *Per Ardua Ad Astra* under eagle's wings in this moment.

"What's that?" Carl asked, pulling his hand back to himself.

Either Shirley was choosing his words carefully or time was slowing down. Possibly both.

"Remember that Air Staff officer I met in Toronto last year? He's asking for help. They need instructors to teach the boys how to fly."

"Well I don't think Gil's quite ready to teach yet, is he?" Carl said, the feeble joke crumpling before the relentless onslaught of the truth.

"No."

Shirley looked up then, giving eye contact for the first time since Una had left the house. Brown eyes deep and soft and not laughing at all.

Carl was used to fear. It came at odd times, unbidden, untethered to circumstance. His mind would sizzle and flare, reacting to dangers that didn't exist, stealing his breath and jolting his heart into a wild gallop. When that happened, Carl knew to put himself somewhere safe — under the pear trees or in a little nook in Rainbow Valley — and let it pass, breathing in and out until his brain caught on that there was no need to panic. He didn't know what to do when his brain was right.

"You can't be serious," he said, voice faint with disbelief.

"Someone needs to teach them."

"Well, they can find someone else."

"There aren't really many Canadians with my experience flying in combat . . ."

"Sure there are!" Carl snapped. "Plenty of 'em. Only they're all rotting in the ground in France, aren't they! You can just tell the Air Force you're not interested."

"I won't be going overseas. Only to Ontario . . ."

"Only Ontario?"

"Yes."

"That's how they'll get you in the door. But Hitler puts a toe over the line in Poland and you'll be off for Round Two with the rest."

"I'm just going to be teaching . . ."
Carl sat back in his chair, amazed. "Wait," he said, scrutinizing the misery writ plain across Shirley's face. "You've already decided to do it. You're not here to ask me. You're just here to inform me."

"Carl . . ."

"The Air Force! Again! You've got to be joking!"

"Kit . . ."

"Why do they want you anyway? Aren't you a bit old for them?"

It was maddening, really, the way the little spark of humor changed Shirley's whole face without moving a muscle. Most people said that Jem was the one who could charm honey from the bees, but that was only because Shirley couldn't be bothered with most people.

"Am I so decrepit?"

He wasn't. Shirley had turned 40 in the spring, and even an unbiased observer would have agreed that he was nearly as fit as he had been in his RAF days. Always tall and broad-shouldered, he had solidified over the years, losing whatever boyish looseness had survived the War. The taciturnity that had seemed incongruous in youth had matured into a stately reserve that made his hoarded smiles all the more precious by contrast. Sitting in a darkened Kingsport movie house listening to a hundred patrons sighing over Errol Flynn in green technicolor tights, Carl could smile with secret satisfaction at his own good fortune. It was difficult to say whether Shirley was more striking emerging grease-stained from under an engine, or dripping in the surf off some lonely beach, or sitting tensely at the table in Una's kitchen, tight and terse and distressingly able-bodied.

"Don't do this," Carl said. "You did your bit. More than. Don't go back."

Shirley shook his head. "Gil will go. They all will. I can't protect them, but I can teach them what I know. Maybe get them out of a scrape. Bring them back whole."

"Nobody comes back whole," Carl muttered miserably.

Shirley did not try to refute the obvious. Instead, he rolled his shoulders uncomfortably and said, "It's only Ontario."

"It's already decided?"

"Please, Carl. I have to do this."

"No, you don't."

The corners of Shirley's mouth tightened visibly. Carl had seen him angry before, but it was quite rare for him to display any annoyance Carl-ward. In fact, now that Carl thought about it, Shirley always treated him gingerly when they disagreed. Why was that?

Shirley drew a breath through his nose, but spoke calmly. "I know that you don't want me to leave. I wouldn't do it for anything less than a real emergency. But I can help — I really can. I know it’s a risk leaving you, but can’t you spare me just for a little while?"

A risk? Carl wan’t exactly sure he followed, but it was difficult to focus when he could feel every thread in his shirt, the soft cotton turning to burrs that pricked his skin with ten thousand needle-points of heat. If Shirley had decided that something needed to be done, no matter how dirty or
disagreeable, he would do it in his cool, business-like way, and no one, not even Carl, could stop him.** Stubborn ass. Carl hadn't bothered to put on a tie, but there was still a knot around his throat, cinching his collar tighter and tighter.

“You really think you should go?” he asked as calmly as he could.

“I really do.”

Carl mustered his courage and let his eye flutter shut. “When would you leave?”

"I'm supposed to report to Camp Borden in two weeks."

"Just two weeks?"

"I'm sorry."

"Then don't go. You're not being conscripted, are you? Just don't go."

"I have to protect the line," Shirley said with a note of distress that frightened Carl even more. “Please. I couldn't live with myself if the boys went and I just watched them go.”

Carl's heart still rebelled, not having had time to grow reconciled. Even knowing what it meant to go to war, he could still say with equanimity that it was easier to give yourself than it was to give someone else. But there was a Call greater and more insistent than the call of love. Shirley had listened to it, and Carl must not add to the bitterness of his sacrifice.***

"Shall I call you Flight Commander, then?" he asked, trying for a smile that sputtered and died before it rose to his lips.

Shirley rubbed a broad hand across the back of his neck. “It’s . . . um . . . Squadron Leader, actually. They offered me a promotion."

"Squadron Leader? What's that in Army terms?"

"Major."

"Fancy."

"Carl . . ."

Carl pushed back from the table and stood. "I think I need to go for a walk."

"Can I come with you?"

“No!”

Shirley blinked and Carl was doused in instant regret, but it was true. He needed space, trees, sky, not more empty reassurance. But . . .

but . . .

time, always precious, had suddenly become so much dearer. There would be long days of all the space Carl could ever want, weeks of it, or months, or years, or even . . .

"You're leaving," he said, face crumpling.
"Only for a little while."

Carl's scoff came out half a sob. "Let me guess. The war will be over by Christmas?"

"I'm not going to war, Kit. I'm going to Ontario."

"You're leaving."

Shirley reached out and settled a hand on Carl's hip. "Not at this very moment."

The shirt came untucked as Shirley pulled him closer, just a little at first and then more as he slid a cool, smooth hand around Carl's back. This helped, too — being anchored to the present moment through the overwhelming sensation of determined lips and a seeking tongue. Distant trees lost their appeal as the lacerating pins separated from Carl's skin, pulling away with his rucked-up hem, then vanishing altogether, dropping forgotten to the kitchen floor. The plate of pastries followed, crashing in a shower of china shards and flaky crumbs that were still scattered across the tiles when Una came home to a sleeping house hours later.

Notes:

*Rainbow Valley*, chapter 26: "Miss Cornelia Gets a New Point of View"

**Rilla of Ingleside**, chapter 25: "Shirley Goes"

***Rilla of Ingleside*, chapter 14: "The Valley of Decision"
Many Happy Returns

September 1, 1939

Shirley leaned against an oak tree near the Glen St. Mary train station, reducing a stick to curled shavings with his pocketknife. He'd carried the knife for more than twenty years, ever since he won it in a poker game off of one of his roommates. Dwyer? Durban? Something like that. Whatever his name, he'd gone out on a training flight one day and never come back. It was a good knife, with a little folding corkscrew that had come in handy more than once, though the wooden handle had begun to shrink away from the blade. Well, they were none of them as young as they used to be.

The noon train from Charlottetown pulled into the station, wheezing to a stop and disgorging several passengers onto the platform. Shirley looked up from his whittling, searching until he spied a tall, square-shouldered woman wearing a smart, forest-green blouse over wide-legged trousers. Her short red curls were threaded with silver under a sleek brown hat and she carried a leather valise. She spotted him before he reached her and opened her arms for a hug.

"Shirley!" Di cried, pulling him in close. "You're looking very handsome."

"You too," he said, smirking. "Trousers? In Glen St. Mary?"

"Well I was hardly going to buy a dress just for this," she snorted. "Syl offered to lend me one, but she's so much shorter that it would have been a scandal either way. Besides, she's forever wearing pink and I never can."

Di took Shirley's arm and they started toward the Glen street, disregarding any odd looks from passersby.

"So no Sylvia this weekend?" Shirley asked.

"No." Di said crisply. "She's delighted to have a quiet weekend at home. How's Carl?"

Shirley grimaced. "Oh, you know Carl. Worrying."

"I don't doubt it," Di said in sober tones. "The news these days . . ."

She shook her head as if to clear it, but there was no banishing the gathering stormclouds. Even here, in sunny Glen St. Mary, they passed a dozen people hidden behind morning editions of the Charlottetown Guardian — LONDON VIEWS SITUATION WITH DEEPEST GRAVITY — and a small crowd that had gathered around the radio at Miller Douglas's store.*

"Odd day for a party, isn't it?" Shirley observed grimly.

"And how is the happy couple?" Di asked through a determined smile.

"Well, Ken hasn't shown up at my door with the Mounties yet, so I assume they're busy."

"He's not still on about Gil spending time with you, is he?"

Shirley gave a derisive snort. "Still afraid I'm going to corrupt his precious boy."

Di squeezed his arm. "You did, too. You made him fall in love with those death traps of yours."
"I don't think it's the planes Ken's worried about."

"Well he should be," Di sniffed.

They walked on through the Glen street, passing the post office and Link Drew's little lunch counter, nodding greetings to Fred Arnold and his teenage son. Beyond the Glen Pond, the street began its ascent to Ingleside, where a great white tent loomed among the ancient hardwoods and the hum of merry voices floated on the gentle breeze. The whole family was up there, along with their friends and neighbors, and there might not be another quiet moment.

"Wait a minute, Di," Shirley said, halting abruptly at the bottom of the lane.

She blinked her confusion, but paused, alert at the fervor of his tone. "What is it, love?"

*No sense in sugarcoating.*

"I . . . I've been called up. To the training base at Camp Borden. I leave for Ontario in two weeks."

Di's eyes were very round and very green, her intake of breath sharp and audible. "You can't mean . . . you aren't going back into the army?"

"It's the Air Force, actually . . ." he muttered.

"Oh, Shirley, no."

"They need flight instructors."

She caught his hand and squeezed, exhaling through her nose. "It was never supposed to happen again," she murmured.

"I know."

"The last war's babies are barely old enough . . ."

"I know."

"You haven't told Mother, have you?"

Shirley shook his head. "I thought . . . maybe after the party."

Di's lips twisted in sympathy. "Afraid she'll be angrier than Carl?"

It was a feeble attempt to lighten the moment, but Shirley stretched out his hand for the lifeline. "I don't think that's possible."

"Oh, Shirley." Di's hand on his cheek was soft but firm, a caress and a brace all at once. It wasn't disappointment in her voice, but something more resolute, a grim determination to face the inevitable.

"It's only Ontario," he protested feebly.

Di shook her head and patted his cheek forcefully, stopping just short of a slap. "Had much success with that line of argument, have you?"

"No."
"Didn't think so."

"I just wanted you to know."

Di smiled sadly, but the shock had worn off and it was down to business as usual. Good old Di. "Is there anything I can do to help you?" she asked.

Shirley could have said no, he could handle this himself. After all, he’d had a tepid truce with Mum and Dad lately. He’d even volunteered to go down to the old House of Dreams this past spring to help Mum repair the shell-lined paths in the garden, and that had gone alright. Still, Di always seemed to know what to say to them, and it couldn't hurt to have her on his wing.

"Maybe stay after the party with me? When I tell them?"

Di hefted her valise into view. "I'm staying overnight with Faith and Jem," she said. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Thanks, Di."

She squared her padded shoulders and tossed her head briskly. "Alright, flyboy," she said. "Are you ready for Rilla's twentieth anniversary party?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

With a nod and a determined stride, they walked hand-in-hand toward Ingleside, prepared to face whatever the day might bring.

***

The magnificent old hardwoods of Ingleside were at the height of their late-summer glory, lush with dark green canopies that shaded the gaily dressed crowd. Victoria Ford had helped Jemmy and Cecilia Blythe festoon the boughs with crepe streamers and bedeck the white tent with a hand-painted banner reading, "Many Happy Returns!" Rilla and Ken, beaming in silk voile and seersucker, stood beneath it, greeting Mary Douglas with cheek kisses and exclamations of delight.

All of the original wedding guests had been invited, along with the spouses and children they had accumulated in the intervening decades. Shouts of youthful laughter from Rainbow Valley floated up the lawn accompanied by the ever-so-faint tinkle of fairy bells. Closer to the house, the eldest of the post-war babies flirted and flounced, giggling into their glasses of iced lemonade while their parents and grandparents howled over re-told tales and distilled gossip.

Escorting Di toward the veranda, Shirley looked for Carl and found him under the star-leaved horse chestnut, chatting with Bruce and a heavily pregnant Agnes. Beyond, Jerry and Nan's girls flitted between the trees like a flock of brightly colored raptors while their parents helped Faith and Jem carry laden platters from the kitchen to the buffet table. Nearby, Wally Blythe danced attendance on Zoe Maylock, the flaxen-haired belle of Lowbridge, whose presence at his side was something of a victory for the gangly, red-headed lad. It was widely known that his grandparents were not enthusiastic about the match, perhaps out of loyalty to Dr. Parker, whose grandson had been unceremoniously jilted by the fair Miss Matlock last summer. There had been rumors that a Mr. Gilbert Ford of Toronto had had something or other to do with that unfortunate business, but Shirley had never asked and Gil had never told. Either way, Gil was nowhere in sight and Wally appeared to be delighted with his companion, so what did it matter??

Shirley and Di climbed the veranda steps toward a circle of elderly revelers who were quite as giddy as the young fry. John Meredith caught sight of Shirley first and suddenly remembered an
urgent engagement elsewhere, but he was hardly missed in the clamor of greeting.

"Di!" Mother exclaimed, hurrying across the porch with all the verve that seventy-four could muster on an arthritic ankle. "Darling, we've missed you!"

"Sorry I couldn't get away earlier," Di said as they embraced. "Babies have notoriously inconvenient timing."

"I recommend retirement," said Dr. Blythe, greeting his daughter with a kiss. "No midnight calls. Best sleep I've had since I was a baby myself."

"I wanted to take the phone out entirely," said Mother. "Drastic measures, you know. Even moving out of Ingleside didn't convince him to stop entirely."

"Oh, I've hung up my stethoscope," he objected, ruffling his steel-gray curls. "I just give a little free advice here and there."

"By which he means that any trip to the post office invariably turns into an impromptu clinic," Mother said, patting Di's hand and leading her toward the group, where she was engulfed in salutations from Rosemary Meredith and Aunt Leslie and Aunt Diana and Uncle Fred and Auntie Phil and the Reverend Jo. Shirley thought he might be able to slip away unnoticed . . .

"So Gil tells me you let him fly your new plane," Dad said jovially.

"Ah . . . yep," Shirley replied. "This morning."

"How'd he do?"

"Well, we're both still alive," Shirley said noncommittally.

"He gave me the impression that it went very well."

Dad had only a passing interest in flying, but he was making an effort to converse, and Shirley reminded himself that he didn't have to freeze him out. You could meet him halfway.

"It did go well," Shirley said, consciously relaxing. "He's very good. Intuitive. He needs a good scare or two to make sure he's always as careful as he should be, but he'll be better than I am someday."

Shirley was confused by his father's dazzling, chuckle-laced grin. Had he said something funny?

"Would it surprise you," his father said, slapping him on the shoulder, "to know that that's exactly what I used to say about Jem when he was a kid?"

"Jem?" Shirley asked, brow quirked.

"That he was a natural at medicine, but he needed a good scare to make him careful."

"Did he get it?" Shirley asked.

A shadow passed over the hazel eyes, dimming their sparkle, though they still shone.

"He came home careful."

Shirley looked out over the lawn, scanning until he spotted Gil, golden crown thrown back in
merriment as he joked with Sam Blythe and Jims Anderson.

He almost said, *at least he came back.*

But truth be told, he didn't want to hear what Dad might have to say about that.

***

Lunch was served, but only after the assembled guests gathered 'round to witness Rilla and Ken renew their vows under a trellis of late-summer roses, fragrant and drooping under their own weight. Shirley retreated to the fringes of the crowd and lit a cigarette. After all, they were already married, weren't they? Wasn't once enough?

But the ceremony was mercifully short and soon the renewlyweds were leading their jubilant guests to the buffet, where they loaded their plates with flaky biscuits and chicken salad, tomato pickles and crustless sandwiches, dressed greens and creamy custards.

Shirley took spartan helpings, not feeling equal to the festivities. He wasn't sure where to sit, either. The family had retired to one of the long tables, with the older crowd taking up the lower end while the various Blythes and Merediths found seats below the bride and groom. Even Una had been convinced to stop running back and forth to the kitchen long enough to enjoy the meal. Rather than commit to a seat, Shirley stood beside a nearby tent pole, close to the table if not quite at it.

"We'll have to do this all again next year," Rilla sighed, "for Mother and Dad's 50th."

"Fiftieth?" Dr. Blythe called down the table. "Impossible! I'm not a day over forty!"

The company rewarded this jest with rather too much over-bright laughter while Dr. Blythe met his own bride's exasperation with a twinkling grin.

"Our fiftieth anniversary was lovely," said Aunt Diana, reaching for Uncle Fred's hand. "The children treated us to dinner at the White Sands hotel. Small Anne Cordelia even wrote a little poem to commemorate the occasion."

"I forgot all about ours," Auntie Phil admitted. "I would have missed it entirely, except that it was the same day as a concert to raise money toward a new furnace for the church. Jo had the children's choir learn 'Let Me Call You Sweetheart' and presented me with fifty chrysanthemums."

Nan turned starry eyes toward Jerry. "It's hard to believe it's seventeen years for us."

Jerry pursed his lips and patted his waistcoat. "Seventeen? Are you sure about that?"

Nan poked him smartly, provoking a round of indulgent chuckles. "Of course I am. You graduated Law School in '22 and we got married that May. Seventeen years."

There was something mischievous in Jerry's smirk as he caught his wife's hand and pressed a kiss to her fingers. "Oh, well," he said. "I could have sworn it was twenty. As they say, *ipsum matrimonium.*"

Nan gave him a warning look, but he only chuckled and leaned over his potato salad to kiss her on the cheek. Shirley was quite certain he caught a flash of blue out of the corner of his eye, but by the time he looked, Carl was absorbed in his green beans, eye fixed resolutely on his plate.

"Your wedding was lovely, Nan," Rilla smiled. "I have one of the photos framed in my parlor at home so I can always remember us all as happy as we were that day. I wanted to make Susan's
wedding cake for today, to remember her by, but nobody knows the recipe."

That was news to Shirley, but far be it for him to contradict the bride.

"Whose idea was it to throw daisies at your wedding?" Ken asked. "That's what I remember from that day — your daisy tunnel and cheering when you kissed on the bridge."

*Carl in his groomsmen's tailcoat, leading Di through a foxtrot, a stolen moment under the candling horse chestnut, a soft brush of sleeve against sleeve and some blather about castles and monsters . . .*

"All credit to my best man," Jerry said, raising his lemonade in salute to Jem. "A true romantic at heart."

"Do you ever regret not having a wedding, Faith?" Rilla asked earnestly.

Faith, who had just put a rather large forkful of chicken into her mouth, seemed caught between chewing and choking. She pressed a napkin over her lips to swallow, all the time looking across the table at Jem with her hilarity barely bottled.

"I'm fairly certain I did have a wedding," she said when she could speak.

"But I mean a *proper* wedding. With bridesmaids and cake and dancing . . ."*

"What do you say, Jem?" Faith asked, one honey-brown brow arched in challenge. "Do you regret not having a proper wedding?"

Jem's own incredulous laughter was infectious, plunging most of the table into a round of side-splitting mirth. Even Shirley, still standing by the tent pole with his plate in hand, cracked a smile.

It was short-lived.

Before the company could muster another round of do-you-remembers, there was a commotion up by the house.

"It's happening!" came a boyish shout that struck Shirley's heart like a driven icicle.

All attention pivoted toward the veranda, where Gil Ford leaned over the rail with Sam and Wally and Jims, shouting, "It just came over the radio! Germany has invaded Poland!"

*Beneath the blinking eye of the Four Winds light, Shirley had danced enough to throw off any suspicion, enduring the company of Irene Howard and Ethel Reese and a put-upon Miranda Pryor. He didn't dare seek Carl out overtly, but suspected he might be in the lighthouse kitchen with Una, pulling taffy with the others who couldn't or wouldn't dance. Shirley was technically Una's escort, wasn't he? It was only gentlemanly to check on the indoor crowd.*

*He had only just made his way to the door when Jack Elliott pushed past him, brandishing a folded Charlottetown newspaper and announcing to the room, "England declared war on Germany today." Outside, Ned Burr's fiddle had stopped and a low moan rose from the gulf, the presage of a storm already on its way up the Atlantic. Shirley looked across the crowded, buzzing room and found Carl staring back at him, both blue eyes startled wide.***

The boys made their way across the lawn and into the tent.

"It'll be war!" Wally said, his voice cracking on the awful word.
Jem cleared his throat, all his mirth lost. "Has England made a formal declaration?"

"Not yet," Sam said. "But the CBC says that Britain and France are mobilizing their reservists, and Parliament has been summoned for this evening."

"Then we'll just have to wait and see what they decide," his grandfather said with a desperate look at his own eldest son.

"Oh, they'll declare war," Gil Ford said, face alight. "They have to."

There was a general muttering, punctuated by cries of despair.

*There had been light surprise and idle interest in the lighthouse kitchen, but few had realized the import of the message — fewer still had realized that it meant anything to them. The fiddle started again, and soon nearly everyone was chattering just as they had been before. Walter had turned pale and left the room, but he was one of the few.*

*Shirley fought his way through the throng til he reached Carl's side. "A war?" he asked, disbelieving.*

"Not for us, I don't think," said Carl, who was still two months shy of seventeen. "Do you suppose Jerry will go? And Jem?"

"I guess so," Shirley shrugged. "Jem always said he wanted to be a soldier. I don't see how anyone could stop him."

"Please!" Ken Ford said, standing and calling out in a commanding voice. "Please, everyone! We don't know anything for certain yet. I would ask everyone to keep calm and wait until we have definite news."

"But Dad . . ." Gil protested, breaking off at the look of warning in his father's eye.

"There's no reason to rush into anything," Jem agreed, standing shoulder to shoulder with Ken. "We'll know what there is to know soon enough."

"Do you think they'll call for volunteers, Dad?" Sam asked.

Jem's eyes fluttered shut for a moment and Shirley saw the gray shadow of age fall across his face. "I hope not, Sam."

"Well, if they do, I'm for the RCAF," Gil said, bowling over any objections. "I can fly as well as anybody, can't I Uncle Shirley?"

Shirley had no wish to be drawn into this conversation, but was transfixed by the score of heads that swiveled toward him.

"It's not my place to say," he said quietly.

"Fiddlesticks!" Gil shot back.

"Gilbert!" Rilla warned, but her son ignored her.

"You know flying better than anyone," Gil said, half-accusingly. "Why, if they call men 18 to 45 like they did last time, you'll go again yourself, won't you?"

The flurry of admonitions from parents and grandparents alike gave Shirley cover to dart a glance
toward the place where Carl had been sitting beside Di a moment ago. His chair was empty, and Shirley caught a fleeting glimpse as he disappeared through the back flap of the tent. Shirley licked his lips, but remained still and silent. When he did not answer, an awkward silence expanded among the company like a chilled bubble waiting for someone prod it.

"Shirley?" his mother asked at last.

_The week after he had turned eighteen, he had sat on the edge of the table in the living room, swinging his jangling legs, and asked permission to go._

"I can get into the flying-corps. What say, Dad?"

_His father's hands had shaken as he folded up a powder, and his mother's face had gone the same flat white it was now._

Shirley looked to Di for a nod of solidarity.

"I . . ." he stuttered, unaccustomed to having the undivided attention of the gathering. "I . . . already got called up. I'm supposed to report to Camp Borden on the 14th."

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Notes:

*The archives of the _Charlottetown Guardian_ (back to 1890) are available for free at islandnewspapers dot ca.

**The Blythes are Quoted, "An Uncommon Woman"

***bits from _Rilla of Ingleside_, chapter 3: "Moonlit Mirth" and chapter 4: "The Piper Pipes"

****_Rilla of Ingleside_, chapter 25: "Shirley Goes"
Some Quiet Island

September 4-12, 1939

Shirley and his nephews spent all day Monday flying. They had spent Sunday the same way, Sabbath or no. There was so little time. Gil was going back to Toronto tomorrow to start his course at the University at his parents’ insistence. He had whined about it a bit, but Shirley wouldn't permit any bellyaching within his hearing. There was no call for volunteers just yet, and besides, the kid was underestimating just how much of his early RCAF training would be spent hunched over an algebra book. Might as well keep up his mathematics at college.

Not that there was any doubt that the call would come. Monday's Charlottetown Guardian trumpeted the news in thick, black capitals: BRITAIN AT WAR. The first Canadian casualties were reported just below: the passenger liner Athenia, bound from Liverpool to Montreal with 1,400 souls aboard, most of them Canadians, Americans, and Jewish refugees, had been torpedoed off the coast of Scotland.* The call would come, and soon.

It wasn’t Shirley’s place to tell the boys what to do. They had parents and consciences for that. But he knew flying and he knew his nephews, and he would have his professional say as to whether they’d make the grade in the RCAF even if it didn’t win him many friends.

"You did some good flying today," Shirley said to the three boys hanging on his every word. "I won't have time to give you more lessons after this, but I want to talk to each of you individually in the office. Alright?"

They nodded, solemn as he had ever seen any of them. Well, it was a solemn moment.

"Wally first," Shirley said, and led the way.

***

"Wally . . ." Shirley began as he settled into the chair in the waiting area, not quite sure how to put things diplomatically.

"Aw, gee, Uncle Shirley," Wally said, grinning crookedly under ginger freckles. "I'm no flier. No need to tell me what I already know."

Relieved, Shirley returned the boy's smile. Really, Wally flew with all the grace of a duck on dry land, and it was a weight off his mind to know that he need not crush a dream.

"I've been thinking the Navy might suit me," Wally said. "And they'll accept me now — no waiting til I turn 18."

“What do your parents think about that?”

Wally made a dismissive noise.

Shirley shook his head. “This is all very hard on them, Wally, and you should have a care for their feelings. They’ve been through a war and you haven’t, so you should listen to whatever they have to say on the matter. And who knows," he gritted his teeth, "maybe this will all be over by next spring.”
"That's why I've got to go now!" Wally protested, green eyes wide and starry. "I don't want to miss out!"

Shirley motioned the kid back into his seat. God, had they been this young when the last war started? Younger, even. Hard to imagine. Wally, all ears and gawky energy and carrot-colored hair, jumping out of his chair to chase down the birthday that couldn't come soon enough, and all Shirley could think of was the *Athenia* and frozen, bloodless bodies floating in the North Atlantic.

"Listen, Wally," he said, affecting a conspiratorial frankness irresistible to boys. "You won't miss out. The last war lasted for years and there's no reason to think this one won't. But you'll get a better job in the Navy if you finish school first. You won't be 18 until the spring, and graduation's right after. With a diploma, you'd be eligible for better training, maybe even work your way up through the ranks."

Wally nodded along, more convinced by this tack than the other. If only he were a junior, maybe it would have been possible to convince him to stay out of this mess even longer.

But no, Wally departed whistling, "Wi' a hundred pipers and a' and a'," and Shirley knew there was no more he could do for him.

***

Sam was more difficult.

"I can fly," he said earnestly. "I know I can."

"Yes," Shirley agreed reluctantly. "I'm sure you could pass an RCAF training course . . . but . . ."

"But what?"

Shirley paid his nephew the respect of looking him in the eye. Beautiful amber eyes, so like Faith's. Sam was one of the golden-brown branch of Merediths, though he was built more on Blythe lines. Tall and broad, he upheld the family name at Redmond as far as football was concerned, though he was not quite the prankster one might expect of a son of Ingleside. Steady where Wally jangled, Sam had always been a reliable chap, sturdy and square in attitude as well as form. He could study his way to competence at anything, even flying.

"It's not that you can't fly," Shirley said. "If it were peacetime and I needed a trustworthy pilot to take passengers to Kingsport, I'd hire you myself. But combat flying . . . it's just a different beast."

"I could learn," Sam protested.

"I know you could," Shirley allowed, biting back his reservations on that score. "But you've got to ask yourself whether flying is the best use of your skills."

"My skills?"

"We'll need all sorts of men in this fight, Sam. Every one of us will have to give the best that's in us. Men will follow you and you'll lead them well."

Sam scowled. "How can you trust me to lead men when you don't even trust me with a machine?"

Shirley shook his head vigorously. "That's not it. Not at all. You'd make a good officer, Sam. Just like your dad. I'd trust you with the lives of a whole company. You'd love the men and they'd love you back, but you'd still be able to do what needs to be done. Me, on the other hand, I couldn't do
all that."

"You're an officer."

"It's not the same."

Sam hung his head, turning his hands over and over as if seeing them for the first time. "So what do what I do?" he asked. "Go into the infantry?"

"Have you talked to your parents about it?"

"A bit. I told them I'm not planning on going back to Redmond this term, but I was hoping . . . I mean, I was planning to talk to you about the RCAF . . . ."

"Go talk to your dad," Shirley said. "He and Uncle Jerry will know what to do. I’ll bet they’ll even get you into officer candidate school if that’s what you want."

"And what if I want to fly?"

Shirley licked his lips and considered his words. "I can’t stop you from volunteering," he said carefully, "but I’d rather have this conversation with you now, instead of washing you out during training."

Sam looked defiant for a moment, but only a moment. A boy might have dug in his heels or stormed off, but the war was making men out of them already. Sam nodded grimly and stood, reaching out to shake his uncle's hand. Shirley didn't know whether to say I'm sorry or you're welcome, so he only nodded.

***

When Gil perched on the edge of the couch, face shining with adventure-lust, Shirley quailed. He wanted to clap the kid in irons and ground him for the duration and damn the disgrace of it. He wanted to deny that Gil was born for this, but anyone could see that he flew like a falcon and shot as if the rifle were part of his arm. He knew he was good, but he had no idea just how good. Even less of how incalculably precious.

Shirley wanted to send him home, smother his ambition, keep him safe. Instead, he looked into the eager gray eyes and extended his hand.

"I guess I'll see you at Camp Borden."

On Tuesday morning, Carl was surprised to find Shirley at the breakfast table. Shirley had given him space these past few days, but he was here now, apparently attempting to rub a hole right through the side of that teacup.

"Will you come with me today?" Shirley asked.

Carl crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the doorjamb. "Where?"

"Away."

"I'm not going anywhere near an airplane," Carl said flatly.

"No planes. I promise."
"And what if I don't want to go anywhere at all?"

"Please?"

***

An hour later, they were hoisting sail as the *Sweet Flag* swung clear of Four Winds Harbor and into the glittering Gulf of St. Lawrence. By the look of things, Shirley had been provisioning the boat all night. The bunk in the cabin downstairs was freshly made, the water casks were full, the galley was stocked with food. It was a good surprise, with work and thought behind it, and yet Carl couldn't help but feel miffed at not being consulted. Was he just supposed to go along now and pretend nothing was wrong?

"Where to?" Carl asked, shielding his eye against the brilliant sunlight of waning summer.


"Don't you have to be in Ontario?"

"Not till the 14th."

Nine days. And two for travel, at least. That left a single week, ticking away one second at a time.

Shirley stepped across the deck, fastening strong brown hands securely around Carl's hips. "I have to take the Tuesday morning train next week. Till then, I'm all yours."

"What about the dog?"

"Una's watching her."

"What if I have work to do?" Carl asked, striving to hold onto his righteous annoyance.

"The birds?"

"Yes. The Brant Geese will be arriving soon," Carl sniffed. "Their population is only just starting to recover from the Eelgrass Blight."

"I'll come watch birds with you," Shirley said, drawing him closer.

"There's quite a bit more to it than that, you know."

"Will it take all day?"

"Possibly."

"All night?"

One needed stronger resolve, Carl reflected, to stand one's ground where the Blythe boys were concerned. He never had gotten Faith's knack of it. He knew he'd castigate himself later for not standing his ground. There would be an awful lot of time for it.

"Well, Brant Geese are black," he conceded. "Not really much use looking for them in the dark."

"Let's go, then."

***
An hour till sundown and there were no Brant Geese to be found. Really, it was a bit too early for them, and Carl knew it.

Instead, he had piloted *Sweet Flag* to a tiny crescent-shaped island in the lee of the Magdalens. It was little more than a rock, really — a few scraggly spruces and a smear of pebbled sand, far enough from other islands to remain unobserved, close enough that ships swung wide of the entire area. They dropped anchor within the half-moon embrace of the breakwater.

"I saw some northern lapwings here once," Carl said as he handed blankets and provisions over the gunwales to Shirley in the dinghy. "There was a big storm that blew them in from Europe in '27. Gorgeous birds — green and red with little black crests on their heads. Michelson insisted that I write a bit about them for our updated edition of *Conservation*."**

"Are they an invasive species?" Shirley asked, holding out a hand for Carl to join him.

"No. They all died. It was an accident they were here at all, and they didn't adapt."

They left *Sweet Flag* at anchor in the sheltered cove and rowed over to the beach in the dinghy. Or rather Shirley rowed and Carl watched him row until he forced himself to stop counting the strokes and the seconds and tried to embrace the idyll.

***

A waning gibbous moon rose over the gulf. That seemed about right. It had been full last week, with bits sloughing off relentlessly ever since.

Carl hadn't wanted to light a fire. Too like those nights out on the line, with warnings about crack German snipers who could pick a man off at 500 yards by the light of a single match. There were no snipers here, but a fire on the water would call any vessel within ten miles and what was the difference, really?

But Shirley had insisted that it would be cold, and there was sense in that. September in the Glen was already turning bronze and breezy, and out in the gulf, sailwinds swept unimpeded over the steel-dark sea. In the end, Shirley had dug a slanted pit in the sand and built up a screen of flotsam and bladderwrack on the seaward side. Thus shielded, the driftwood fire might *weave its wavering, elusive, sea-born hues* without betraying their sanctuary.***

Carl leaned against a driftwood log, head lolling, fingers twined in the brown waves of Shirley's hair, cradled in the hollow of his chest. There were not many moments like this, not for anyone. Lulling waves and salt-spiced wind, and a lover's comforting weight, a warm anchor against the pull of an infinite, star-spattered sky.

"I'm sorry," Shirley said. "About leaving."

"No you aren't."

"I am."

"Then don't leave."

Shirley was quiet a long moment. Above, a green-tailed meteor streaked toward the horizon to meet its reflection, then disappeared into the depths. "You know how it is for me," he murmured at last. "I just . . . I can't send them off without doing what I can to protect them."

"You can't save them, Shirley," Carl said, not harshly.
"I know that. But just for myself. I have to know I did my bit."

Carl disentangled his hands and brought them down to cross over Shirley's chest. "You did your bit. Twenty years ago."

"It's not enough."

"It was more than enough."

They stayed that way in silence, following their own well-trodden paths. If it was true that they could not follow every bend and side-trail together, it was also true that their way was less lonely than so many of their comrades-in-arms who came home and couldn't really explain things to the people who tried so hard to love them.

The silence lengthened, and Carl decided to ask because he wanted to know. "What did you mean the other day when you said it was a risk to leave me?"

No one would have guessed that Shirley stiffened slightly, not unless they had their arms wrapped around his chest.

"I just meant . . . it's an uncertain time. No one knows what will happen."

Carl sighed. "You're really not going to tell me?"

"I don't want to leave you," Shirley said, which seemed to be true, even if it wasn't a whole truth. "I wouldn't, except that . . ."

He hesitated and Carl held his breath, urging him on silently.

". . . except that I sometimes feel like I haven't done enough. I don't want you to think that I regret living here, because I don't. But if I had taken that Vickers job . . . I don't know. I would be in the thick of all this, wouldn't I? I would be . . . useful."

It was so rare for Shirley to talk this way. Moving to the Island after Redmond had done nothing for his career, but he never really let on that it bothered him. Carl tightened his embrace, relieved that Shirley was sharing his disappointment instead of denying it.

"I can understand that," he said gently.

"I'm sorry."

"No." Carl swallowed. It was true; Shirley had given up so much to follow him home. The least he could do was be gracious now. "Don't apologize. I'm sorry for complaining."

Shirley reached up to grasp the slim hand against his chest. Carl let his eye flutter shut, freezing the moment in his mind so that he could look back and remember that he hadn't let it pass unappreciated. The world was crumbling and taking Shirley with it, but they were alright.

They sat a long while, listening to the lapping of the waves and the crackle of the fire. Carl watched the waning moon. In the last war, he had sometimes found comfort in the thought that the moon looked the same in France as it did at home. It would be the same in Ontario, too.

"I guess our mail will be censored again," Carl said.

"I don't know what the rules will be for mail sent within Canada. But I can get to a civilian post office if I need to."
Carl rested his chin on the top of Shirley's head, breathing in the smell of his hair: sweat and salt and a whiff of something fresh-baked. "What did you do with my letters?" he asked. "During the last war?"

Shirley shrugged. "Burned them. Well, memorized them, then burned them. Why, what did you do with mine?"

"Same," Carl admitted. "When I could get a fire. There were times when we couldn't have one, out on the line. Too dangerous."

"What did you do when you couldn't?"

"Held onto them for a little while," Carl answered. Then, remembering, "Or . . . well . . . one time I ate one."

"You ate one?" Shirley asked, tipping his head back to look up at Carl with a twinkle of incredulity.

A gentle chuckle bubbled through Carl's chest. "Maybe not ate. Chewed to a pulp, though."

"Why?"

An intrusive memory flashed into clarity, sprung from the box on the shelf where Carl kept it lidded and inactive. The cheek-reddening cold of a night that froze the mud in the bottom of the trench, intermittent shell fire — nothing out of the ordinary — and the coarse laughter of men trading bawdy gossip.

_Found them together in their billet._

_No court martial?_

_We should send them over to Prince Eulenburg with our regards._

_Probably spies._

_They should be horsewhipped through the parade grounds._

"It was too dangerous to keep it," Carl shuddered, mouth gone dry with the ghost of chewed paper.

"Do you remember which letter?"

Carl forced himself to file the memory away, back in its place on the long, crowded shelf, and consciously relaxed the shoulders he had bunched unwittingly. "I think maybe the one about praying for me whenever you saw a rat?"

"I still do that."

"Really?"

"Sure."

"There were an awful lot of rats there."

"I prayed a lot."

Carl smiled, then sighed. "I wish we still had them. Those letters. Yours were awfully good."

"I have yours," Shirley said quietly.

"You just said you burned them."
"No, I said I memorized them, then burned them."

"That was twenty years ago."

An unhurried smile spread over Shirley's face. "Let me assure you that I found Paris perfectly enchanting. It is a breathtaking city and I hope to return there as often as I can."

Carl snorted. "You never remember them all. Now?"

"I certainly do remember that vow to Rilla. You were our witness, and I guess you've done a pretty good job of holding us to our oath."

"You're kidding."

"We Blythes always did have a happy talent for recitation."

"You really memorized those letters?"

"Course I did."

The night was chilly and the driftwood log hard against his back, but Carl did not mind. With the crackling fire and Shirley’s weight against him, he might have been back in the circle of light at Aster House, safe and warm, with Di balancing a plate on her knee and Sylvia coaxing Shirley to recite.

“I always liked that, you know,” he said. Then, realizing that he had begun in the middle of a thought, clarified. “When you recited, I mean. I was just thinking about how you used to recite Whitman for us sometimes. I always liked that.”

Shirley sat up, letting cold air rush in to chill the skin where they had kept one another warm. Turning to face Carl, he knelt and addressed an audience of one:

"The way is suspicious, the result uncertain, perhaps destructive . . . The whole past theory of your life and all conformity to the lives around you would have to be abandon’d,"

“I didn’t mean you had to do it right n . . .” Carl said before being interrupted by a brief kiss.

Shirley continued:

"Therefore release me now before troubling yourself any further, let go your hand from my shoulders, Put me down and depart on your way."

“I think that ship has sailed,” Carl said on a breath.

"Or else,” Shirley continued, cradling Carl's cheek in a broad, brown hand, then sliding upward under the elastic of his eyepatch and pushing it out of the way to kiss across his brows.

"Or else by stealth in some wood for trial
Or back of a rock in the open air
For in any roof’d room of a house I emerge not, nor in company . . .”

He spoke quietly, but distinctly, letting the annunciation of the words send little puffs of breath down Carl's neck, then across his collarbone . . .
"But just possibly with you on a high hill, first watching lest any person for miles around approach unawares, 
Or possibly with you sailing at sea, or on the beach of the sea or some quiet island,"

"Which poem is this?" Carl asked faintly.

"It's 'Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand.'"

"It isn't."

"It is."

"You're making that up."

"I'm not."

Carl made an inarticulate reply.

"Holding the volume of verse, you understand," Shirley explained, rubbing his thumb back and forth in slow, deliberate arcs. "It's a poem about holding the book itself."

"Of course it is," Carl gulped. Then, with a tiny shudder, "What's next?"

"Next is, Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you," Shirley said, demonstrating.

"With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss or the new husband's kiss, 
For I am the new husband and I am the comrade."

"That's . . . enough poetry . . . for now."

"You sure?" Shirley asked. "Because the next stanza is, Or if you will, thrusting me beneath your clothing . . ."

"Yes . . . quite enough . . ."

"Where I may feel the throbs of your heart or rest upon your hip . . ."

". . . stop . . ."

"Stop?"

". . . stop . . . talking . . ."

Shirley did not finish the verse then, nor for a long while afterward. Not until the fire had burned to winking coals under the silver moon, and Carl was sinking into sleep, replete, in the curve of his arm. Then, Shirley pulled a blanket over them, not for modesty, but to trap their shared heat against the chill of the lengthening night. Beneath its shelter, he traced a languid pattern across Carl's shoulder with one strong finger, and whispered the stanza through to completion:

Carry me when you go forth over land or sea; 
For thus merely touching you is enough, is best, 
And thus touching you would I silently sleep and be carried eternally.****

On Tuesday morning, Una served a silent breakfast, scrambled eggs pushed from one side of a plate to the other, toast untouched, tea cooling in forgotten cups. Even Muggins, draped over
Shirley's foot under the table, was still. The mantel clock in the living room ticked away minutes, the sharp pulse of its brass pendulum wearing down Una's nerves with every mechanical click until she resolved that really a sundial would be perfectly adequate to their needs.

"I put some butchers' scraps in the icebox," Shirley said eventually. "For the dog."

"Thank you," Una replied when it became apparent that Carl would not be drawn into small talk. "I packed you a hamper for the train."

"Thank you."

There had been a round of goodbyes yesterday, and a farewell supper at Ingleside that Carl did not attend. Faith had asked where he was, but Una could only say truthfully that she was not really sure. That had been a subdued affair, smothered by the weight of that morning's headline: CANADA DECLARES WAR WITH GERMANY. Nobody ate much of anything.

Mrs. Blythe had roused herself from her bed — Faith had whispered that she mightn't — and come up to Ingleside to sit in ghastly silence at the supper table. When it came time to bid Shirley adieu, she had clasped his hands and kissed him and extracted perfunctory promises of correspondence.

Dr. Blythe had said his goodbyes with a handshake that became an overlong hug, which Shirley endured somewhat stiffly but without complaint.

"Be careful," Dr. Blythe had said just loudly enough for others to hear. But of course, Shirley had been born careful.

"Did you send your measurements to the tailor in Toronto for your uniforms?" Una asked over breakfast.

"Yes."

"Is Camp Borden near Toronto?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you can see Gil."

"Maybe."

Conversation having been thus throttled in its cot, Una fidgeted with the dishtowel stuck in the waistband of her apron until Shirley consulted his radium wristwatch and swallowed.

"I guess I'll be going then," he said, pushing back from the table.

Una thought for a moment that Carl might stay where he was, watching his eggs shrivel and saying nothing. But he stood as well and held out his palm to Shirley.

"Give me your keys."

"Keys?"

"I'll drive you to the station."

Shirley complied, digging in his pocket and meekly handing the ring to Carl before hoisting his duffel to his shoulder. Next, he turned to Una and bent, kissing her primly on the cheek.
"Bye, Una."

"Be safe," she said.

Shirley only nodded, then knelt to scoop Muggins into his arms.

"Be good," he said, scratching her scruff before passing her to Una.

Shirley gave them both a last apologetic grimace. Carl followed him out the door and did not return until sometime deep in the black watches of the new moon night.

Notes:

*In fact, more than 1,200 of the people aboard the *Athenia* were rescued by passing vessels (it took the ship 14 hours to sink and many of the dead were killed in the initial torpedoing and in lifeboat accidents). However, the *Charlottetown Guardian* news item on September 4 only reported the ship's loss, not the rescues.

**Carl and Professor Michelson have been collaborating on updated editions of Charles Gordon Hewitt's *The Conservation of Wild Life in Canada* (1921). Hewitt, an entomologist and conservation-minded biologist, died of the flu in 1920.

***Anne's House of Dreams*, Chapter 9: "An Evening at Four Winds Point"

****Walt Whitman, "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand," *Leaves of Grass*
At its September meeting, the St. Elizabeth's Altar Guild had finally voted to retire the old fair linen cloth that had seen such long and distinguished service in their sanctuary. It was to be replaced by a generous bequest from the late Mrs. Eleanor Palmer, a new cloth that she and Una Meredith had worked on together. It was an exquisite piece of white-on-white embroidery with a bobbin lace fringe that was intricate enough to grace the altar of Canterbury Cathedral itself.

Una was satisfied with the Guild's decision, not on her own behalf, but for the sake of her dear friend, who had worked love into every stitch. There had been some disagreement as to whether the new cloth should debut immediately or whether they should wait for St. Elizabeth's feast day in November, but with the world in such a state, the consensus was that everyone must put their best foot forward in altar vestments as well as in more mundane matters. Una smiled secretly, thinking of Rilla's long-held belief that it is easier to behave nicely when you have your good clothes on.*

Perhaps thoughts of young Rilla distracted Una, or perhaps she was only uncharacteristically inattentive as she carried the pale and heavy cloth from the sacristy to the altar. In either case, she did not notice the long edge of lace fringe slipping loose from the bundle and falling precariously close to her steel-buckled shoes. Neither did she notice the man sitting in the front pew until his cheerful greeting surprised her into a stutter-step that intersected the fallen lace at an unfortunate moment and sent Una tumbling to her knees on the mosaic-tiled floor.

"Goodness, are you alright, Miss Meredith?" Father Caldwell asked, crouching to extend a hand to Una as she disentangled herself from the froth of whitework.

"Yes," Una assured him absently. In truth, she was more concerned about the state of the fringe than her own bumps and bruises, and immediately began scouring the cloth for tears, ignoring Father Caldwell's proffered hand.

"And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be," the priest quoted with a twinkle in his eye.**

Una peered at Father Caldwell with badly disguised skepticism. It was scarcely possible to imagine a less angelic visitation. Father Caldwell was a jovial little man with a round, open face and a ready smile shining above his black cassock. He was somewhere north of fifty, though his age showed mostly in the roundness of his belly and his thinning salt-and-pepper hair, not in his boisterous energy nor in his habit of making his pastoral rounds on a Vincent Meteor motorcycle. He loved the motorcycle and tended it with care, keeping it in the rectory stable where Father Kirkland had once housed his old nag, Jenny. When a congregant commented on the change, Father Caldwell had merely laughed and said that for the sake of continuity, the motorcycle would henceforth answer to "Jenny" as well. The rumor among the congregation was that he was a widower, a supposition all but confirmed by the presence of a wedding ring and absence of a wife. In the six months since his arrival at St. Elizabeth's, he had insisted that everyone call him Father Daniel, and had persuaded the majority of his flock on this startling innovation in etiquette, with only a few holdouts clinging resolutely to his surname for propriety's sake.

"Thank you, Father Caldwell," Una said, taking his hand and rising to her feet. The fair linen cloth seemed none the worse for wear, though it had come unfolded and was now a rather unwieldy bundle of thick, slippery cloth that Una attempted to corral by tossing a loose end of lace over her
"Oh, dear. I seem to have caused rather a mess," he said. "May I make amends by assisting you in your duties?"

Una could hardly prevent a priest setting his own altar, could she? Nevermind that she had garbed that very altar hundreds of times in the past twenty years, counting each solitary, peaceful moment of her work among the happiest in her week.

"Thank you, yes," she said, adding, "though no amends are necessary."

Feeling flustered, Una turned toward the chancel rail and knelt to gather her thoughts. Father Caldwell took the place at her right hand, careful not to kneel on the trailing edge of white lace. It took Una a moment to clear her mind before her customary invocation came to her, and another before she felt at peace.

... grant me a devout spirit and a reverent demeanor ... and for goodness sake, a steadier nerve!

When she was finished, Una opened her eyes to find Father Caldwell smiling at her. He opened the little gate in the chancel rail and held it for her, following her to the altar and genuflecting there. Silently, they worked together, spreading the fair linen cloth between them, draping and smoothing it, adjusting the lace edges until they hung even on either side. Una was perfectly capable of doing this herself, and could not help but feel slightly defensive when Father Caldwell stepped in to adjust the fringe that she had already judged acceptable. Still, it was not unpleasant to stand side-by-side before the altar, evaluating the effect, knowing that St. Elizabeth's was well fitted for what promised to be a trying season.

Back outside the chancel rail, Father Caldwell broke the reverent silence. "A lovely cloth. I've never seen anything quite like it. I understand that you made it?"

Una demurred. "My friend, Mrs. Palmer, gave the materials and designed the embellishments. I only helped."

"I see," said Father Caldwell, a certain flash in his eye suggesting that perhaps he saw more than Una had intended him to see. "I'm very sorry I did not have the chance to meet her. I shall convey my gratitude to her through prayer, and to you in person."

Una bobbed her head awkwardly, squirming under this unlooked-for recognition.

"I should go to the sacristy," she said. "I haven't laid out your vestments yet."

"I assure you that I can dress myself, Miss Meredith," Father Caldwell chuckled.

Una blinked. "It's my job."

"Far be it for me to keep you from your vocation," he said. "In that case, I'll see that the communion plate is all in order, shall I?"

Again, Una could hardly object, though she knew very well that the silver was in perfect, gleaming order, having polished it herself. She followed Father Caldwell to the sacristy and busied herself at the credens, selecting the proper green stole from the drawer and laying it out for the priest's convenience. He busied himself over the chalice and paten, giving no reason for Una to be so minutely aware of his presence.

Out in the sanctuary, the organ wheezed to life, blaring a few discordant notes before the organist
began warming up in earnest. *That would be Mr. Allonby,* Una thought, not quite charitably, as the unseen musician mashed a few grating chords that wanted to be the beginning of "How Firm a Foundation."

She must have winced visibly, because Father Caldwell appeared at her elbow, eyebrows raised.

"Don't like this hymn?" he asked.

"It's my favorite," Una admitted, grimacing.

Father Caldwell laughed, a hearty, buoyant sound that generally elicited echoes from his companions. "I see. Well, let us hope that practice makes perfect."

Una returned the smile. She was not insensible to the joke, which only intensified as poor Mr. Allonby continued to butcher the piece.

"*When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,*" Father Caldwell shrugged, not even attempting to sing the line to the broken melody squeaking out of the organ.

It was too funny. Una hid her smile behind her hand. It seemed a terrible thing to be giggling in the sacristy, especially at poor Mr. Allonby's expense, but she could not seem to help herself. Father Caldwell was certainly not helping, grinning at her over the credens.

"Why are an organist's fingers like lightning?" he asked, a wicked twist to his lips. "Because they rarely strike the same place twice."

Una snorted, clamping her other hand over her face in a belated effort to stifle the sound. It was most undignified, and she would worry what Father Caldwell might think of her if he hadn't been the one cracking jokes in the first place.

When the hymn came to a merciful conclusion, Una bowed herself out of the sacristy, wondering what on earth had come over her.

"Goodbye, Miss Meredith," Father Caldwell called after her.

Before he knocked on the office door marked *Headquarters: No. 1 Service Flying Training School, Camp Borden,* Shirley took a moment to straighten the sleeves of his new service dress tunic, tugging them down over his radium wristwatch. The slate blue wool was crisp and thick enough to lie flat, which Shirley found soothing. He had thought that the uniform might feel stiff and formal after all these years, but the moment the tailor had eased the tunic over his shoulders, it molded itself to him like a second skin. He'd tipped the craftsman well for the good fit.

He'd dressed eagerly this morning: belt and buttons and smart black tie over a light blue shirt. The boots were leather so supple they barely needed to be broken in. The only part that had needed some extra care was the left breast. Shirley had checked and double-checked that the silver wings flew straight and true over the colorful row of medal bars, from the purple-and-white diagonal lines of the Distinguished Flying Cross to the cheerful little rainbow of the Allied Victory Medal with its bronze oak leaf spray denoting "Mentioned in Despatches."

Now he was all shined and polished and ready for the next bend in the road.

"Come in!" shouted a gruff voice.

Shirley did as he was ordered and stepped into the dim, cluttered office, standing to attention and
saluting the officer behind the teeming desk. A stack of folders slid to the floor as the older man leapt to his feet.

"Blythe!" said Bob McMullen as he stepped over the papers to pump Shirley's hand in his own firm grip. "Well now, you're a welcome sight and no mistake."

"Yes, sir," Shirley said, relaxing internally, if not visibly.

McMullen waved him off.*** "Please, Blythe, please. At ease. Right now I need you settled in and comfortable so you can help me with this . . ." he gestured helplessly to the chaos of the office. "We've got our first batch of new cadets coming in tomorrow — tomorrow, Blythe! — and no one around here knows their ass from their elbow! Group Captain Simmons took off for England last week and left me with this . . ." McMullen seemed unable to summon adequate words for his predicament and aimed a desultory kick at the toppled paperwork.

"Yes, sir," Shirley replied.

McMullen exhaled. "First things first. I remember you saying you flew an old Curtiss flying boat at home. Is that right?"

"Yes, sir. Though I bought a Piper Cub this spring."

McMullen nodded. "What's the top speed on that Cub?"

"About 85 miles an hour, sir. If you push it."

McMullen bit his upper lip to keep from grinning, sending his mustache prickling out in a bristly spray of delight. "Ever flown a North American Harvard?"

Shirley had seen them on his way in, gleaming on the runway. The bright-yellow paint reminded him of the little snub-nosed Cub, but no paint job could disguise the heft of the Harvards. They were five times as heavy as the Cub and three times faster.

"Not yet, sir," he said, unable to suppress a small smile.

McMullen clapped him on the shoulder. "I'll tell you what. Let's get you introduced to your batman and settled in. Then you go and get one of the flight instructors to take you up for a spin. When you get back, join me for supper in the mess and then we'll get down to sorting through this muddle."

"Yes, sir," Shirley said, a genuine smile dawning as he shook McMullen's hand.

***

Shirley set his duffel on the bed in a little room in the officers' quarters. Spare and unadorned, his quarters boasted little more than a metal-framed bed, writing desk, and wardrobe. Still, the room had a window looking out onto the playing fields, an ensuite bathroom, and a door that locked. What more could anyone want?

Before Shirley could unpack a single sock, a rapid-fire knock at the door announced the arrival of his batman. He was a freckly, buck-toothed lad not much older than 20, with cornsilk hair and a patch on his coveralls that said Davenport. He gave a lazy salute before blurring, "You're Shirley Blythe?"

Shirley may have been a long time out of the service, but he was fairly certain that this was not the proper way to greet a senior officer. He raised an eyebrow, which did not prevent Davenport from
A name like that — I was expecting the Good Ship Lollipop!"

"Charming.

Shirley straightened up to his full height and blasted Aircraftman Davenport with a full five seconds of silence that seemed to remind the younger man where he was.

"Let's just stick with sir, shall we, Davenport?" Shirley said mercifully when he began to cower.

"Yes, sir," Davenport agreed, assuming a lax posture Shirley feared was meant to be attention.

Oh, this is going to be exhausting.

In the last war, Shirley hadn't given much thought to batmen. They were around, sure, but junior officers tended to share one in groups of three or four, and only when circumstance permitted. Once they were in France, everyone had been so busy and resources stretched so thin that Shirley barely ever saw the men who washed his clothes and cooked his meals. He recalled only one of them, an older man with a port wine birthmark who had a talent for finding cigarettes under even the most adverse circumstances. Harold, maybe? Or Hayward? Something like that. He'd had other things on his mind.

"Tell me, Davenport," Shirley said, trying to keep annoyance out of his voice, "what exactly are your duties as my batman?"

"Yes, sir," Davenport said, ticking off his assignments on his fingers. "I'm to tidy your quarters, make your bed, clean your ablutions, keep your uniforms clean and ready, shine your boots, cook if you need anything not available in the mess, drive you if you need to go anywhere, run errands for you, and just generally be on hand at all times."

Delightful.

"Errands, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Alright," Shirley said, casting about for an excuse to send him away. "I require . . . a supply of writing paper. And envelopes. Pencils, too. When you get back, you can unpack my duffel. Beyond that . . . well, just wait for further orders."

"Yes, sir," Davenport said, already halfway out the door.

As Davenport's footsteps faded down the hall, Shirley shut the door and drew the flimsy lock. He leaned against it, head back, preemptively weary at the thought of Davenport on hand at all times. The first order of business might be to devise a list of time-consuming tasks to keep him occupied.

For now, Shirley looked about the room, trying to see if there was any place that was really private. No locks on any of the desk drawers, no loose floorboards, and a mattress too thin to hide much of anything inside. Well, he'd think on that later, and keep his wallet on his person at all times.

Reaching for it now, Shirley flipped the leather cover open, revealing the transparent panel meant for displaying a photo. He had chosen carefully, selecting one from last summer: himself, posing next to the Curtiss with Gil, Sam, and Wally, Muggins a gray blur in Gil's arms. The airplane dominated the frame, its spindly struts and canvas wings faintly absurd in contrast to the sturdy
Harvards outside. In the unlikely event that anyone ever saw it, this photo provided plenty of opportunity for diversionary conversation — the old Flying Boat, the nephews, the joys and trials of terriers.

Prying the flap up, Shirley caught hold of the edge of the picture, tugging it from its sleeve. It was a tight fit, and the snapshot did not budge easily, which was just as well. He drew it out a smidgen at a time, each pull revealing another sliver of the photo behind. Water first, glinting white and silver in the black-and-white snap. Then a rail, a bit of deck, and finally Carl, helming the *Sweet Flag*, laughing up at the camera.

"You're going to fall overboard, you know, leaning back on the rail like that!"

"I'm steady as the Rock of Gibraltar. Stop talking so I can get a good shot."

"I thought you wanted a candid."

"I do. Just . . . argh!"

"There are waves around here, you know."

"I'm soaked!"

"Told you you should have worn a mac!"

"Got it."

"A mac?"

"The snap."

Shirley ran a thumb over the surface. There were other pictures at home — yearbook photos and Christmas pictures and the flustered merriment of wedding parties. But he'd known this one was special even before he had developed it. No matter what happened or how many years passed, this was how he would always remember Carl, wind in his hair, mid-laugh. It was wrong to keep it hidden, no matter how necessary.

Shirley slid the other photo back over Carl and tucked the wallet into his pocket.

If he meant to be back in the officer's mess for supper, he'd need to find one of the junior flight instructors and get briefed on the finer points of the North American Harvard. There would be time tonight, in the somewhat suspect privacy of his quarters, to write home and report that all was well.

Notes:

*Rilla of Ingleside* chapter 13: "A Slice of Humble Pie"

**Luke 1:29

***The real commanding officer of Camp Borden was Wing Commander Frank S. McGill. I've kept his mustache, but invented an otherwise fictional replacement. The real Wing Commander McGill really did take over Camp Borden in September 1939 when Group Captain Stevenson was sent to England to help set up the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, but all the character details in this story are purely fictional.

One of the real RCAF officers at Camp Borden, Squadron Leader B. Lloyd Hession (the medical
officer), was from Prince Edward Island. He got married in Charlottetown in July of 1941, and the announcement says that his father was from Georgetown, which is the town I use as a proxy for Lowbridge. Not relevant to the story, but something I noticed while reading the Charlottetown Guardian.
Deaconesses have, according to the apostolical regulations, the office of serving the Christian congregation as Phoebe served the Church at Cenchrea. To them is committed the care of the sick, the poor, the education of young children, and generally the help of the needy of whatever kind. And also it is their office to be helpers, either directly or indirectly, to the ministers of the Church.

- Deaconess Elizabeth Ferard, first Deaconess of the Church of England, 1861

When Carl sunk into the sofa, letter in one hand, ripe pear in the other, Muggins hopped up onto the cushion beside him and snuffled after the envelope addressed to C. Meredith. Carl couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm. In all the rituals he had devised for savoring letters, he had never thought of smelling them. After all, Shirley hardly ran to scented paper. Carl lifted the envelope to his nose, but whatever trace Muggins had caught was too faint for the human nose to detect.

"Sorry to disappoint," he said, dropping the pear to scratch her silky ears. "But I'll read to you if you like."

The dog settled in beside Carl, pressing her solid warmth along his thigh as if to say she was sorry too, but they'd just have to make the best of things together. Carl slit the flap and bit into the pear, catching a dribble of juice with his sleeve before it could splatter the page.

"Dear Kit," he began, adding, "and Muggins,"

All is well at Camp Borden. We have a class of 40 cadets and it is lucky that they mostly have previous flying experience because we are still getting our legs under us here. I am second-in-command to Wing Commander McMullen and am in charge of coordinating the junior flying instructors and teaching combat maneuvers and night flying. I am also in charge of classroom instruction — navigation, meteorology, trigonometry — which is going about as well as you might imagine. McMullen saw in my file that I had a teacher's certificate from Queen's and wouldn't hear any of my protests that my year as a supply teacher in Charlottetown was hardly my finest hour.

My batman, Davenport, continues to fulfill his duties with annoying thoroughness. My quarters are very clean and my uniforms nicely brushed and I am all at sixes and sevens over it. I have tried to devise any number of improbable errands for him, but he is like the cat that came back and I can't get shut of him. Have no concerns for my material comforts — I assure you that I am looked after to the absolute limit of my endurance.

I think sometimes . . .

"Whoops, sorry girl, I don't think this part's for your delicate ears," Carl said, grinning to himself and reading the next paragraph several times through. At least Shirley seemed to be fairly confident that Davenport wasn't reading his outgoing mail.

"I've written my parents to tell them I'm settled," Carl resumed, "but the truth is that I'm swamped and don't have much time for letters. I'll make time for yours, of course, but perhaps I can delegate the rest to Davenport. In any case, give my regards to Una, and a kiss to Mugsy if she'll allow it. For yourself, imagination must suffice.
Carl leaned back into the sofa, giving imagination free rein for the space of a few heartbeats. A dangerous thing to do these days, but necessary in small doses. His eye roved over the mantel — the photo of the whole family at Jerry and Nan's wedding, another of Shirley with the boys out at the hangar, Nellie's watercolor of the Orinoco geese. Shirley had sent a copy of his official portrait in uniform, the one that had run in the *Charlottetown Guardian* when he took up his post. Una had put it up beside the others, but Carl found it unnerving and had shoved it into the back of his closet.

The front door creaked, admitting a windblown Una home from the Newgates'.

"You're home early," she said, leaning over the back of the sofa to kiss Carl's cheek with chill-chapped lips.

"Rain coming," Carl said, folding the letter. "I didn't want to get caught out in the dark."

Una gave an approving nod to this exercise of caution and removed her gloves so that she could give Muggins a greeting pat.

"Letter?" she asked, eyeing Carl's correspondence.

"Shirley says hello," he said. "They've put him in charge of teaching the cadets meteorology."

Una was too polite to voice her skepticism, but couldn't keep her expression entirely neutral.

Carl laughed. "I don't think he's particularly optimistic either. How's Amelia getting on?"

"Honestly, I'm worried," Una said, perching on the edge of an armchair. "Archie's back is worse than ever and I don't know how they'll get the potatoes in this year. The children are helping, of course, but the girls are only thirteen and Georgie's so small for nine."

"I can help," Carl said. "It'll be too wet tomorrow, but day after that, I'll go over and dig spuds."

"Oh, would you?" Una said, clasping her hands beneath her chin. "It would be such a help. I was going to spend tomorrow baking bread for them — Amelia's been helping in the fields and hasn't a spare moment. And even if she did, there's hardly a morsel in the house. I hate even to accept tea when I visit."

Her words conjured the days of Ditto, when a visit to Ingleside meant bread and butter as well as companionship. Well, the little gray house couldn't quite be Ingleside to the Newgate children, but they could at least keep them fed.

"I'll bring over a peck of pears, too," Carl said. "We've got enough to feed an army. And should we ask Jem to come out and take a look at Archie?"

Una shook her head. "I suggested as much, but he won't have a doctor. Though I think that's pride more than poverty. He's never even gone to the Pension Board, even though his shoulder troubles him."

Carl chewed thoughtfully. His own dealings with the Pension Board were perfunctory — the eye was unlikely to grow back — but nonetheless disagreeable. A less obvious disability like Archie Newgate's might well mean intrusive questions and uncomfortable examinations with no guarantee of a pension at the end.

Yours truly,
Shirley
"Jem never bothered applying either," Carl said. "Maybe I can get Archie to talk to him at least. He might accept a checkup once he sees Jem's lift."

"It isn't my place to press," Una said, smoothing her skirt. "But I know Amelia would be grateful."

"I can't promise anything, but I'll do what I can."

It was the least he could do for a comrade, especially one who was a neighbor as well. Carl had an uneasy feeling that he was not a very good neighbor, leaving all that to Una. If it weren't for her, would he even know the Newgates' names, let alone the fact that they were in need? Part of that was distance; it was half a mile to Pelham's Pond, with the Newgate house on one bank and the hayfield they rented from St. Elizabeth's on the other. Carl's own routes were generally oriented Glenward, toward the harbor or the road that branched off toward Mowbray Narrows, so he rarely passed by. But that wasn't the whole story. Even if the Newgates had lived a stone's throw away, Carl might have gone months or years without remembering they existed if it weren't for Una.

"They're lucky to have you," he said, startling his sister with sudden praise. "We all are."

Una took the compliment badly, blushing and muttering vague denials. She retreated to the kitchen soon after, leaving Carl to his letter and his pear. He watched her go, wishing there was something he could do for her as well.

It was nearly noon before Una was able to leave the Mitchell house. She had only intended to stay a moment, having marked today as the day when she must finally speak to Father Caldwell, but what with one thing and another, she simply could not get away. Mr. Mitchell was laid up with yet another bout of the malaria he'd picked up in the Mediterranean during the War. That is to say, the last war, which was The War no longer. Strange, that. It had been the great cataclysm of all their lives, and Una couldn't reconcile herself to the idea that it was only one of the many, many wars that had once been The War to someone.

In any case, Mr. Mitchell was prone to recurring fevers that sent him to the dark-curtained safety of his bedroom, where he hid from his children and their questions until he could emerge smiling once more. Sometimes he was down for several days, other times for several weeks. No telling how long it would be this time, but his family still needed food and clothing, and Mrs. Mitchell needed a shoulder to cry on far away from the bedroom, where her husband could not hear.

Una stowed her empty crate in the blue tricycle's carrying basket, confident that she had stocked the pantry well enough to see the Mitchells through another week. All the ladies of the Altar Guild had sent something, even Amelia Newgate, who had filled a small sack with potatoes out of her own meager harvest. It was a kind gesture, if one Amelia could ill afford, and Una made a note to find some way of disguising a meal as a gift to lessen the pinch.

The Mitchell children waved goodbye as Una pedaled down the drive, strumming her bell as she turned onto the familiar streets of Lowbridge. Past the low-slung lobster cannery with its perpetual stink, past the shanties where the workers lived three-to-a-bed without electricity or running water, past the post office with its red flag snapping bravely in the breeze off the bay. Una nodded hello to Mrs. Millison and Mrs. Crawford, in from the Upper Glen to do a little shopping, and to old Mr. Anderson, sitting on his daughter-in-law's front stoop, mending a lobster trap.

She passed Lowbridge High School just as the noon bell rang and said a little prayer for Wally and Jemmy and all the other young people pouring out into the slanting autumn sunshine in all their beautiful vitality. She did not pause to search out the Blythes' ruddy heads among the crowd, knowing that a spinster aunt on a tricycle could only embarrass them in front of their friends, but
she held them in her heart just the same.

Two streets over from the high school, Una parked her tricycle beneath a flaming maple between St. Elizabeth's and the little brick rectory next door. There was plenty to do in the church office, particularly with the Feast of St. Elizabeth and attendant festival coming up in November, but Una did not follow her usual path up the granite steps to the church. Instead, she patted her hair, brushed dust from her navy blue skirt, and went to knock at the rectory door.

Father Caldwell had evidently been at lunch. Una ducked her head and offered to return later, but he waved away all her objections and insisted that she join him in a bite.

"It's no trouble at all!" he insisted as he led Una through the sitting room, past the study, and back toward the kitchen. "Mrs. Howard brought me a beautiful ham and there's really no way I can do it justice on my own."

Una sat in the chair he offered her and accepted a plate and a thick slice of bread, though she hesitated when it came to the ham.

Father Caldwell paused in his bustling to peer at her. "Of course! Forgive me, Miss Meredith. I recall now that you are a vegetarian. I'm sure I have some cheese here somewhere. Do you eat cheese?"

Una was on the point of saying that yes, cheese was perfectly alright, thank you. She could not, therefore, account for the words that tumbled out when she opened her mouth.

"I'm not, actually," Una said, surprising herself. "A vegetarian, that is."

"No?" Father Caldwell's brows flew up. "Forgive me. I must have been misinformed."

"I don't often cook meat," Una said apologetically. "My brother is a vegetarian. We live together and I've gotten out of the habit."

"I see. But you do eat meat?"

"Yes," Una conceded. "Not often, though."

"Is ham alright?"

"Yes, it's fine." Una cut a piece to prove herself an amenable guest, which appeared to satisfy Father Caldwell. It also left Una chewing a mouthful of ham when she meant to be making a solemn petition. She took a long, quiet sip of water to regain her composure. She had been waiting a long time to ask this, taking time to get the measure of the man cheerfully tucking into his lunch across the kitchen table. Perhaps now wasn't the right time after all. But if not now, when?

"Father Caldwell," Una began, committing herself to action before she could flee. "I wonder if I might ask you something."

Father Caldwell bobbed affably, covering his mouth with his napkin as he swallowed. "Please do!"

Una steadied her nerves with a deep breath and plunged ahead. "I have been hoping for quite some time . . . that is . . . are you familiar with the Order of Deaconesses?"

"Indeed!" he answered. "There was a Mother House near my last posting in Toronto. Most impressive, the work they did with the poor and sick. And you wish to be consecrated? Wonderful! I say, you're probably over-qualified, aren't you? But I doubt the Bishop will hold that against you.
Splendid idea! I'd have suggested it myself if I had thought of it first."

Una had the sense to close her mouth. She had spent many hours in prayer and contemplation, choosing her words carefully, deciding how best to explain the call she felt to fulfill this particular vocation. She had even rehearsed this conversation, not once, but many times, and now that it came down to it, it was over before it had properly begun.

"I . . . believe I am called," she said, haltingly. "To serve."

"No surprise there," Father Caldwell said, winking. "The way people in this parish tell it, you've been at every sickbed and charity supper for twenty years. And of course the Altar Guild depends on you. And the Festival committee. And a dozen more, I'm sure! Why, just the other day, Deacon Saunders was telling me . . ."

He stopped, arrested perhaps by the look of alarm on Una's face.

"Forgive me, Miss Meredith," he apologized. "I've gotten ahead of you. Tell me, do you truly wish to be set apart as a deaconess?"

Una licked her lips, her heart fluttering like a hummingbird. "I do," she said, quietly but confidently. "I have for a long time."

"If I may ask," Father Caldwell said, merry brown eyes alight with interest, "why haven't you already begun your studies?"

"I did try once," Una admitted. "I . . . Father Kirkland was a dear friend. But perhaps a bit . . . set in his ways?"

Father Caldwell nodded in agreement. "Indeed. Just so. He was one of the old school, that's for sure. And he didn't approve?"

"It wasn't the right time," Una said.

"What's changed?"

It was positively infuriating to feel a flush rise in her cheeks. Una wouldn't have asked it for herself, but God had laid it on her heart to pursue this vocation. Being a deaconess wasn't like being ordained, not really, but it involved formal consecration to the work of serving the poor and needy, to lifelong service to Christ through service to others. Most deaconesses lived in community with other consecrated women, almost like nuns, with whom they were frequently confused, due in part to the blue habits they wore. Never, in all the years since Father Kirkland had counseled her to seek fulfillment in lay ministry instead, had the flame diminished, as surely it must if it had sprung from her own vanity. It was something within her, yet apart from her, inextinguishable.

"You're here," Una said more boldly than she felt. "You have a different way of doing things. I thought perhaps that if Providence has called you here, then I might be meant to try again."

Father Caldwell was beaming. "Indeed!" he enthused. "No need for suspense, Miss Meredith. I think it's a capital idea! It will be a long process — a period of contemplation and then at least two years of study before you can be formally consecrated. Tell me, do you wish to relocate to a Mother House or remain in parish service?"

This was the trickiest bit. Carl needed her, now more than ever. A Mother House was a home of sorts, but it wasn't hers.
"It was my understanding that I might be allowed to stay in parish service," Una said carefully. "That is, I understood that it is possible to join the Order and don the habit, but serve at home . . . if the local rector agrees that there is need in the community . . ."

"Need enough, Miss Meredith!" Father Caldwell agreed heartily. "Of course you must stay. What would we do without you? I take it you don't wish to travel to Toronto for a course at the Anglican Women's Training College?"

"No," Una concurred.

"Then we'll do it by correspondence. I'll sponsor you, of course. We'll write to the Bishop straight away for permission. He'll probably require testimonials from the congregation, but that shouldn't be any trouble at all. Perhaps he will even consent to waive the preparatory period, as I imagine you've done quite a lot of contemplating already. Why, I've even heard a few people call you Saint Una . . ."

At this, Una paled, her nascent joy draining away as through a sieve. "No," she whispered, shaking her head. "That's not . . . I'm not . . . please don't say that."

Father Caldwell blushed, the apples of his round cheeks florid and his tone apologetic. "Forgive me, Miss Meredith. A joke, I'm sure. I only meant that your neighbors think the world of you. I'm sure they will be happy to provide whatever testimony Bishop Atwood requires. And I'd be delighted to oversee your studies. I look forward to it! A wonderful chance to brush off the old textbooks. You'll have courses in Scripture, of course, as well as Christian Apologetics, Anglican Church History, Introduction to Christian Ethics . . ."

Una knew all this, of course. Hadn't she had a course catalog tucked away on her bedroom bookshelf for the past decade? Some of them seemed intimidating — what might be required of her in Introduction to Ascetical Theology? — But Una was fairly sure that she could hold her own in studying both the Old Testament and the New, as well as in Deaconess Practicum: Parochial Skills. As Father Caldwell rattled off the names of a dozen courses without pausing for breath, Una reflected that her greatest challenge in lessons might be getting a word in edgewise.

"Thank you, Father Caldwell," she interrupted. "Shall I draft a letter to the Bishop?"

"No need, no need," Father Caldwell replied. "I owe him a letter as it is. I'll make this the first order of business."

"Thank you," Una said, and meant it.

"Just one thing," Father Caldwell said, a twinkle in his eye. "Since we are being ever so progressive now, I must insist that you call me Father Daniel. You're practically the only hold-out."

Una's flush deepened and she struggled to find her voice. It seemed terribly informal. Wouldn't the congregation think less of a rector who did not embody respectability? It grated against something very deep and very old inside her, the same elemental worry that had inspired her to sew her father's Sunday suit buttons and brush his jacket whenever she could find the clothes-brush. The congregation wouldn't respect him and then they'd all be turned out of the manse and perhaps Mrs. Davis would come back to adopt her and take her away from Carl and Faith and Jerry . . .

Something of the old fright must have showed in her face because Father Caldwell's smile drooped. "Please?" he asked. "I really do prefer it."
Una shook herself. Really, she was being terribly rude. The Good Conduct Club had never quite disbanded in Una's own reckoning, and she scolded herself for resisting such a simple request as using Father Caldwell's preferred name.

"Of course," she said, forcing a smile. "Father Daniel."

Notes:

When the lecture was finished and the cadets had filed out of the classroom, Shirley breathed a sigh of relief. How, exactly, was he supposed to find some novel way of explaining barometric pressure when the textbook did a perfectly fine job of it already? To make matters worse, the cadets approached meteorology with all the enthusiasm of tranquilized harbor seals. But just let them get ice buildup in their pitot tubes so that their airspeed readings went belly-up and then see who cared about the weather!

Perhaps when the next class of cadets arrived at Camp Borden, he could pawn off meteorology instruction on Flight Lieutenant Ramsay. For all their sakes.

It wasn't that Shirley hated all classroom teaching. In fact, an hour of Operational Tactics and Countermeasures flew by in the blink of an eye. But that was different, and not just because Shirley had made little balsa-wood models to demonstrate effective techniques for pursuit and evasion. When it came to plotting out dogfights or dreaming up lurid hypotheticals, the cadets hovered on the edges of their seats with rapt attention and ready questions. Shirley still didn't know how to make them understand that it was really all just high-stakes geometry.

He gathered up his notes and made for the door, jumping slightly when he opened it to find Davenport standing on the other side.

"Good evening, sir!"

Well, at least he was saluting these days; that was something.

"What can I do for you, Davenport?"

"Sir, Wing Commander McMullen sent me to fetch you. You're to report to his office when you're finished with class."

Probably something about the training schedule. This was the first group of cadets to start their training after the outbreak of the war and everyone was still working out kinks in the schedule. In a few weeks they'd be done with Intermediate training and need to take their individual wings tests to qualify for Advanced. As the senior flight instructor, it was Shirley's job to decide who passed and who didn't.

Shirley passed his notes and books on to Davenport for safekeeping, then hurried out of the low-slung classroom building and across the chilly grounds to Headquarters. One thing about airfields: the trees in the vicinity tended to be squat and scrawny, and the land around very flat, so the wind here could be as brisk as it was far out in the Gulf, beyond sight of land. He should order a new overcoat before it got any later in the season; he could even send Davenport to pick it up in Toronto. Or Vancouver.

Shirley ducked into Headquarters, an unassuming little brick structure that might have passed for a suburban house if it had had a sedan outside instead of a jeep. No need to knock on McMullen's office door, which stood open, revealing the chaos within.

"Don't just stand there gawping, Blythe," McMullen grumbled. "Come give me a hand with this lot."
Shirley stepped gingerly over one teetering pile of papers and another, finding footholds wherever the carpet peeked through. He found a corner behind the map table that hadn't been overrun yet and planted himself there.

"What is all this, sir?" he asked.

"Cadets, Blythe, cadets," McMullen growled. "Thousands of volunteers champing at the bit, ready to give their all for King and Country and we can only take 40 at a time, damn it!"

It was true: demand for flight training far outstripped Camp Borden's capacity. There was a plan in the works — the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan — a huge scheme that would bring airmen from all the Commonwealth countries to train in Canada. It was a massively ambitious scheme — tens of thousands of cadets, hundreds of instructors, dozens of training schools — but it was still only a set of scratchings on a page. Right now they had Camp Borden and its class of 40.

"So these are the files for all the new volunteers?" Shirley ventured.

"Hardly! No, there are thousands upon thousands of chaps just waiting to hear the word go. These are the pre-cleared files — men with previous flying experience, maybe a bit of college. The sort we can fast-track through the manning depots and put right into Service Training without mucking about too much with the preliminaries."

When a new recruit joined the RCAF, he went first to a manning depot for a month of basic training and remedial academic instruction, after which the instructors would earmark him for either flight crew or ground crew. Pilot candidates got another month of classroom time at an Initial Training School — theory of flight, algebra, duties of an officer — before beginning an 8-week training course at an Elementary Flying School. There, civilian instructors gave basic lessons in small planes. Successful cadets were then passed on to the Service Flying Training Schools, of which Camp Borden was currently the one and only. The peacetime recruits who had arrived on September 15 were slated for a 28-week course at Borden, but there were already plans to trim that to 16 weeks: 8 weeks of intermediate training, 6 weeks of advanced training, 2 weeks of gunnery school. The RAF needed 100,000 aircrew and they needed them right now. The RCAF could barely send 100.

"We should be able to take overlapping groups soon," McMullen muttered, flipping through the files. "Get one group through Intermediate, then take on another while the first goes on to Advanced. We should be getting more kites, too. And they're already building new SFTSes near Ottawa, Calgary, and Saskatoon. Should be online by next summer."

Shirley plucked a file from the top of the nearest pile and scanned the cover sheet. **BRANTLEY, Henry Joseph, 24; Kingston, Ontario; McGill Class of '37; commercial pilot for Trans-Canada Air Lines.**

"So we're supposed to choose?" Shirley asked.

"Orders are to select two groups of forty who can skip Elementary Flight and come straight to us as soon as they learn a bit about how to salute and keep their bunks tidy."

"But don't we want all of them, sir?"

"Eventually, Blythe, eventually. They'll all come through at some point. But we have to pick some to put through right now. The rest will just have to cool their heels and wait their turn. Pull up a seat. You find forty you want and I'll find forty I want and then we'll go have a drink or three."
Shirley was all for just counting out the eighty files and having done with it, but McMullen seemed to be taking the matter seriously. Shirley exchanged places with a tottering stack balanced on the armchair and tried to clear enough space to make a pile for acceptances and another for rejections. Brantley was first on the accepted pile; if he was good enough for Trans-Canada, he was good enough for the RCAF.

For the next hour, Shirley read and sorted, devoting only a minute or two to each candidate. There were bush pilots and hobbyists, engineers and air traffic controllers, and even an aeronautics executive from de Havilland who would surely be more useful cranking out aircraft to keep all these fine cadets aloft. Shirley accepted an MP's son, a prairie mechanic, and a barnstormer whose photo looked like it had been taken in a wind tunnel.

When the next file fell open in his lap, Shirley recoiled. **FORD, Gilbert Owen, 19; Toronto, Ontario; student at the University of Toronto; licensed hobby pilot.**

He'd accepted cadets as young or younger. College was a plus, even if it was only a semester. His training had been impeccable and his natural abilities unmatched.

Shirley flicked a glance toward McMullen, muttering through his mustache as he tossed files to left and right. What would have happened if Gil had turned up in McMullen's stack instead?

But he hadn't.

Shirley dropped the file in the rejected pile and reached for another.

On a blustery Tuesday afternoon, when the dull husks of oak leaves rattled dryly in the trees and the sky threatened rain or worse, Una arrived at St. Elizabeth's fifteen minutes before the scheduled start of her first lesson with Father Daniel. The correspondence course from the Anglican Women's Training College began with *Introduction to Holy Scripture*, and Una had spent the previous week writing and re-writing her answers to the prompts at the end of the first module. Parking her tricycle under the barren maple, she unpacked her carrying basket, careful not to jostle the string-tied parcel containing her contribution to the rectory tea table. Balancing the box and the folio containing her course materials was awkward, but Una managed, holding her papers tightly under her elbow as she knocked at the rectory door.

"Hello!" came a cheerful voice from behind her.

Startled, Una dropped her folio, which hit the granite step and sprang open, releasing her notes into the swirling breeze. She caught at them, corralling a few, but at least half a dozen pages flew free, winging through the chilly autumn air along unpredictable paths.

"Sorry!" Father Daniel shouted as he chased the errant leaves. Dressed in grease-smeared coveralls rather than his customary blacks, he had evidently been working on Jenny in the stable. The door stood ajar, and several of Una's close-written pages adhered themselves to the motorcycle. Father Daniel proved more agile than Una would have predicted, scurrying this way and that, and even leaping for one paper that had impaled itself on a low-hanging branch. Red-faced with both embarrassment and exertion, he smoothed the pages as best he could, apologizing to Una for the obvious inadequacy of his efforts as he handed them back.

"Forgive me, Miss Meredith," he said, bobbing. "I didn't mean to surprise you."

Una murmured that it was quite alright, really, and hadn't they better go inside? In truth she was as discombobulated internally as externally and it was just as well that Father Daniel excused himself.
to change out of his coveralls. It gave Una a chance to splash water on her face in the washroom and recover her nerve.

When she joined Father Daniel in the sitting room, she found him smoothing her papers against the worn seat of the antiquated horsehair sofa, smiling guiltily as he attempted to shuffle them back into order. He handed them back to her with a shrug and took up a single typed sheet he had prepared to structure their conversation. Una murmured her thanks and tried not to stare at the little smudge of grease on his temple.

"I don't suppose it's quite fair to go over the prompts in order after I've made such a mess of them," he said when they had taken armchairs opposite one another. "Instead, let me ask: how did you find the first assignment?"

"I found it very interesting," Una said honestly. "I'm not sure what I expected from an introductory course, but I found the reading pleasantly stimulating."

"Oh?" Father Daniel said, a kind smile not quite obscuring his quiet disbelief. "I would have thought there wasn't much in it that you hadn't covered with the Sunday School students."

Una considered this. "No," she admitted, "but there is something to be said for being forced to articulate simple principles. I've often found that explaining Bible stories to the primer class requires me to consider the essence of the lesson without extraneous clutter."

Father Daniel tapped his ring on the side of his chair, the high back and tufted armrests lending him a professorial authority not quite in keeping with his fidgeting. "Indeed," he said thoughtfully. "Tell me, what is your favorite lesson to teach to the primer class?"

Una spoke without hesitation: "The Good Samaritan."

"Not Noah's Ark?"

"No," Una said. When the priest allowed silence for her to elaborate, she explained: "It is difficult to explain why God would save cows and sheep, but drown every child in the world."

Father Daniel started at the bluntness of her answer, but nodded. "I would not think that many children would notice that aspect of the story," he said quietly.

"They do. Some of them anyway. When my brother Bruce was a child, he used to fixate on the suffering of children: the Flood, the deaths of the firstborn of Egypt, the slaughter of the Canaanites. Of course, he grew up during the War. But there is usually one child in every class who sees it that way."

The priest smiled, perhaps a bit wistfully. "I suppose you were such a child yourself. They often grow up to pursue ministry. Did your brother?"

"Yes," Una admitted. "He has the Presbyterian church in Cherry Valley."

"And his sister will be an Anglican deaconess," Father Daniel said, amused. "There's a story there, I'm sure. But since we are supposed to be discussing Introduction to Holy Scripture, perhaps you will tell me more about The Good Samaritan. Why do you like to teach it?"

Una flicked a glance toward her rumpled notes, but found that she did not need them. "It is the heart of Christ's message," she said. "To love one another and care for one another, no matter the danger or the expectations of society."
"Is it really that simple?" Father Daniel asked, his head cocked in interest.

"Yes."

The priest leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands outstretched to emphasize his eager questions. "Isn't it possible that the parable is an allegory? That the fallen man represents Adam, and the Samaritan is Christ? The priest and the Levite, representing the Law of the Old Testament and the Prophets, do not stop to aid the fallen man, but Christ brings him to the inn — or Church — where he nurses him and promises to come again?"

There was a hint of humor in Father Daniel's tone, and Una could not tell whether he was in earnest or if he meant to bait her. Either way, she frowned, shaking her head with grave sincerity.

"Origen of Alexandria might agree with you," she said, "and Saint Augustine as well. But I see no reason to ignore the plain reading of the text. Jesus taught the poor, and told his stories in ways that they could understand; why would he disguise his meaning in riddles?"

"Are you a Calvinist, then, Miss Meredith?" Father Daniel asked, surprise evident in his amusement.

"Certainly not," Una said, folding her hands in her lap. "Christ is for the many, not the few. Why should his teachings be difficult to understand?"

Father Daniel nodded enthusiastically, shifting in his seat so that the typed lesson sheet slipped forgotten to the floor.

"Tell me, Miss Meredith, have you ever heard the name David Strauss?"

"Of course," she said simply. "I read his Life of Jesus when I was a girl."

"Extraordinary!" Father Daniel said, clapping his hands together in delight. "I can imagine you easily enough. Though I had no idea that Lowbridge boasted such a comprehensive library."

"You have not met my father," Una said. "He is the Presbyterian minister in Glen St. Mary. He has always had a passion for German theology, and keeps a very fine library."

"Does he? And you made yourself at home there, I see. Tell me, who else have you read?"

Una thought hard, wrinkling her nose in concentration as she conjured names and titles imprinted on the well-worn spines. "I only read the Germans that were available in translation," she said apologetically. "Schweitzer on the historical Jesus and Baur on the differences between Peter and Paul. The Scottish theologians were all in English, of course. My father's name is John Knox Meredith and one of my brothers is Thomas Carlyle, so Knox and Carlyle, as well as Cunningham on the Reformation . . . ."

This bibliography was interrupted by Father Daniel's barking laugh as he raised his hands in a plea for abeyance.

"Have mercy, Miss Meredith!" he grinned. "You have me on the ropes already! As it is, I will be up all night reviewing my notes from seminary!"

Una blushed furiously, lowering her gaze to her lap and apologizing reflexively.

"No, indeed!" Father Daniel chortled. "Why should you ever apologize for knowledge? I was only thinking that this correspondence course may prove to be somewhat superfluous. There is an exam
at the end, but I suppose you will not be stumped when asked to name the Books of the New Testament?"

Una smiled sheepishly. "I suppose not."

"Well then, let us consider this lesson at an end," he said, rising from his armchair. "Though I would be fascinated to know your thoughts on Strauss's idea of the mythical Jesus. Over tea, perhaps?"

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Una had brought along a toothsome nutcake frosted in pink and white and studded with candied pecans. She knew that Father Daniel did not starve, but his part-time housekeeper, Mrs. Williams, tended rather toward the Aunt Martha school of cookery. This had suited the elderly Father Kirkland, but must have been something of a trial to anyone else. Mrs. Williams only came to the rectory two mornings a week to clean and cook up an indescribable pot of something-or-other to see Father Daniel through the other days. Father Daniel did not complain, except to refer to his rations as "Bully Beef" and accept any and all gifts of food and invitations to dine abroad.

Thanks to careful packing, Una's confection had survived with only minimal damage, easily remedied by the quick flick of a butterknife. It made a lovely centerpiece for the tea table, though Father Daniel was enthusiastic in his appreciation for its non-visual qualities as well.

"Tell me," he said, cutting a second slice, "how did a daughter of the Presbyterian manse come to be studying for the Anglican diaconate?"

"My step-mother was raised in this parish," Una said. "She left it to marry my father, but she would come back occasionally, and I would come with her. It . . . felt right. Especially after the War."

Father Caldwell nodded, studying her face as she spoke. "Not the theology, then?" he asked.

"That, too," she admitted. "The Elect never sat well with me. When Father Kirkland told me the story of St. Elizabeth — how her family disapproved of her charity, but she hid her loaves under her skirts and fed the poor against their wishes, and how God saved her from her family's wrath by turning her bread to roses — it just made sense."

"Better sense than Cunningham on the Reformation?" Father Daniel asked with a gentle smile.

Una's teaspoon tinkled against the side of her cup, a musical sound like a tiny bell, cheerful and friendly. "Cunningham was unfailingly sensible," she said. "My eldest brother Jerry — he's a judge in Charlottetown — he loved Cunningham and all the Calvinist controversialists. A rational argument and a rational faith. But I don't know that Cunningham's cleverness ever fed the hungry."

"What about spiritual hunger?" Father Daniel said, leaning avidly over the crumbs of his vanished nutcake. "Don't we need scholars and theologians to feed the mind?"

"Perhaps," Una conceded, conscious that he very much wanted her to agree with him, even if she did not. Conceding to the appeal in his manner, she said, "I think you would get along well with my father. He loves a good theological maze, and will spend a week sleuthing out an answer, lost to the world and his congregation."

She did not say and his family, though it was on the tip of her tongue. It would be disloyal, no matter how true. She swallowed instead, taking a gulp of tea that scalded her tongue as penance.

"I should be delighted to meet him," Father Daniel said, oblivious. "I really should get to know the
other clergy in the area, particularly in these uncertain times. Tell me, does Mr. Meredith approve of inter-denominational cooperation in times of trouble?"

Una thought of the infamous Union Prayer Meeting of 1916 and Uncle Norman shaking fat, florid little Josiah Pryor to the jeering approbation of Presbyterians and Methodists alike.

"He did during the last war," she said. "I expect this time will be the same."

"Splendid! I'll invite him for dinner sometime, shall I? That is," he grimaced, "he isn't any sort of gourmand, is he?"

It was Una's turn to laugh, an elusive sound that matched the fairy falls of silver on china. "No, indeed," she said through a genuine smile. "He's quite famous for his indifference to food. Why, before he married my stepmother . . ."

She broke off. What did Father Daniel care for stories of Ditto and the time before Rosemary West came to the manse? There were stories to be told, of course, but only to friends and family. Explaining Ditto would mean explaining Aunt Marthe and explaining Aunt Marthe would mean explaining Mother and really, that was all rather too much for a Tuesday afternoon.

"My stepmother is a wonderful cook," Una said, recovering her poise. "I'll see that they invite you to the manse, shall I?"

Notes:

At the suggestion of TinaLouise88, I have added a cover image for this story (inserted at the beginning of the prologue, but I'm putting it here as well so that regular readers see it). Photo credit: Esther Bubley, October 1943.
In the year of our Lord 1640, the God-fearing Presbyterians of Scotland enacted through their representatives in Parliament an Act for the Abolition of Yule, declaring that "the kirke within this kingdom is now purged of all superstitious observatione of dayes." Instead of reveling in gluttony and wickedness like their Southron neighbors, the godly Scots profaned Christmas Day with commerce and ordinary housework to show that no day was more holy than any other. Unless, of course, Christmas Day happened to fall on a Sunday, in which case they observed the Sabbath with grim determination and many protestations that it was the day of the week, and not Christ's nativity, that demanded their repose.

Alas and alack! Three centuries of backsliding later, their ungrateful descendants across the sea saw nothing at all amiss in tarting up a "Presbyterian" church with evergreen garlands and Advent fripperies. Why, the minister of such a church — if one so far fallen truly deserved the title — might even be heard to say that Advent was the busiest season in his year, and that he must, with regrets, postpone his dinner party with the local Episcopal priest until the Yuletide festivities had concluded. Thus it came to pass that the Reverend John Knox Meredith, degraded bearer of a pious name, sat down with his family to a convivial meal in company with Father Daniel Caldwell on the first Sunday after Epiphany in the year of our Lord 1940.

Carl liked the look of the jolly little priest. Or, at least he might have liked him if he had been in a more generous mood. In Carl's current fog of gloom, Father Daniel might have looked like the Archangel Michael and talked with the tongues of men and angels and it would not have made a bit difference.* Oh, he seemed nice enough. Although . . . was that a motorcycle parked in the driveway? But Father Daniel seemed a conventional guest in all other respects, presenting Rosemary with a gift of a potted African violet of his own cultivation and introducing himself to Carl with a warm smile and a two-handed handshake. Una hovered nearby, pink-cheeked from the cold, even when they sat to dinner.

Carl took the single chair across from Una and her guest. Who had set the table this way? This was Faith's place, and it felt decidedly odd to occupy it. The perspective was all wrong.

"I've heard a good deal of praise for your cooking, Mrs. Meredith," said Father Daniel, his round face shining as he surveyed the feast arrayed before him. "But nothing could have prepared me for such a scrumptious-smelling bounty."

"Please do call me Rosemary," replied that good lady with a gracious smile. "And certainly you must sample my cooking before you celebrate it, or you may come to regret your enthusiasm."

Father Daniel laughed, assuring his hostess that she must, in turn, call him Daniel, and that he had no notion of being disappointed. He was awfully familiar, wasn't he? But Father and Rosemary were smiling, so Carl tamped down his irritation.

"Will you say grace for us, Daniel?" Father asked.

"I'd be delighted," said that easily delighted gentleman. "Do you join hands around the table for grace?"
"We do," Una said, beginning her self-correction almost before she had finished speaking. "Carl and I do, I mean. Now, that is. Not when we were growing up."

"I don't mind joining hands," Father said, reaching out to Una on one side and Carl on the other. Father's hand was cool and steady, and for a moment, Carl felt less jittery. Grace would do him good.

Father Daniel extended his own hands to both Rosemary and Una. "Tell me, Miss Meredith," he said with a spark in his eye, "am I allowed to say a Common-Prayer grace in a Presbyterian manse?"

"I think you will find this an ecumenical table," Una replied. "Besides, it has been said here often enough before, if perhaps not aloud."

Father Daniel chuckled and bent his head to pray, as did Una. Carl squinted across the table at the priest. They were awfully friendly, weren't they? Una had mentioned that she was studying with the new priest, but Carl had imagined someone like elderly, taciturn Father Kirkland, whom he had met on two occasions, one of which being that good gentleman's funeral. There had not been much difference in the conversation. But this? This was something else entirely. Carl nearly missed the grace, concentrating as he was on the linked hands of the supplicants. Yes, the man definitely wore a wedding ring.

*Give us grateful hearts, our Father, for all thy mercies, and make us mindful of the needs of others; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Among those mercies was the meal before them. There was no rationing — not yet anyway — which meant a sugar glaze for the turnips and fluffy white-flour biscuits with butter in abundance. Rosemary had long since adjusted her recipes to use vegetable shortening instead of lard or drippings, but the presence of a clerical colleague demanded a full dinner with meat as its centerpiece. In this case, a beautifully roasted wild duck, skin brown and crackling, *trussed and dressed, encircled by its liver and heart and gizzard.* Father carved dexterously, serving glistening morsels of meat to everyone but Carl.

"A rare treat!" Father Daniel enthused as Una passed him the first plate. "We hardly ever got ducks at my posting in Toronto, and only in the autumn, I think."

"One of my congregants brought us a brace yesterday," John explained. "We have a winter hunting season here for sea ducks. This is one of those black-and-white sort. What are they called, Carl?"

"Eider," said Carl, serving himself a pile of brussels sprouts. The rich aroma of the duck fat made him feel queasy, and he privately looked on the company as *little better than cannibals.*

"Oh yes," Rosemary said. "The ones with the very soft, warm down. I noticed it as I was cleaning them. I thought I might save it for a quilt, but I suppose you'd need a hundred ducks to get enough."

"You know," Carl frowned, "eiderdown can be harvested from wild ducks without harming them. People wait until they feather their nests and then go out and collect the down from around the eggs."

"Don't the eggs get cold?" Una asked, regarding her own serving of duck with some ambivalence.

"You can replace the down with hay," Carl explained. "It works well enough. Eider were endangered once, but now they're one of the great success stories of the Migratory Birds Treaty of 1916. Thirty years ago, there were only a few hundred nesting pairs in this area. Now there are
"That's good to hear," Father Daniel said, tucking into his meal. "After the Flood, the renewal. Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth."

Carl scowled across the table. "It wasn't the Flood that endangered the eider. It was over-hunting."

"Then I'm very glad to hear that they have recovered," said Father Daniel, chewing appreciatively. "Rosemary, this bird is done to a turn. Marvelous. Do tell me a little of your history, won't you? Miss Meredith has told me that you play the piano?"

The conversation moved on to music lessons and the genealogy of the West family and was beginning to come 'round to the subject of Ellen and courting and spitched-eel wedding suppers when Carl interrupted.

"Eider are very noble birds," he said to no one in particular. "I often think they are the most generous of the ducks."

Rosemary looked surprised, but asked, "Are ducks generous?"

"Eider are," Carl nodded. "Self-sacrificing, even. Did you know that when a mother eider is sitting on her eggs, she doesn't eat for weeks and weeks? She stays on her nest the whole time and loses a third of her bodyweight keeping the eggs warm. Some mothers even starve to death protecting their clutches."

"That is certainly noble," Father said judiciously, "though the mother's sacrifice can't come to much if the ducklings perish as well."

"But they don't!" Carl said, warming to his subject. "Eider raise their ducklings in crèches. You see, after the eggs hatch, the mothers have to spend weeks feeding and regaining their strength. Eider ducklings are raised by their aunties — older, non-breeding females with experience raising the young. One auntie might look after the broods hatched by three or four or five young mothers. I once saw an eider auntie with 27 little ducklings queepling along behind her in a line."

He wiggled his fingers before his face to mime the gentle bumbling of baby ducks, desisting only when he noticed the tight neutrality of Una's expression.

"Very admirable," said Father Daniel through a mouthful of duck. "Perhaps it shows the tender heart of the female in any species."

"Sex has nothing to do with it," came Carl's flat contradiction. He ignored Una's startled intake of breath. "The male eider are just as caring. In wintertime, eider crowd together in the water to keep warm, so close to one another you can't even distinguish one bird from the next. And then the males take turns swimming around the perimeter of the group to keep the water moving so it doesn't freeze. That way they all survive together."

"That's quite fascinating, Carl," Rosemary said with a warning edge in her voice. "To think that we can learn such useful morals from the animal kingdom."

Father Daniel bobbed his head in agreement. "Indeed! Recall the pelican, who feeds her young on the blood of her own breast. When I was in England, our hospital chapel had a pelican motif on its altar frontal: the mother nourishing her chicks with her blood as Christ does for his people."

"Pelican chicks eat fish . . ." Carl said skeptically.
"And like the kind, life-rendering pelican / Repast them with my blood," quoted John Meredith.**

"Now that is Shakespeare, but the point is the same. Do you say you were a hospital chaplain, Daniel?"

Talk turned to England and Daniel's service in the last war, first at a Canadian hospital near London and later as a battalion chaplain at the front. The duck disappeared into second helpings, one red slice after another falling from its plump breast.

"I once saw an eider die of grief," Carl said to himself. "They form long-term pair bonds, but they don't winter together. They just meet up in the spring. Sometimes one doesn't make it back . . ."

Rosemary stood abruptly. "I need to set the dessert to warm," she said. "Carl, will you please assist me?"

Carl blinked his confusion, but noticed the thin line of Una's tight-pressed lips and did as he was bid. Taking up several empty plates, he followed Rosemary to the kitchen, where he found her standing with her arms folded.

"Are you feeling quite well?" Rosemary asked tersely.

"Perfectly well," Carl mumbled, though he did not meet her gaze.

"Really?" Rosemary asked. "I had hoped that you might offer some excuse."

"For what?"

"For being so rude to Una's guest."

Carl pulled a face that would have done credit to the ten-year-old he had been when Rosemary first became his mother. "I was just making conversation."

Rosemary said nothing and then more nothing, waiting until Carl became curious and looked up of his own accord. It was not her way to scold the Meredith children, having always delivered on her promise to be a friend to them, rather than the dragon of Mary Vance's imagination.

"What is the matter, Carl?" asked Rosemary gently.*


"If you'd like to tell me, I'll be glad to listen. But if you'd rather not — that's all right, too, dear."

Carl took a long, earnest look into Rosemary's eyes, but could not bring himself to speak, not even when she reached out a velvety hand and caressed his cheek.

"Have you considered taking a vacation?" Rosemary said quietly. "You always go to Kingsport after the New Year."

Kingsport meant Aster House and Aster House meant Di and Sylvia and every fourth chair yawningly vacant.

"I don't want to go to Kingsport," Carl said dully.

"Well then, how about Toronto?"

She said it casually, but Carl stiffened nevertheless. In this house, the wheels of harmony were greased with evasion, and it was a shock to have the brake applied so suddenly.
"I recall that you boys used to get leave every once in a while?" Rosemary continued.

Carl's irritation had receded like the border of a frost-rimed window facing east toward the sunrise. Alert and curious, he prodded cautiously at this unlooked-for acknowledgement.

"Yes, every once in a while."

"I understand that officers get rather more of it," Rosemary said, returning Carl's astonished gaze frankly and taking the West family china from his hands, lest he shatter it through inattention.

"That's true," Carl said, "but only when they can be spared. It's a very busy time."

"All the more reason you should go. A weekend pass isn't enough time to come home, but I believe Toronto is much closer, isn't it?"

Carl managed to nod.

"You should go. It might settle your mind to see that it's only a train ride away."

Rosemary set the china in the sink and busied herself over pound cake and cherry preserves while Carl swept up his scattered thoughts. They had only spoken frankly the one time, and filled the intervening thirteen years with chatter over children and the weather. But Rosemary had indeed been a friend once, and Carl was in terrible need of a friend.

"I might put him in more danger," he murmured, so softly that she might not have heard.

Rosemary clicked a stack of dessert plates onto the tray. "I can't say that you're wrong," she said. "But do consider it, won't you?"

"I will."

"And Carl?" Rosemary paused as she pushed the kitchen door open. "No more duck talk. You're giving Una fits."

Notes:

*Quotations throughout (and title) from *Rainbow Valley*, chapter 19, "Poor Adam!" and chapter 20, "Faith Makes a Friend."

**Hamlet, Act 4, Scene 5**
8 January 1940

Dear Uncle Shirley,

I'm awful sorry you couldn't come to Ingleside for Christmas. It wasn't especially jolly, I can tell you that. Sam couldn't get leave from officer candidate school long enough to come home either, though he sent a letter saying he'll be posted to the Royal Regiment when he's commissioned. Jims came up to say goodbye — he is going to Kingsport to take a job in a shipyard. He says that the money is very good.

The whole family was pretty cut up. I guess it's a good thing none of the girls believe in Santa Claus anymore. Grandad put on his old suit like always, but even he couldn't keep it up for long.

Wally and I hightailed it out of there as soon as we could and sat out in the barn talking a while. He sure is sweet on Zoe Maylock, that's for sure. He seemed nervous that I might mind about Zoe, but that's all water under the bridge and I told him so.

I guess Wally may get into the Navy before I get anywhere near the RCAF, even if he does have to wait til he graduates. When we got home to Toronto I had a letter saying that my basic training is delayed again. Dad says I should go back to school and just wait until they call me up. How can I just wait? Sometimes I can barely sit still, itching to get into a Spitfire. The RAF needs pilots right away — you know they do. Isn't there anything you can do to get me called up faster?

I guess I will go back to college in the meantime. Mum and Dad are glad, at least, and Victoria, too. She got me a silk scarf for Christmas, just like a real pilot. It was nice of her, and made me sorry for scaring her with my elephant beetle when she was small. Funny, isn't it — I never paid Victoria much mind, except to fight with her, but now I think I will miss her if I ever manage to get into this war.

I suppose you're busy at Camp Borden. If you do have some leave, though, you could come to Toronto. It isn't far. But I hope you will not get the chance because I'll get to Borden before you can get away. I guess they can't keep me out forever.

In the meantime, I'll keep on with my maths like you said. I practice shooting, too. There's a rifle range in the basement of Hart House and I try to get in an hour of practice three times a week. When my turn comes, I'll be ready.

I hope you are well. Kiss a Harvard for me.

Your loving nephew,

Gil

The coffee in the officers' mess was hot. That was just about all that could be said for it, but that was enough on a day like this, when the weather howled down off the lake and visibility was rubbish. They had a war to win and cadets to train, but it wouldn't do anyone any good to get the boys killed in a squall before they were half-fledged. Better to put them through a morning of
lectures and then give them a rare afternoon off. Most had put on their pads and gone to play hockey against some of the Armoured Corps lads, unbothered by the snow.

The officers had retired to their mess to chat and play cards. Flight Lieutenant Holyoke had invited Shirley to join the junior flight instructors in a hand or two, but Shirley felt awkward about taking money from men he commanded. Instead, he sat alone, nursing his coffee and trying to think of something besides the telegram in his pocket: *K Eddy 302*.

"Let's have a game of chess, Blythe," said McMullen, clapping Shirley on the shoulder. "You do play, don't you?"

They set the board before the fire that Davenport had built with crackling, fragrant pine that burned hot and too fast. Would Carl and Una have enough wood this winter? Carl knew better than to use soft, resin-y pine, but he wasn't used to stocking enough hardwood for a whole winter. They usually went to Kingsport this time of year. Had he cut enough to get them through a real cold snap?

Shirley moved his pieces mechanically, playing a conservative defense that would pass one of the hours until the 5:17 train left Camp Borden for Toronto. He had stepped in as acting CO over Christmas so that McMullen could spend the holiday with his kids; it hadn't been difficult to get a bit of leave in return. Not a full 10 days, mind, not with a new cadet class coming in next week. But McMullen could spare him for 72 hours. Shirley checked his wristwatch and lit a cigarette.

Two figures approached the game and hovered while McMullen contemplated his rook. Shirley looked up to find Flight Lieutenants Ramsay and Trent, one wisp-thin and dark, the other squat and fair, both with wind-chapped cheeks, shivering as they began to thaw before the fire.

"Well, what is it, Ramsay?" McMullen barked, his finger still on the active piece.

"It's the new Harvards, sir. We've just come from the hangar. Sergeant Dixon says the ground crews are finished checking four of them and can probably finish the fifth this evening, but he wants to wait til the snow passes to fuel them up."

That was good news. With the five new Harvards operational, they could train intermediate and advanced cadets at the same time.

"Excellent, Ramsay, excellent," McMullen said, deciding he didn't want to take Shirley's bishop after all. "Have some coffee, both of you. You look done in."

Trent turned toward the coffee urn on the sideboard by the windows, but Ramsay lingered.

"Sir, if I may ask . . . where do they come from?"

"What?"

"The Harvards, sir. Where do they come from?"

It was a good question, come to think of it. Shirley hadn't wondered that himself, but perhaps he should have.

McMullen sat back in his armchair and squinted at the earnest young flight instructor. "Why, they come from the Aero Fairy, of course. Didn't your mother ever teach you anything, Ramsay?"

Ramsay blushed as several of the other junior officers chuckled over their cribbage at a nearby table, their own conversation abandoned.
"I only meant, well, the Harvards were built by North American Aviation, weren't they?" Ramsay observed. "Last I heard, North American was a California company. But the Yanks are neutral — they can't deliver guns or ammunition or ships or . . ."

"Or aircraft. Correct. Auditioning for the Intelligence Services, are you?"

"Sorry, sir."

McMullen flapped a dismissive hand. "Oh, it's quite alright. No shame in being clever. We could use a bit more of that around here sometimes," he bellowed for the benefit of the peanut gallery. "Now, run along, Ramsay."

"Of course, sir. Sorry, sir." Ramsay saluted and retreated toward the coffee, enduring some ribbing from the cribbage table as he pulled up a chair.

Shirley turned back toward the board, puzzling over the question as he took a drag on his cigarette. The Harvards were brand new, no doubt about that. And they definitely hadn't been manufactured in Canada. Just this month, Noorduyn Aviation in Montreal had gotten the first order for Canadian-built Harvards, but hadn't actually built any yet. De Havilland was turning out Tiger Moths as fast as they could, but those were trainers for beginners — they certainly weren't making Harvards.

"It's the stupidest thing, really," McMullen grumbled quietly.

"Sir?" Shirley was both curious and eager for anything that might distract him from K Eddy 302 until it was time.

"Ramsay's quite right, you know," McMullen said. "The Yanks can't deliver aircraft directly to the RCAF anymore. Cash and Carry, they call it, but they can't fly planes to Canada. We got fifteen Harvards from them back in September, but then their Congress passed the blasted Neutrality Act and froze us out."

He advanced his queen in the front half of a two-pronged attack.

"So you see," he continued, "it's illegal for North American to fly a brand new Harvard to Canada. But it's NOT illegal for them to fly one to an open field in North Dakota or Minnesota or Maine . . . maybe a field very, very close to the border . . . and just . . . leave it there."

"Leave it, sir?"

"Oh, it's all pre-arranged. Our boys put on their civvies and hitch up a team of horses to tow the things over to the next field, which is, of course, Canadian. Damnedest thing, hauling Harvards with horses. Horses!"

"I've done that," Shirley said, moving a lowly pawn to protect his knight. "Towed a kite with horses, I mean. When I was a kid, the only place I had to store my Curtiss was an old sheep barn. When I needed to get it down to the water, I'd hire a friend who had a team of huge black draft horses. I forget what they're called. Something French."

McMullen pondered for a moment. "Percherons?"

"Yes, sir. Percherons. Very steady animals."

"Well if the brass ever comes around asking for pilots for a pickup, I'll know who to nominate," McMullen chuckled. "There's talk now of landing some of them on the St. John River up in New Brunswick. The border runs smack down the middle. What d'ya think, Blythe, can horses walk on
"They can if you shoe them with ice cleats," Shirley shrugged.

"Well look at you, farm boy!" McMullen guffawed. "Who knew?"

Shirley flicked his butt into the fireplace. "It all sounds like a colossal waste of time to me, sir."

"You can say that again. Hell, when the Yanks were delivering the first batch of Harvards, they missed the border altogether and were 100 miles into Alberta before they realized their mistake. Had to turn around and re-cross the bloody border just to keep up the charade."

Well, no one ever said maintaining appearances was efficient.

"You said fields, sir," Shirley observed. "Are they really landing them without runways?"

"Oh, they've patched things up a bit," McMullen admitted. "Smoothed out the buffalo wallows and gopher holes. The place in Maine is really a proper airstrip — it was right on the New Brunswick border to begin with, and they just lengthened the runway so it stops right at the line."

"I think I know that place," Shirley said. "Houlton, Maine, isn't it, sir?"

"It is indeed, Blythe, it is indeed," McMullen said, his eyes dancing with amusement. "But tell me, why would you be familiar with an airstrip just over the American border, eh? No clandestine missions of your own, I hope."

"Of course not, sir." Shirley answered, allowing a hint of mischief to show as he put McMullen in checkmate.

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At 7:30, Shirley stepped into the lobby of the King Edward Hotel in downtown Toronto and approached the desk. It was impossible to walk about inconspicuously in RCAF getup these days, even without stripes on your sleeves, but there was nothing Shirley could do about that.

There was some sort of tussle behind the desk as two hostesses tripped over one another to bid him welcome. A slender, black-eyed woman with Jean Harlow brows pulled rank and sent her companion off to perform some less enticing task.

"Good evening, sir. How may I assist you?" she asked through a dazzling smile.

"I have a reservation. The name is Blythe."

The hostess consulted a stack of cards, beaming when she found the right one. "Blythe. What an enchanting name! I see we have you for two nights in room 437?"

There was a brief exchange of paperwork and keys, and the Harlow-browed woman signaled a bellhop.

"No, that's quite alright," Shirley said, lifting his small overnight bag into view. "I don't need any assistance."

"If there's anything at all I can do to make your stay more comfortable, anything at all, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Thanks."
"Enjoy your stay, Commodore," she said, promoting Shirley several ranks in her imagination.

"Thank you. I'm sure I will."

He made his way to the elevator and asked the uniformed operator for the fourth floor. Strange how an elevator felt a bit like takeoff, the floor pressing up into your feet for a brief moment of heaviness before you started moving at the same speed as everything around you. Shirley drummed his fingers on his thigh, impatient now he was so very close.

On the fourth floor, Shirley tipped the elevator operator and stepped purposefully into the corridor. He scanned the deserted hallway until he found the stairs, then slipped through the door. Down the echoing concrete to the third floor, heart reciprocating ungovernably. Shirley didn't like subterfuge; it was galling to be forced to land in the approximate vicinity of a location instead of just going there directly. But there was a war on and needs must.

He paused in the stairwell door, checking for hazards. There was a couple far down at the other end of the hall and Shirley waited for them to round a corner before he turned the other way, past 308 and 306 and 304 . . .

He took a deep breath before rapping gently on 302.

He didn't have to wait long. Before the echo of the knock died, Carl was pulling him into the room and locking the door behind him.

Notes:

In January of 1940, Noorduyn Aviation in Montreal got the first order for Canadian-built Harvards. They produced 2,800 of them over the course of the war, but none yet.

The whole US-Canadian aircraft-delivery scheme was bonkers and also true. I recommend the article "Horses on the Payroll" by Jerry Vernon, RCAF Journal, (Spring 2016, vol 5. Issue 2). bit.ly / 2Msrpf3
Not Because We Will

January 1940

But each day brings its petty dust
Our soon-chok'd souls to fill,
And we forget because we must,
And not because we will.

- Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), "Absence"*

"No, Mugsy!" Una scolded, shooing the guilty little terrier away from the siren scent of chicken giblets wafting from the Ingleside pantry. "Go lie down by the fire like a sensible beastie and you'll have the innards when they're good and ready."

Faith grinned, holding the kitchen door open for Muggins as Una chivvied her out. The dog whined in protest, but desisted when Dr. Blythe senior appeared at the living room threshold and scooped her into his arms.

"Come sit with me a spell," he said, scratching her ears but grinning at Una. "It's been a while since I had a dog to help me lounge in front of a fire properly."

Behind Dr. Blythe, the living room was the very picture of creature comfort, the squashy sofa and becushioned armchairs bathed in the frolicsome flickering of a merry fire. Over by the silent radio, Jem and Mrs. Blythe sat together at a small table, salt-and-cayenne heads bent low over case notes and correspondence. Outside, a gentle flurry sent flakes to kiss the windowpanes, frigid but harmless to all within the hearth-fire's reach. Dr. Blythe settled Muggins beside him on the sofa, petting with one hand and wrangling the newspaper — Soviet Warplanes Pour Destruction on Finnish Cities; Nazi Drive in Prospect? — with the other.

Una slipped back toward the kitchen, leaving them all to their leisure.

"I'm sorry again for imposing on you," she said to Faith as she rolled up her sleeves and retrieved the butter tray from the icebox.

Faith laughed, tying up her hair in a silk scarf she had brought home from France in '36. "You're hardly a difficult guest, love. I'm likely to end the week with more clean linen than I started and a pantry full of pies besides."

"Only if Muggins doesn't get to them first. I really am sorry about her. She's out of sorts, being left behind."

Again.

"But Carl will be back soon?" Faith asked, scrupulously attentive to her flour-measuring for once.

The butter slices fell under Una's knife with perfect regularity, each creamy square exactly like all the others. "Yes. Tuesday, I think, or perhaps Wednesday."

"Well, you're welcome to stay as long as you like," Faith said. "Ceci was over the moon last night when her cream puffs turned out so well. She's been trying to get me to teach her, but mine are
better for hockey than tea."

The creampuffs in question were currently residing under a glass dome in the pantry, awaiting Ceci's return from school. She'd be along any minute, pink-cheeked and eager to help with the pies; Una had promised to demonstrate the proper technique for making a lattice top. At going-on-fourteen, Ceci Blythe seemed poised to inherit her mother's careless beauty, though she was more sweet pea than rose. Sometimes, she would whisper her secrets to Una over potato peels or tubs of bluing, which is why Una knew that she was anxious about leaving the Glen School for the wide world of Lowbridge High and that she worried she'd never be able to make anything just exactly the way Susan had.

If justice demanded a full and thorough accounting, it must be said that the creampuffs were not precisely "the Susan brand," but they were a good deal like creampuffs, which was more than could be said of previous attempts. Wally and Jemmy had certainly registered their appreciation, nicking extras on their way out the door this morning.

"It's only I didn't want to stay at home alone," Una explained, "nor leave Mugsy in a cold house when I went to Lowbridge."

"You don't have to justify yourself, Una. I'm happy to see you anytime." Faith's smile quirked into a something sharper. "Besides, it gives me a chance to ask whether you might have any news of your own?"

"News?" Una frowned, sinking the pastry cutter into the bowl. She doubted Faith wanted to hear about Georgie Newgate's strep throat or the bickering over whether the St. Elizabeth's chapter of the Red Cross should combine with the larger Lowbridge chapter or remain independent. What other news was there?

Faith caught her bottom lip between her teeth, biting the pink flesh white. "How are your deaconess lessons going?"

"Oh, that."

"Fine, thank you," Una answered comfortably. "We had a very enjoyable discussion of the Q Hypothesis this week."

"And who, exactly, is we," Faith asked, all innocence.

"Why me and Father Daniel of course."

"Oh yes, of course."

Una stopped crumbling her butter and blinked at her sister, who seemed on the verge of an explosion of giggles. "Whatever are you on about Faith?"

Faith pulled the mixing bowl across the table to take her own turn, sinking her fingers into the forming dough with determined zeal. "Nothing, I'm sure," she said, still grinning. "It's only that Rosemary seems to think very highly of Father Daniel. She had . . . rather a lot to say about your dinner."

That dinner. Goodness, Una could have melted with embarrassment when Carl had gone on and on about the ducks. She had so wanted everything to go well. Of course, Father Daniel had left the manse with three books that Father believed he would enjoy and Rosemary had invited him back next month and Father Daniel himself had insisted that he had had the most marvelous time. But Una had still felt an odd pang of disappointment when Jenny-the-motorcycle disappeared around a
"I think Father Daniel will get on with Father and Rosemary very well," Una said, stepping toward the sink to wash her hands. "That's why I introduced them."

"Am I to understand that this Father Daniel is invited back to the manse sometime in the near future?"

"Well, he'll have to return Father's books at some point, I'm sure."

"Indeed!"

Just what was so funny? Faith was snickering the way she did when there was some particularly jolly prank afoot, the joy of it bursting out of her in little snorts. Well, Una had learned long ago that all would be revealed in time and no use pressing when Faith had gone silly like this.

"Don't over-work that dough," Una warned, drying her hands on a towel. "I'm going to go ask if anyone would like tea."

Una left Faith chortling over the pie crust, padding as noiselessly as a little gray mouse toward the living room. The firelight still danced through the archway and into the wood-paneled hall, but a pair of low, urgent voices made her pause just short of the threshold. Peering in, Una could see that Dr. Blythe and Muggins were snoring together under the newspaper, but she could not see Jem and Mrs. Blythe without them seeing her. Una was loath to eavesdrop, but the first overheard sentence petrified her where she stood.

"Walter never bayonetted anyone, Mother."*

"But he wrote that he did," Mrs. Blythe said, her voice steady, if a bit faint. A paper crackled and she read:

"And when the moon rose redly in the east,
I killed a stripling boy!
He might have been my brother slim and fair;
I killed him horribly and I was glad,
It pleased me much to see his dabbled hair,
The pale and pretty lad."

Una's breath caught in her chest. Surely that couldn't be one of Walter's poems. He never . . .

"I don't think he wrote that from experience," Jem said gently. "But he saw . . . he saw . . ."

He trailed off, unable to summon words that could stand the blast of Walter's.

When Mrs. Blythe spoke, her voice was cool enough to send chills down Una's back, in spite of the fire.

"I am thankful now, Jem, that Walter did not come back," she said. "He never could have lived with his memories . . . and if he had seen the futility of the sacrifice they made then mirrored in this ghastly holocaust . . ."

"I know . . ." Jem said haltingly. "I know. Even I who am a tougher brand than Walter . . . but let us talk of something else. Who was it said, 'We forget because we must?' He was right."

"Rubbish," Mrs. Blythe hissed. "I haven't forgotten."
Una clapped a hand to her mouth as if she could recapture her little gasp. Had she ever heard Mrs. Blythe speak harshly to anyone, let alone Jem? Of course they hadn't forgotten and never could forget. At the same time, there were hours — days, even — when the dead rested peacefully, coming only when they were summoned, rather than intruding as they once had. At least Una's dead did. Perhaps Mrs. Blythe's were more insistent.

"I didn't mean that you could ever forget Walter," Jem said apologetically. "I only meant that we must go on with the business of living. It's we forget because we must, not because we will."

"Well I won't."

There was a long silence, long enough that Una considered going in, perhaps to rescue Jem with innocuous offers of tea. But Mrs. Blythe spoke again, her own apology woven into her softened tone.

"Do you know, Jem, on the night before you went away to Valcartier, Susan and I packed up your things. I remember telling her about a time when you were only a few months old and you cried for me in the night. Dad didn't want me to go to you — he thought you were warm and well and it would be fostering bad habits. But I went — and took you up — I can feel that tight clinging of your little arms round my neck yet. I remember telling Susan that if I hadn't gone that night and taken you up when you cried for me, I couldn't have faced that next morning."**

"I remember those nights with Sam," Jem said gently. "Though I can't say I ever tried very hard to resist going to him, whatever Dad or Morgan might have said about it."

"I've tried so hard, lately, to remember . . ." Mrs. Blythe whispered, "... to remember whether I ever went to Shirley like that."

"I'm sure you did."

"I'm not."

"Mum . . ."

"No. I'm not sure. Shirley never was much of a one for crying, not even when he was a tiny baby. Susan used to say he was saving up his strength. When he was a little older, he always ran to Susan to be kissed for bumps and rocked to sleep. And I can't help but wonder . . . would things be different between us now if I had done for him what I did for you?"

"Mum. Stop. You can't beat yourself up over a baby crying forty years ago. You were sick. There were so many of us. And Susan . . ."

"I don't mean when he was a baby," Mrs. Blythe cut him off. "I mean . . . oh, never mind."

"What, Mum?" Jem implored. "What happened between you two? I've never asked, but, it's clear that something did. When he and C . . . uhhh . . . when he went away that year and kept sending your letters back unopened . . ."

Una held her breath. She had had the story from Carl — in bits at least — but never from Shirley. All she knew was that it had been a long, slow road back to civility between Shirley and his parents. Whatever Mrs. Blythe had said or done, she certainly seemed to regret it.

"You have to understand," Mrs. Blythe pleaded. "We were only trying to help . . ."

Suddenly, the front door banged open in a great gust of icy wind and swirling flakes. "Hello! Mum!
Dad! We're home!

Una clutched a hand to her chest, her startled heart galloping frantically as Jemmy, Wally, and Zoe Maylock tumbled into the hall in a flurry of wooly scarves and high spirits. All conversation was obliterated by the young folks' chatter and Muggins' barks and the scrape of chairs as the adults came to greet them.

"Hi, Auntie Una!" Jemmy grinned, kissing her cheek with frigid lips. "Are there any of those cream puffs left?"

31 January 1940
Aster House
Kingsport, Nova Scotia

Dear Carl,

How are you getting along, honey? We miss you terribly. Sylvia was saying this morning that she feels suspended forever in the old year, as you always bring the new along in your luggage. It feels awfully bleak to come in from the cold after work and not find you at the table all inkstained and covered by a drift of papers, with Shirley tinkering at the radio and Mugsy snoring on the couch.

I'm afraid Aster House may soon be seeming even bigger than it does at present, as Syl has begun to get serious about joining the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. She couldn't get into the army in the last war because she wasn't a trained nurse then, but now nothing will stop her, not even me.

She had a meeting with a recruiting officer this week and the RCAMC is quite keen to have her, what with her VAD service and her experience running her ward at the hospital here. She thinks they might commission her as a Captain and have her serve as a matron.

I had hoped that 44 might be a bit too old for the army, but age means experience and the only thing they really seem to care about is that nurses are unmarried. The recruiting officer said Syl would make an ideal role model for the younger nurses (she saved that tidbit for last to make me laugh, which was both effective and much needed.) Of course I'm proud of her and she'll be doing good and necessary work, but I don't need to tell you I only give her up because I have no real choice.

Oh, Carl, do come visit a while this winter. I know it's a wrench coming here alone and Kingsport can have nothing on Toronto these days, but it's a dull, drab, dreary season without you. Bring Una along if you like — when was the last time she had anything like a vacation? And Mugsy, too. I don't know whether I ought to find some furry companion of my own to come home to or just work enough that I don't come home at all. Syl won't be going for a while yet, though — she told the hospital she'd stay at least through the end of February to help train her replacement. Come see us before then, or come after and keep me company for a week or two. I'd go for the RCAMC myself, but they've less need of obstetricians than we do here in Kingsport, so I must bide and muddle through somehow.

Don't even bother phoning — just come over. You still have your key? If not, you'll remember where the spare is. Nothing could be a better surprise than to come home one day and find you here.

Love always,
Notes:

*The very last line of LMMontgomery's Anne books is Jem quoting this poem by Matthew Arnold. After reading Walter's poem, "The Aftermath" at the end of *The Blythes are Quoted*, Anne says that she is thankful that Walter did not live to be tortured by his memories, nor to see the futility of his sacrifice. Jem thinks of his own sons and responds, "Who was it said 'We forget because we must?' He was right." That's the end of *TBAQ*. LMM delivered the manuscript in to her editor on April 24, 1942, and died later that day.

In terms of canon, I am not adhering super strictly to everything in *TBAQ* (for example, canon Susan lived until WWII and I had some fun interpreting "Jem Jr."). However, I am expanding the character of Zoe Maylock from "A Commonplace Woman" and continuing to engage with Walter's poetry and the conversations the Blythes have about it.

**Quoted (and lightly edited for pronouns) from *Rilla of Ingleside*, chapter VI: "Susan, Rilla, and Dog Monday Make a Resolution."
On May 23, 1940, twenty-nine cadets received their wings in a ceremony at Camp Borden. McMullen had wanted thirty and had pushed hard for it, but Shirley refused to adjust his standards, in spite the news.

It was shocking, really. Maybe it shouldn't have been, given Poland and Finland and Norway. But still, the headlines on the 10th of May — God, not even two weeks ago? — had landed like a war hammer:

**HOLLAND, BELGIUM INVADED AT DAWN; BRUSSELS, ANTWERP BOMBED BY NAZIS**

Every day since, the radio brought news of another staggering Nazi victory as the Wehrmacht rolled through Belgium and Northern France like an axe through butter. There were reports of skies black with Stukkas that swooped down to strafe crowds of civilian refugees, leaving the roads clogged with corpses. The stalemate salients of the Great War, where vast armies had stalled and bludgeoned one another bloody for years in the last war, crumbled in mere days in this one.

Each evening, the Camp Borden flight instructors gathered in the officers' mess to hear BBC newscasters reel off the names they had learned to pronounce in their youth. Ypres. Lille. Cambrai. Arras. Insignificant little places like Vimy and Courcelette barely rated a mention when Hitler's Blitzkrieg swept over them. The coastal cities, places with names that conjured visions of permanent hospitals and hot food and a bit of rest — Étaples, Boulogne, Calais — were falling right now, this very minute. The British Expeditionary Force, battered and cowering, was falling back and back and back toward Dunkirk, and the next step backward would be into the sea.

The BBC was coy with numbers, but it didn't take a military genius to know that the Allies had lost hundreds of thousands of men, astounding numbers of aircraft, bewildering sums of equipment and munitions. It was unfathomable.

Twenty-nine Borden cadets were ready to face the Luftwaffe, and Shirley passed twenty-nine.

The wings parade was held in a field near Camp Borden's control tower. Cadets — pilots now — stood to attention in formal service dress while McMullen pinned their glinting golden wings, cheered on by the intermediate classes, the ground crews, and over a thousand visiting family, friends, and dignitaries.

At previous graduations, McMullen had given a short speech, but the unfolding disaster in France called for something rather more special to hearten the newest Allied pilots before they shipped out to meet their destiny. Accordingly, the RCAF had sent Air Marshal Billy Bishop, whose 72 aerial victories in the Great War — the most of any ace in the British Empire — had earned him a chestful of medals, including the Victoria Cross, and made him a bona fide Canadian hero. Even Shirley was slightly starstruck by the doughy, round-faced man who pumped his hand, grinning, "So you're Shirley Blythe, are you?"

Bishop addressed the crowd with firm resolution, assuring them that the current catastrophe was merely a setback and no reason to be in any way dismayed.

"In 1918 over the same ground the same enemy smashed with all his might, and was turned
back," he assured them. "Then came the glorious 100 days when, with Canada always in the air, we drove him to his knees in surrender."**

One hundred days. It had begun at Amiens, where Carl had lost his eye. From August till November, Canada was always in the air, or sometimes tumbling down through it, screaming toward a fiery death . . .

"I can remember those black days, how we used to worry about the outcome, and our leaders then bade us stand firm and give two blows for one. 'Keep your tails up,' we were told."

Had Billy Bishop even been in France during the Hundred Days? Hadn't they sent him back to Canada to do morale-boosting tours? Oh, he had come back to France for a while. Shirley remembered the rumors — unbelievable tales of scoring five victories in fifteen minutes in the summer of '18. Maybe they oughtn't have believed. Bishop was a legend, and maybe a bit of a myth as well. But he was here now, with twenty-nine fledgling pilots hanging on his every word. That was real enough.

"The message is the same to you today. The Allies will win this war and win it in the air. But only after a desperate struggle which will call for a marshaling of all that is true and steadfast within us."

There was applause and saluting. The column formed up with the twenty-nine at its head and paraded past Air Marshal Bishop, their blue uniforms and his blue eyes and all those shiny golden wings dazzling in the afternoon light. Then the new-minted fliers of the RCAF scurried off to the hangars and strapped into their sun-yellow Harvards for a grand flyover, saluting their hero in formation.

Shirley didn't stay to watch. Instead, he went to the barracks to make sure that everything was ready to welcome the incoming class tomorrow.

On the fourth of June, Carl rattled up the road from the harbour in Shirley's old pickup. The Sweet Flag's rigging needed replacing, which felt like something comprehensible in a world gone mad. That meant a trip to Lowbridge and lots of heavy ropes, so Carl had biked over to the hangar this morning with Shirley's keys in his pocket.

He had been lax in checking in on the desolate place, where everything was stowed and shrouded and silent. Shirley had asked him to drive the truck every once in a while just to keep the engine happy, but Carl would just as soon have left it to the mice. Last time, he had brought Mugsy with him, only to have her tear up the stairs to the apartment and then reproach him with large, sad eyes. Maybe he could figure out some way to take her with him to Ontario the next time he went. There had been some talk of renting a remote cottage on Lake Huron for a week at the end of the summer. No one could work all day every day forever without a proper break.

The truck had started on the third attempt, startling a murmuration of iridescent starlings from the hangar roof and sending them winging in a great black cloud above the overgrown runway. They were everywhere these days.

An uneventful trip to the marine supply store in Lowbridge, then back to Four Winds harbour under skies that threatened thundershowers. Carl had gotten the new rigging stowed in the cabin, but the installation would have to wait. He sprinted up the dock to the turn-out by the harbourmaster's shed, dodging the first fat drops and sliding into the driver's seat just as the skies opened.
Now Carl was jolting over the rutted road, peering through the deluge and looking forward to a hot cup of tea. He hoped Una hadn't been caught out in this, but no, she had more sense than that. Unlike the poor wretch on the roadside ahead, limping along toward Glen St. Mary looking like a drowned rat.

Carl had resolved to offer the man a ride even before he registered his height and the span of his shoulders and the small black bag he carried. Pulling up alongside the miserable figure, Carl flung the passenger-side door open and shouted, "Get in, Doc!"

Jem obeyed, tossing his bag into the cab and hoisting himself in after.

"Thanks a million," he said, pushing off his sodden cap and shaking out his damp curls. "You gave me quite a turn, driving up in this old thing."

Carl rounded his shoulders and shifted back into gear. "I'm just borrowing it."

Jem coughed into his fist. "Of course. Sorry. I just meant . . . I did a double-take is all."

"Where's your car anyway?" Carl asked, setting a course for Ingleside.

"I like to walk sometimes."

"In this?"

"Yeah, well, I guess I didn't exactly check the weather this morning."

That was understandable, at least. The *Charlottetown Guardian* printed the day's weather in tiny letters in the bottom corner of the first page. It was awfully hard to focus on it, though, what with the screaming headlines:

**MASS AIR RAID ON PARIS; NAZI BOMBERS RAIN DEATH ON FRENCH CAPITAL.**

There were so many things that didn't really bear discussion. Not with Jem, anyway. Ever since Rainbow Valley days, Carl had held Jem in a bit of awe. He had been the undisputed chieftain of their little clan, bold and brash and game for anything, whereas Carl had been smaller even than Una, off on his own observing his ants, at least in the days before fishing. There had been a few times when Carl's creatures and Jem's own woodsy wanderings had intersected pleasantly — Carl had one vivid memory of hunting salamanders together among the rotten logs in a jungle of dew-damp ferns — but in general, Jem belonged to Jerry and Faith.

Though there had been that one time in Kingsport, when Carl had collapsed at the market, and Jem had hinted that he might know a bit about how it felt. Carl hadn't really believed him; Jem was invincible. But now he was soggy and rumpled and uncharacteristically quiet, dripping rainwater onto the seat of Shirley's truck.

"I hear that Lowbridge High is having graduation on Saturday," Carl said, hoping to jump-start the conversation. "Is Wally excited?"

Jem did not answer right away. Carl could not see the face on his blind side, but he felt the shift of Jem's weight and heard the exhaustion in his exhalation.

"He was eighteen a month ago. Our agreement was that he had to finish high school before he joined the Navy. Come Saturday . . ."

Jem let the future hang, dangling unspoken, simultaneously unknowable and all too clear. Carl
remembered his own eighteenth birthday, how he had been waiting when the recruiting office
opened, clamoring for khaki. He'd left home on a *pale-yellow windy evening in October*, headed
for manhood by way of Charlottetown and one last visit to Mrs. MacDougal's. He had been proud
and stupid and so heartbreakingly young.

"I'm sorry," Carl said.

"It's not your fault. Nothing I said could dissuade him."

"Well, I guess I know how that is."

The rain hammered insistently on the roof of the truck, echoing in the silence between them.
Maybe he shouldn't have said that.

"How is Shirley anyway?" Jem asked, carefully casual.

Carl hit a pothole disguised as a puddle and jostled against the steering wheel.

"Easy there," Jem said, bracing himself against the glass. "We don't hear from him very often, is
all. And I figured . . ."

Just what, exactly, Jem Blythe figured remained a mystery, as his confidence in this new policy of
acknowledgment did not extend to the completion of that particular sentence. Still, there had been
no malice in the question.

"Uhhh . . . he's alright," Carl said, groping for some neutral tidbit. "He met Billy Bishop."

"Really? Victoria Cross Billy Bishop?"

"The very same. He gave an address to the cadets at the last graduation ceremony."

"You'll have to tell Wally that," Jem said, evidently smiling. "He and Sam used to cut pictures out
of *Flying Aces* and tack them up in their room; I'm fairly certain old Billy's still up there. They
were always wild for those stories."

They lapsed back into silence, Carl wondering how many of Jem's own stories he had told to his
boys. There were a handful of favorites that got a good airing anytime Jem and Jerry and Emile
were in the same place — the white shirt prank and a recitation of Robert Burns in the buff and the
time Emile saved Jerry's hide from an irate French laundress when Jerry had mistaken the verbs
*baisser* and *baiser*. There were certainly others, though Carl had never lingered long in any room
where they might be told.

"Rain always brings me back," Carl said mildly. "It's funny — it can't actually have rained every
single day for years and years over there, but whenever I remember anything, it's always raining or
just stopped raining or just about to rain."

Jem snorted. "And you weren't even on Salisbury Plain in '14. God, who knew it was possible for
mud to be so deep? That's one good thing about the Navy, at least. Less mud."

"True," Carl agreed, though the thought of being confined in the strict, airless quarters of a naval
vessel made him shiver. "And Sam?"

"Shipping out any day," Jem said tightly. "No details, of course. We had hoped he might be able to
come home once more, but you know how it is."
Carl turned the truck into the deserted Glen street. There were lights and movement in Miller Douglas's store, the usual knot of radio-listeners having sought refuge inside for once. By the time they reached the Glen Pond, a freshet was surging down the slope from Ingleside, forcing Carl to drive down the middle of the road or be swept away.

"I saw your neighbor Archie again," Jem said as they chugged up the hill. "I haven't been able to convince him to apply for a pension yet, but I think he could get a partial one. I don't know how he's been farming all these years with that shoulder wound healed so badly and his back the way it is."

"They barely get by," Carl conceded. "I don't think they would at all if Una didn't take such an interest in them."

"How is Una? Faith was just saying the other day that she seems to be awfully busy lately."

Carl shrugged. "You know how she runs around trying to set the whole world right. And now that she has her deaconess courses, she's always studying or meeting with the priest."

Jem breathed a little laugh. "Oh, I heard about the priest, alright. Daniel, is it? Rosemary can't praise him enough. You met him, didn't you?"

Carl grimaced. "He seemed nice enough. I don't think I made a very good first impression, though."

He eased the truck to a stop in front of the house, leaving the engine running.

"Come in," Jem said. "Have some tea."

"No, that's alright."

"Carl. Come in. You're always welcome. And Faith will be glad to see you."

Indeed, she was. Wrapped in the solid warmth of his sister's embrace, Carl wished he could offer her better solace than a damp hug and silent sympathy. Well, he'd brought her husband home in one piece at least.

Wally was out — tucked up somewhere cozy with Zoe, no doubt — but the girls were home and put together an admirable spread for tea. Cecilia beamed with shy pleasure when Carl declared her eclairs better than Grandma Rosemary's, and Jemmy was bursting with news of the impending graduation festivities.

"I get to play the fanfare for the ceremony," she announced. "All of the first trumpets are graduating and half the seconds as well, so I get to be first chair even if I'm only a sophomore. Angus Perry said that he should be first because I mightn't have the lung strength for the solo, so we went out onto the football field together and played the fanfare over and over and over until he ran out of breath and gave it up as a bad job."

Carl laughed appreciatively and congratulated his niece, promising that he would applaud her from the stands.

At the top of the hour, Jem excused himself to the sitting room. Carl started to help clear the table, but cocked his head when the radio crackled to life.

". . . the evacuation from Dunkirk . . ."

"Leave the plates," Faith said, already stepping toward the door. "They'll keep."
They found Jem in the armchair closest to the radio, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. Cecilia went and sat on the floor beside him, golden-brown head against his armrest, while Jemmy hovered behind his seat.

". . . three hundred and thirty-five thousand troops, British and French, brought back from Dunkirk. British losses exceed thirty thousand killed, wounded and missing . . ."***

Faith sank to the sofa, jaw set in a grim line, fists clenched in her lap. Carl remained in the doorway, frozen. The evacuation was no surprise — it had been going on for the last few days. But to hear it all summed up like this . . .

". . . young fliers, greater than Knights of the Round Table or Crusaders of old . . ."

The eclairs, so delectable half an hour ago, began to make protest at having been eaten, writhing like eels as the broadcaster went on and on with his catalogue of despair. The British Expeditionary Force had been driven from France by the relentless Nazi tide. There would be no Verdun this time, no Miracle at the Marne. Paris would fall. Soon. And then what was to stop the Nazis from turning their sights across the Channel? Across the Atlantic?

". . . Winston Churchill, addressing the House of Commons . . ."

Jem leaned forward to turn up the volume as the broadcaster began to read the Prime Minister's remarks. What could any man say at such an hour?

Carl missed the beginning of the speech, transfixed by the inconsequential details of the moment, storing them away in memory. The way the rain pounded against the windows, the bright fire of Jemmy's hair in the gloom of the too-dark afternoon, the grim avidity of Jem's attention.

There were moments when things changed, when a bright line divided everything into before and after. Sometimes they were obvious: a deathbed goodbye to Mother, an impulsive kiss, a sudden blinding punch of shrapnel. Other times, they were discernible only in retrospect, with the belated realization that an ordinary farewell had really been forever, or that a chance-made friend was really the love of a lifetime. Was this the end of everything? Or only a chapter somewhere near the beginning?

". . . defend our Island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary alone . . ."

Years? Could they even last weeks?

". . . we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air . . ."

Were they listening at Camp Borden? Were they crowded around a radio in the officers' mess at this moment, wishing themselves in Spitfires and Hurricanes? Or were they aloft, their ears full of the roar of engines, not pausing in their mission long enough to listen to the news?

". . . we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender . . ."

It was impossible not to be swept up in the rhythm of the words. And yet, the images they conjured, of an England besieged and invaded, were so horrific that Carl could barely breathe. He had seen what British generals were willing to spend in blood and treasure for a yard of ground at Ypres and Courcelette. How much dearer were Dover and Canterbury?
"... and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle..."

Carl dared a glance at Faith, who had made no sound, but had gone perfectly still. She, who was always in motion, might have been a painting of herself, captured eternally in a posture of heart-stricken fear. Jem, too, grey and drawn and old, met the stirring words with stone. Sam was already on his way, with Wally on his heels; would the war be over before they even arrived? Would they be needed to defend Canadian shores?

"... until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the Old."

Notes:

*Rilla of Ingleside*, chapter 12: "In the Days of Langemarck." Langemarck/Langemark is a Belgian town near Ypres/Ieper, about 30 miles inland from Dunkirk.

**Air Marshal Billy Bishop's remarks at Camp Borden graduation as reported by John Bassett, Jr., "We'll Win Again in Air,' Bishop Tells New Pilots," Toronto *Globe and Mail*, May 24, 1940.

***Quotations from the BBC broadcast of June 4, 1940 and from Winston Churchill's "We Shall Fight on the Beaches" speech to the House of Commons."
It was still morning when Carl tied the *Sweet Flag* securely to the little wooden float in the shadow of the looming cliffs of Rocher aux Oiseaux. The Bird Rock was still breathtaking, even after dozens of visits: sheer, red cliffs rising suddenly from the sea, teeming with tens of thousands of nesting birds. They swooped and screamed, calling to their mates and warding off threats both real and imagined. The red-roofed lighthouse-keeper's cottage on the top must be the loudest lonely place in the world.

The first time Shirley had flown him past the Bird Rock in the Curtiss, Carl had vowed that any return trips would feature generous gifts for the keeper and his family. They were all alone out here, in the middle of the sea — the least he could do was bring them vegetables. Carl had made good on that promise, bearing offerings for the Jubinvilles every summer: quart jars of fresh strawberries, crocks of new butter, a burlap sack of spinach redolent of deep, rich soil. And, of course, a bottle of cognac. No matter how carefully he packed them with newspaper padding, Carl's rucksack still clanked and rattled as he climbed the steep wooden gangway that rose a hundred feet straight up from the float.

Emerging over the top of the cliffs, Carl was buffeted by the sea winds that could — and had — blown men over the edge to their doom. The Rock was crowded with milling throngs of kittiwakes and murres and gannets, and slick with bird shit. The acrid, throat-searing stink was incredible. You got used to it, though.

At the cottage door, Mrs. Jubinville folded Carl into her warm bosom, exclaiming over him as loudly as any nesting razor-bill. The children tumbled in from the sitting room, clambering for greetings and the licorice they knew Carl had in his pockets. What a strange life it must be, born in the middle of the vast ocean, your whole world a few hundred yards square, and not even that, when you considered how unpleasant it was to step outside. Carl liked birds, but really, there were limits.

He spent an hour trading news with Mr. Jubinville over strong coffee that masked the taste of the island's tainted water. Mrs. Jubinville puttered in the background, praising *les fraises*, slapping last week's crumpled newspapers onto the stack on the table as she unwrapped each jar.

**NAZIS SURROUNDING PARIS**

**FRANCE ASKS ENEMY TO NAME PEACE TERMS**

**BRITISH TO FIGHT ALONE**

**BRITAIN UNDER HEAVY RAID**

**PREMIER KING URGES HASTE IN HOME DEFENSE MOVES***

"It is very bad, no?" Mr. Jubinville asked, tapping a blunt finger on the column describing how Hitler had arranged to accept the French surrender in the very same glade in the Compiègne Forest where the 1918 Armistice had been signed. Carl's eye slid ineluctably to the next column: *The names of eight Canadians appeared tonight on the Royal Air Force casualty list containing 284 names . . .*
"Yes," he said. "Very bad."

"When the Nazis come here, I will turn off my light," Mr. Jubinville said. "Maybe I will sink a battleship."

Carl gave the joke a wan smile. "We'll all have to do our bit, I suppose."

"I wish them luck with les oiseaux. I think they will not like Canada very much."

Carl promised that he would come back topside for a late supper when the sun went down. These were the longest days of the year, and the best for counting nests. Three or four days at anchor should be sufficient to collect the data he needed — three days out of the human world, rocking to sleep in his bunk, watching the timeless sun rise over one watery horizon and set over another. The Bird Rock did have its compensations.

He would start with the herring gulls, whose speckled chicks were already bullying their siblings and squawking for parental attention. After strapping on cleated boots, life preserver, and tool belt — pickaxe, monocular, whistle, rubber-cased notebook — Carl secured one end of his lifeline to his chest harness and the other to the bow of the Sweet Flag. He'd lost his footing many times over the years, but only gone into the drink once. It was an experience he did not care to repeat.

Climbing over the slippery rocks, Carl made little effort to be quiet. For one thing, the constant screeching of wheeling birds and the chatter of their chicks would absorb any sound he could make. For another, the inhabitants of Rocher aux Oiseaux had no fear of humans. In the days before the 1919 Act that protected them, hunters could just tie up to the Rock and wring the necks of as many birds as they could carry. That was what had happened to the Great Auk, hunted to extinction for its heavenly soft down a century ago. Now the Rock was supposed to be a sanctuary, though Carl could hardly blame the Jubinvilles if they had the occasional fresh gull egg for their breakfast.

A gust of wind knocked him back a step, but Carl hunkered down and paid out another loop of rope, moving with careful deliberation toward the herring gull colony. Small, shaggy nests peeped from cracks and crevices safely above the water line. Carl couldn't climb to every one, but he could count them well enough, and survey a sample of nests to see whether the breeding pairs were having good success this year.

They were. Most of the nests Carl examined were home to two or three black-and-tan spotted chicks, some of them playing tug-of-war with seaweed or crying for food. A few were solitary, but the Bird Rock was a safe place, far from most predators' reach, and the herring gulls thrived here. Carl tallied them in his notebook, rows of little ticks and abbreviations that would become data when he entered them into his ledgers at home.

Carl was nearly ready to pack it in and return to the Sweet Flag when he spotted one: a superclutch — six unhatched eggs in a nest meant for three.

"Oh, where are you?" he murmured, looking to right and left for the parents.

Carl had first seen superclutches in Nova Scotia while working on his roseate tern thesis. They were rare, but not very rare, these nests with too many eggs that usually didn't hatch. He had developed a theory about them, but had never dared mention it to Professor Michelson. It was difficult to prove, especially in monomorphic birds like roseate terns and herring gulls, where the only way to tell male from female was to catch the individuals and examine them closely. Even physical examination was not always definitive, but if you could get a good look and reliable measurements, you could make a decent identification.
"Come on," Carl muttered to the absent gulls. "Show yourselves."

The first bird arrived home within five minutes. She settled herself over her eggs, still hopeful that one might produce a chick, even as the neighboring nests showed plainly that hatching season was over.

Carl approached the nest slowly and lifted the bewildered gull off her clutch for examination. He sized her head, body, and bill with the calipers in his tool belt: small, small, small. He would swear on a stack of Bibles that she was female.

Normally, Carl would return a bird to her nest as soon as possible, but he wanted to meet her mate. Reaching into a pouch on his tool belt, Carl drew out a small aluminum ring stamped with an identification number. He clamped it securely around the gull's leg, then tucked the soft, trembling creature under his arm and whispered promises that he'd let her get back to her eggs as soon as . . .

"There you are," Carl grinned as another gull settled onto the same nest. It wasn't impossible for it to be male — both herring gull parents incubated their eggs, though the females did by far the greater share of the work. Carl set the first bird down on the rock beside him. She flapped her wings in confusion, but did not alarm her partner. It was the work of a moment for Carl to pluck the sitting bird from the nest and measure her. Definitely her.

"Well, hello, ladies," he clucked as he banded the second bird. "Sorry about the jewelry. It's quite light, though."

Carl set the gull back on her nest. She ruffled her feathers and cawed, calling her mate to join her.

"There's not much of a chance we'll ever meet again," Carl said, penciling their tag numbers onto a page at the back of his notebook. "But if we do, I'd like take note of your future domestic arrangements."

The birds merely looked at him, yellow eyes bright and curious.

"Don't worry," Carl assured them. "I'll keep all this out of my official report. Wouldn't want anyone asking too many questions."

Carl returned the notebook to his belt and stood for a minute, regarding the nesting pair. They weren't the first and probably wouldn't be the last. In addition to the roseate terns and herring gulls, Carl had seen female-female pairs of kittiwakes, black-headed gulls, and Canada geese. Lots of Canada geese, in fact. He'd watched male murres mount other males — razor-bills, too — and there was a pair of Great Cormorants on Rocher aux Margaulx that he'd never been able to tag, owing to rough seas, but he'd watched them build an empty nest together year after year. It wasn't the sort of thing he could risk writing an article about. But it was still true.

That night, after breaking bread with the Jubinvilles, Carl sat in the cabin of the Sweet Flag with his lantern, hunting for letter paper and a pencil. There weren't many people with whom he could discuss his observations, and fewer still who might help him find answers. But there was one.

26 June 1940

Rocher aux Oiseaux, Québec

Dear Nellie . . .
garden, filling yet another wooden crate with glossy green summer squashes. This looked to be the fourth . . . no, the fifth.

"Miss Meredith!" the priest called, sitting back on his haunches amid the broad leaves and wiping his brow with a muddy sleeve. "Just the person I was hoping to see!"

"You have quite a crop of squash," Una observed, a gentle smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"I do not have a crop of squash," Father Daniel objected. "I have an excess of squash! A superfluity of squash! An invasion of squash!"

Una chuckled behind her hand. "I'm afraid you're right. How many hills did you plant?"

"Twelve."

"Twelve?!

Father Daniel rose to his feet, brushing dirt from the knees of his coveralls. "Yes, well, I didn't quite realize just how productive they would be. I've never grown them before."

"Oh dear," Una sympathized. "One or two would have been perfectly sufficient. They'll go on growing new squashes, too, from now until the fall."

Father Daniel grimaced. "I would say I have quite a lot of ratatouille in my future, but I've already managed to kill all the tomato vines, so I suppose not."

Una reached into the nearest crate, fishing out one plump vegetable for inspection. "You did a fine job with these, at least," she commented. "And you've picked them at just the right point. They'll go on growing and growing if you let them."

"Really?" Father Daniel asked, interested. "How big will they get?"

"I'm not exactly sure," Una admitted. "The larger ones are tough and bland, so we always harvest them when they're small like this."

The priest grinned like a little boy, brown eyes sparkling with mischief. "In that case, I propose an experiment. I'll go on harvesting eleven of the plants, but I'll leave this one to its own devices and see what happens."

His delight was infectious and Una could not help but mirror it back to him. "Have you never had a garden before, Father?"

Father Daniel's expression quivered ever so slightly, then settled into a more gentle register of pleasure. "I have, but only for one summer."

The wistful tone of this admission hinted at a story, but Una did not press for details. However, Daniel Caldwell was not a man to keep his peace when he had a willing audience.

"I grew up in Toronto," he explained, "and never ate anything that didn't come from a market. Then college and seminary, all in the city. I never had a garden at all until I married Louisa."

Everyone knew that Father Daniel wore a wedding ring, but no more than that. At least, that was as much as Una knew, and she had no notion of prying. But if Father Daniel wished to tell . . .

"We were married at Easter in 1914," he explained. "I was serving as a minor canon at the
Cathedral of St. James, but after we were married, we moved to a little house with a tiny garden plot. I didn't know the first thing about it, but Louisa made it bloom. Then the war came and I went off to England . . ."

He trailed off into fraught silence, fidgeting with his ring.

"Many things changed," Una said, trying to sound both casual and neutral, and succeeding at neither.

"It's no secret, really," Father Daniel said quietly. "She died of the flu before I came home."

Una's "I'm sorry" was meant to cover both his bereavement and whatever winding path had brought them from the summer squash harvest to this delicate pass.

"Hardly your fault, Miss Meredith," the priest said quietly, mustering a little smile. Turning back to the blooming hills, the expression broadened until he gave a little chuckle. "She would have had a laugh at this, I can tell you that much. Enough squash to feed the multitude twice over, Daniel!"

"What do you mean to do with them all?" Una asked, grateful to return to the vegetables at hand.

"Ah," he said, a bit of relish returning to his gaze. "That's why I was so glad to see you. Who better to help me disperse such a bounty?"

"That smells awfully good," Carl called as he pulled off muddy boots in the front hall. "What are you making?"

"Summer squash," came the faint reply from the kitchen, though it hardly explained the smells emanating therefrom.

Carl lingered a moment to greet an ecstatic Muggins with scratchings and nose-kisses, then made for the bathroom. He deposited bird-stained trousers and reeking shirt in the hamper and washed his hands thoroughly before going to the kitchen in undershirt and blue-striped drawers, Muggins at his heels.

Inside, a row of brown loaf-cakes cooling on the sill seemed to be the sort that Una made from squash left too long on the vine. Aunt Martha's largest casserole pan held scalloped squash bubbling with cheese, as did several of the cheap pie plates that Una used for food she meant to give away. The big enamel basin on the table was brimful of squash slices marinating in vinegar and dill, waiting to be canned.

"I've heard of the loaves and fishes," Carl said, grinning at sight of the abundance on display, "but it would seem we have a miraculous marrow plant on our hands."

"Twelve, actually," Una said, pausing just long enough to kiss his cheek in greeting.

"Twelve?!!" Carl exclaimed. "We never planted twelve, did we?"

"There was a mixup at the rectory," Una explained, stirring a pot of what was certainly more squash. "We gave away as much as people would take and now I'm trying to make the rest more appetizing."

"Can I help?" Carl asked, taking up a knife to slice the end off one dense, moist cake.

"You could take a bath," Una said mildly.
"Are you saying I stink?"

"You do."

"Ah, well, you get used to it," Carl said through a mouthful of crumbs.

Una put her hands on her hips and turned a wrinkled nose toward him. "Perhaps you get used to it, but I do not."

Carl laughed. "Well I suppose you'll never get to visit the Jubinvilles then."

"Definitely not," Una agreed.

"Too bad I left before this visitation of squashes," Carl smiled, cutting another slice. "They're wild for anything green out there — I could have taken some off your hands."

"There will be plenty more where this came from. You can take a whole sackful on your next trip."

Mention of travel diverted Carl's attention from the edible. "Do I have mail?" he asked.

Una gestured toward the sitting room, where a spray of unopened letters adorned the telephone table. Two from Kingsport — one from Di and another from the Rev. Anthony Marckworth — but those could wait. Carl found the one he wanted — precise, upright letters spelling out C. Meredith under Camp Borden's postmark — and slit the envelope. There would be time to read carefully later. For now, there should be news here somewhere . . .

. . . permission to take two weeks of leave in August. Do you still think you'd like to rent a cabin on Lake Huron? It's beautiful country . . .

The prickle of wiry fur against his bare shins alerted Carl to Muggins, apparently protesting the truncation of their ordinary letter-reading rituals. Carl crouched, letting her sniff the letter as he scratched her ears.

"What d'ya say, girl? Are you up for a very long train ride?"

Notes:

*Front-page headlines from the Charlottetown Guardian, June 14-21, 1940. With the fall of France, Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King declared that Canada might be the next Nazi objective after Britain, and began home defense mobilization, including compulsory service in home-defense forces for able-bodied men under 45 and tax increases.
There was a rat in the hangar.

Shirley was in full flight gear, ready to take the last of today's four students up for his wings test, but he needed to have a word with Sgt. Dixon first. He found the man in the hangar, supervising repairs to a beat-up undercart, and had just called his name when the rat ran over his toes.

The unexpected movement surprised Shirley, but he did not jump. Instead, he let his eyes flutter shut for an instant and sent up the little prayer he always said when he saw a rat: That he would be safe.

"Sorry, sir," Sgt. Dixon grumbled, kicking idly at the vanished rodent. "We need a cat around here."

"I've got a terrier at home," Shirley said mildly. "She'd make quick work of that."

Dixon shook his head. "Don't say that too loud, sir. The boys have been begging for a mascot. Like kids before Christmas."

It wasn't a bad idea. Probably good for morale. Maybe even keep Davenport busy . . .

There had been a time when Shirley had looked askance at Carl's creature companions. You never did know when something would wriggle out of one of his pockets, which was bad enough sitting side-by-side on the shore of the Glen Pond, but was another matter entirely when something skittered over you on tiny paws in the middle of the night.

But that was before Muggins. When Carl said he was planning to bring her to the cottage on Lake Huron for their holiday, Shirley had been genuinely delighted. Certainly, Carl's company had been the main attraction, but there had been nearly as much comfort in the other joyous reunion, the sturdy, wire-furred body wriggling ecstatically in his arms when he dropped his bag at the cottage door. Carl had decreed that they would have no radio, so the only news came in the form of the headlines Shirley glimpsed when he paddled over to the nearest village to replenish their stores of eggs and milk: ENEMY BOMBERS RAID BRITISH CAPITAL. He would be back in the world soon enough. But for a golden, stolen moment, there were brisk afternoon swims and after-supper dishes and walks along the shore with the little dog in the early mornings while Carl slept. Two weeks of seclusion on the margins of the vast lake had hardly been enough. But Shirley had come back to Camp Borden with enough spring in his step that McMullen insisted that he must always take the leave that was due him from now on. No sense in arguing.

"Was there something you needed, sir?" Dixon asked.

Shirley re-focused his attention on the crew chief. "The new class of cadets arrived this morning," he said. "The instructors will be bringing them around this afternoon in small groups to meet the Harvards. Would you mind giving them an overview of how maintenance works? That was helpful last time."

"Of course, sir," Dixon said, obviously chuffed. "In fact, I think I see the first group coming now."
Shirley followed Dixon's jutting chin and saw Flight Lieutenants Ramsay and Trent each leading a cohort of four trainees toward the hangar. The new cadets fairly bounced along behind their assigned instructors, each more giddy than the last. They entered the hangar in awe, nudge one another as they grinned up at the Harvards in various states of repair.

"Attention!" F/L Ramsay barked when he caught sight of Shirley. The trainees snapped to the order, falling into line in expectant silence.

It took Shirley a moment to gather his wits enough to address them. He wasn't surprised, not really. He had seen the list. Still, he felt caught out. It was only with effort that he forced himself to tear his own attention from the end of the row.

He cleared his throat. "Good afternoon, Ramsay. Trent. These are your new students?"

"Yes, sir," Ramsay and Trent replied in unison.

"Good." Shirley approached the small group, beckoning for Dixon to follow him. "I'm Squadron Leader Blythe and this is Sergeant Dixon. Please be advised that Sergeant Dixon is in charge of the Harvards, and you will keep on his good side or you won't get anywhere near one. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," the new pupils chorused.

"Good. Sergeant, if you would be so kind as to give these men a tour of your facilities."

Dixon complied, calling for the group to follow him across the hangar toward a work in progress. The trainees filed past Shirley, only daring brief, appraising glances. All except the last one, the golden-haired cadet who couldn't keep from grinning, nor from whispering as he passed, "I made it, Uncle Shirley!"

***

That evening, Shirley joined Wing Commander McMullen in the little alcove where they often took their supper, away from the long tables where the junior officers traded tales of their students' latest antics. There were more flight instructors than ever, enough that Camp Borden would soon be graduating a new class every three weeks instead of every three months. What's more, the new Service Flying Training Schools near Ottawa, Calgary, and Saskatoon were finally — finally — open and on track to graduate their first classes before the end of the year. Things were starting to come together at last.

Not a moment too soon, either. The Luftwaffe had been bombing RAF installations in England since July, trying to blast Fighter Command off the map. That was bad enough, but it was only a prelude to the attacks of September. Beginning on September 7, German bombers had pounded London night after night, sending Londoners skittering into Underground stations and bomb shelters for protection. The newspapers, cagey with casualty figures, were much happier to trumpet German losses in the headlines: *Hitler Loses 141 Planes in 'All-Out' Attack.* God, how many had there been to begin with?

"New class settling in alright?" McMullen asked, cutting into his steak.

Shirley unfolded his napkin and spread it over his lap. "Yes, sir. They seem to be a promising group."

"Good. Under the new training schedule, we'll have them ready to ship out by the end of the year."
Shirley had not yet touched his food. "Sir . . . in the interest of full disclosure . . ."

McMullen squinted at him shrewdly. "What is it, Blythe?"

"Nothing, sir. It's only that one of the new cadets is my nephew. Gilbert Ford. My sister's son. I wanted to let you know just in case . . . well, I didn't want anyone to think I was going easy on him."

Shirley had not expected McMullen's bark of laughter. "You? Go easy on someone? I'll believe it when I see it."

"Yes, sir," Shirley said, relaxing enough to reach for a roll.

"How did the wings tests go this afternoon?"

"Fairly well, sir. Three of the four passed without conditions. I couldn't pass Trowbridge, though. Too skittish."

"Did you wash him out?"

"No, sir. He's competent, just not confident. I scheduled him for some extra solo time — maybe without one of us breathing down his neck, he'll loosen up a bit. I can re-test him at the end of the rotation."

"Good, Blythe, very good," McMullen said, dropping pats of butter onto his baked potato. "We need every single pilot we can possibly get. Even if Trowbridge doesn't make the grade, we'll find something useful for him to do, understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Speaking of being useful, I had a call with Commodore Breadner this morning."

Shirley's ears perked up. The Chief of the Air Staff was a busy man, and his attention heralded momentous things.

"It seems that the third round of SFTSes will be ready to open in a few months," McMullen chawed. "Two more here in Ontario and one out in Alberta. He wanted to know whether I any thoughts regarding command."

Shirley raised an eyebrow. "Are you leaving us, sir?"

"Hardly, Blythe, hardly. And enough with the sir. Do you want one?"

"One what?" Shirley asked, swallowing the reflexive sir that nearly escaped.

McMullen coughed around a mouthful of potato. "A command, of course! Dunnville, maybe? They'll be doing bomber training on Ansons at Brantford, but Dunnville will have be fighter training in Harvards and some of the new Yales and Nomads. What d'ya say?"

Shirley said nothing. His own command? What would that even mean?

"I'm flattered that you'd consider me . . ." he said, stalling.

"Flattery's got nothing to do with it," McMullen huffed. "It's all hands on deck, Blythe, and I'd trust you with an SFTS, no question."
Shirley rolled his glass in his hand, thinking.

"They'd make you a Wing Commander," McMullen wheedled. "It's not just new sleeve stripes — it comes with a pay bump: a third more than you're making now."

"With all due respect, sir, it would take another war bond drive to pay me enough to do as much paperwork as you do."

McMullen laughed, his fork chiming against the plate. "Can't argue with that, Blythe, can't argue with that. Does that mean you aren't interested?"

Was he? Shirley quickly totted up the pros and cons.

Pro: rank, respect, responsibility. And, apparently, remuneration.

Con: thankless hours of dull office-work, adjudicating personnel disputes, constant contact with the high command . . .

"When was the last time you were in a cockpit?" Shirley asked.

McMullen swished his mustache back and forth. "April, maybe? No — March."

"I'm not interested," Shirley said.

"Sure?"

"Very sure."

"Well, I can't say I'm not glad to hear it," McMullen smiled. "I'd hate to lose you. Though it does put me in a bit of a spot with the brass. They need to staff the new schools as soon as possible."

"If you're looking for recommendations, Flight Lieutenant Ramsay could do my job," Shirley said, returning to his carrots. "Not quite ready for yours, I don't think, but he's capable of taking on more responsibility."

"I quite agree. Anyone else? There'll be another half dozen SFTSes by this time next year — Yorkton, Fort McLeod, Aylmer, Summerside . . ."

Shirley froze mid-chew. "Summerside?"

"Yes. No. 9 SFTS, Summerside, Prince Edward Island. You're from there, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Does that change things?"

To be on the Island, a short train ride away, riding a desk instead of flying . . .

"It might."

"I see," McMullen said, the corner of his mouth twitching. "I always suspected you'd left a trail of broken hearts behind you."

"Hardly, sir."

"Jesus, Blythe, someday you're going to call me Robert and we'll both die of shock."
A soft chuckle bubbled up through Shirley's chest. "I'd invite you to call me Shirley, but really, I'd prefer if you didn't."

McMullen cackled, nearly spilling his wine. "God, man, what were your parents thinking?"

"It's my mother's maiden name," Shirley shrugged. "It wasn't quite so bad before Shirley Temple got famous."

This drew yet another laugh from McMullen, prompting some of the junior officers to elbow one another and look over toward the alcove with interest. Shirley smiled himself. It felt odd to share anything personal, but not unpleasant. Almost like having a friend.

"Oh, look at this one, Mother Blythe!" Faith exclaimed, holding up an intricately pin-tucked dress in robin's-egg blue. "Don't you remember Ceci in this at Bruce's wedding?"

"Of course," Mrs. Blythe smiled, brushing the gossamer hem with her fingertips. "She told me that it was just exactly the same color as the pixies that live between the Tree Lovers."

Una, Faith, and Mrs. Blythe sat in the living room at Ingleside, surrounded by colorful drifts of children's clothing that Faith and her girls had carried down from the garret. Most had belonged to Faith and Jem's children, but there were a few that dated back an additional generation. Una recognized several dresses that had once been Rilla's, the long skirts that had once signaled maturity now hopelessly out of fashion.

Perhaps these old things could be made over to meet the new need. With attacks on Britain intensifying, the Children's Overseas Reception Board had announced that it would evacuate thousands of child refugees between the ages of five and fifteen to the Commonwealth countries. Parents had registered over 200,000 children for the plan, and the call had gone out to Canadians to open their arms and their homes. Over a thousand children had already arrived, along with many others evacuated privately at their families' own expense.

Among the new arrivals were five nieces and nephews of Mrs. Jim Anderson of the harbour shore. Fanny Anderson had left six younger siblings in England when she came to Canada at the end of the last war, all of whom were desperate to keep their own children safe from bombardment and invasion, even if it meant sending them across the treacherous Atlantic alone. Una had heard, sotto voce from Faith, that Fanny's family never could have afforded private evacuation, but Rilla Ford could. Rilla and had wasted no time wiring money for the children's passage and now here they were, destitute and underclothed, living with an aunt and uncle they had never met.

The Anderson children's arrival had caused a sensation in Four Winds and thrown Ingleside and the House of Dreams into a flurry of activity that kept everyone busy. Una had contributed a crate of pear preserves and summer-squash pickles, and had arrived at Ingleside today ready to help Faith and Mrs. Blythe assemble enough warm, serviceable clothing to see the children through their first Canadian winter. Sam's old argyle sweater, the trousers Wally had worn on his first day of school, Jemmy's woolly tam, Ceci's flannel nightgown.

"I remember this coat," Faith smiled, unfolding a green wool overcoat made for a boy of eight or nine. "Both of my boys wore this, but I think yours wore it first, Mother Blythe."

Mrs. Blythe reached out her hand for the garment, opening it to run her fingers over the yellow plaid flannel of the lining. "Not all of them," she said with a slight smile. "Susan and I made this for Shirley. See, this is her work on the hems."
Una paid the neat herringbone stitches due admiration. "I think I remember Shirley in this," she said. "He must have worn it the first few winters we lived in the Glen."

"Yes," Mrs. Blythe said, closing the coat and buttoning it in her lap. "The boys generally passed coats down from one to the next, but there was a year when Shirley shot up and was nearly as tall as Walter. He'd outgrown his old coat, but Walter was still using the next one, so Susan and I made this one for him."

Faith grinned. "Well, that explains why it survived long enough to make it to Sam. There weren't many things that survived all three of your boys in good enough shape to be passed on."

"No," Mrs. Blythe agreed. "Though see here? There's an old patch on the shoulder. We were in Avonlea when Marilla died, staying at Green Gables with the Keiths. The day after the funeral, we were all done in and almost everyone slept late, but Shirley was never one for sleeping in. He remembered that the cow needed to be milked and tried to do it himself. I don't think he'd ever milked a cow before — he didn't usually go to Avonlea with the others — but he tried. Somehow, he caught his coat on a nail in the barn and tore it. He came back up to the kitchen with only a very little bit of milk in the pail and wouldn't let me fix his coat until I came down to the barn to show him how to do the milking properly."

"It's still in very good condition," Una said gently, calling Mrs. Blythe back to the present.

"A certifiable miracle," Faith added. "Wally must have outgrown it too quickly to inflict much damage."

Mrs. Blythe tightened her grip on the little coat.

"Mother Blythe?"

"I was only thinking . . . new clothes are so important, aren't they? When I came to Green Gables in my ugly little wincey dress . . . I'd never had anything new. Marilla made me good, sturdy dresses for school, and that helped, but I knew I was loved when Matthew gave me the dress with puffed sleeves I'd always wanted . . ." 

Faith darted a nervous glance at Una. Perhaps it had been a bad idea to include Mrs. Blythe in this task. She was already apt to take morbid spells, even without facing the little ghosts that lingered in children's outgrown clothes.

"I remember when Mary Vance went to live with Miss Cornelia," Una offered. "She came down to Rainbow Valley one day in a new velvet cap and navy blue coat with a squirrel muff. I was very glad for her, of course, because she had never had anything new either, but I'm afraid I was awfully jealous of that muff."**

Faith laughed. "Jealous? Una! I never would have guessed it!"

Una blushed under Mrs. Blythe's sympathetic gaze. "I don't suppose I ever said anything about it. You never seemed to care about being shabby, Faith, as long as you were comfortable."

"No," Faith agreed, grinning. "Do you remember the affair of the striped stockings? I've never been sorry I went to church bare-legged rather than wearing those awful, scratchy things!"

Mrs. Blythe had come back to herself a little and granted Faith a little chuckle. "Oh, dear! I'm afraid even I was a bit shocked by that particular scrape! How you did remind me of myself at that age, Faith. I remember that Susan spent the rest of the day muttering because it was Sunday and she couldn't start knitting for you straight away. But she had a stocking set up before anyone else
was out of bed at Ingleside the next morning.”

"We must make up some nice new stockings for the Anderson children," Una said. "I'm sure Mrs. Anderson hasn't time to knit so many."

"Yes," Mrs. Blythe agreed through a watery smile. "I suppose we ought to send this coat as well."

She moved to add it to the pile of donations, but hesitated, clinging to the green wool.

"You don't have to give it," Una said quietly. "We can make another."

The gray-green eyes were soft, but they held Una's gaze steadily. "Do you think Shirley would tell me to keep it or to give it away?"

Una went shy, as if she had been called out before the class. She was not what Mrs. Blythe wanted to hear, so fell back on the truth.

"I think . . . I think that Shirley would do what had to be done. He'd want it to be useful."

Mrs. Blythe nodded, a wry little smile twisting her lips. "Yes, I believe you're right. Forgive me, we mothers can be a mite sentimental."

She pressed the coat onto the pile, letting her fingers linger.

"Nan wrote that she and Jerry have volunteered to take in a child or a group of siblings," Faith said. "Their house is big enough and the girls have all said they don't mind sharing rooms if they need to. I suppose we could do the same. What do you think, Mother Blythe?"

Mrs. Blythe forced a smile. "They won't be the first war babies in this house. I suppose I wasn't very much help last time, but if Susan can be a heroine, so can I."

"That's very good of you," Una said, eyes shining. "I'd be happy to help with their sewing."

In the end, it proved an unnecessary offer. The next morning's Guardian announced the sinking of the refugee ship City of Benares on its way to Quebec, with the loss of 77 of the 90 children aboard. The whole scheme of evacuating British children overseas was halted for fear of more U-boat attacks. Una spent the evening knitting stockings out of the very finest yarn she could find, adding decorative little scalloped stitches to the cuffs and trying hard to think only of the five children at the Anderson house and their warm, safe, happy toes.

Notes:

*Toronto Globe and Mail, 9 Sept. 1940. Sadly, I don't think Shirley has The Charlottetown Guardian delivered to Camp Borden, so I've had to expand my reading.

**Rainbow Valley, Chapter 18: Mary Brings Evil Tidings

***Rainbow Valley, Chapter 25: Another Scandal and Another Explanation and Chapter 26: Miss Cornelia Gets a New Point of View
Carl hurried across King's Square in Charlottetown, eager to be out of the wind that sliced off the water and directly through his tweed jacket. He'd come into Town at the invitation of the biology department at Prince of Wales College to deliver a lecture on the ecology of the Maritimes. Strange how academic life went on, even in these times. There had been a greater proportion of women in the hall than on previous occasions, but other than that, you might never have known that there was a war on.

Carl enjoyed lecturing, often running over his time if he did not stick strictly to his notes. Over the years, Professor Michelson at Redmond had often asked Carl to take a turn at the lectern when he was in Kingsport for the winter, and had written recently to say that the ornithology class had missed Carl last year and wouldn't he please consider visiting in the spring? Di had been most insistent as well, protesting that she had missed him terribly, and Muggins, too. No doubt she had, with Sylvia gone to England and Aster House so quiet. Perhaps he could manage a short visit this year.

King's Square was not large, and it took Carl mere minutes to cross the blustery park and mount the steps of a blue-gabled Victorian nestled under a magnificent oak. It was a whimsical house, adorned with wooden lace and complicated porch-rails intricately painted in unexpected colors. Carl straightened his bow tie and knocked, grinning when Jerry answered the door.

"Welcome!" Jerry said, wrapping Carl in a back-slapping hug before taking his briefcase and ushering him into the hall. "It's good to see you! How was the lecture?"

"Fine," Carl smiled. "A very earnest undergraduate had a lot of questions about eel grass."

Jerry snorted, shaking his head over this absurdity, but looking very pleased all the same. Jerry often looked pleased. And why shouldn't he? He had given up his private practice last year to accept an appointment as a trial judge on the Provincial Court, and was settled into a comfortable middle-age that showed in both his smile and his waistline. He and Nan were active in church and civic affairs, he sitting on the board of the YMCA, she helming the library committee with daunting zeal. Their three girls had the run of Charlottetown Ladies' Academy and were already terrifying the few spellbound swains who mustered enough courage to speak to Judge Meredith's daughters.

The patter of many feet on the stairs announced the girls' arrival and Carl was soon engulfed in a flurry of colorful, silken embraces. He was quite sure of Portia, who was nearly 15 and still in the phase of arms-and-legs that had once inspired Shirley and Jem to call Rilla "Spider." As to which of the older girls was Beatrice and which was Cordelia . . .

"Dellie, darling, will you go fetch Mum?" Jerry prompted, sending the pink one swirling off into the recesses of the house and clarifying things for Carl.

Bea and Portia led Carl to the plush sofa in the parlor, peppering him with questions about his trip, his lecture, the welfare of the Glen cousins, and a dozen other topics, all rendered fresh and engaging by their youthful enthusiasm and flashing dark eyes. Carl did his best to answer, though he was somewhat distracted by a large and recent oil portrait of the Honorable Gerald Meredith, resplendent in his judicial robes and framed in gold filigree on the wall above the mantel. It was
easier to disguise his chortling as a response to his nieces' banter than to tamp it down.

"Carl!" Nan said, heels clicking against the polished floor as she came to embrace him. "We're so glad you could join us. How is everyone in the Glen?"

"All well. Looking forward to seeing you all at Christmas."

"Any news from the boys?" Jerry asked, accepting a tea cup from Cordelia.

Carl thanked Portia for the tea and turned his body away from the portrait so that he could concentrate on what people were saying. "Faith and Jem had a letter from Sam. The Royal Regiment is on the move, though of course he can't say where to."

Nan sighed. "I had hoped they might stay in Iceland a bit longer."

"I suppose they only need a small infantry garrison there. It's really a job for the Navy."

"Any word from Wally?" Jerry asked, his avid interest making Carl wonder, not for the first time, how things stood between Jem and Jerry these days, when Jerry had all his girls safe beside him while Jem's sons were moving ever closer to the maelstrom.

"He's just been posted to a little coastal patrol vessel," Carl said. "I gather he'd rather be escorting convoys across the Atlantic, but guarding Kingsport Harbour against U-boats is important work. And a bit of a relief at Ingleside, I'd say."

Nan refreshed their cups. "Di said he was in good spirits last time she saw him. He had a bit of liberty from time to time when he was training and came to Aster House for a proper feeding-up."

The image of Wally getting a pass and using it to visit his aunt made Carl grin. Still a boy after all, craving home comforts over the usual debauchery of shore leave. Ah well, maybe he had made promises to Zoe Maylock.

"I had a letter from Gil last week," Bea offered. "He says Camp Borden is keen and he has a laugh seeing how scared everyone is of Uncle Shirley."

Carl sputtered into his tea, but recovered enough not to spill. "Oh?" he said mildly. "Is Gil enjoying his training?"

"Heaps," Bea grinned. "He says they got a falcon for a mascot, but she's only half-trained and she just torments the life out of the poor batman who has to take care of her."

Carl had never met Aircraftman Davenport, but he felt genuine sympathy for the man. A falcon that didn't want to be kept was a fearsome thing, no doubt requiring endless attention and trouble. He'd have to send some suggestions for keeping her happy, though he doubted whether Shirley would pass them along. And where in thunder had he gotten a falcon anyway?

They chatted pleasantly for a while, the girls telling Carl of their classes and dances and the concert the Academy was organizing for the relief of displaced children in Britain. Bea was to give a dramatic recitation and Cordelia would sing, while Portia had a most scrumptious part in one of the dialogues.

After a time, Nan excused herself to look in on supper and called the girls to assist her, leaving Carl and Jerry alone. Carl sipped his tea, catching sight of the portrait again and not bothering to stifle a laugh.
"What's funny?" Jerry asked, bemused.

Carl merely inclined his head toward Jerry's double on the wall, eliciting a furious blush from his brother.

"Nan's idea," Jerry muttered.

"It's very . . . impressive."

"Yes, well, I'm supposed to project authority, aren't I?" Jerry grumbled. "Robes, bench, Your Honour — all of that is so people will respect the majesty of the law."

Carl nodded, grinning. "It's too bad you don't get to wear a wig. Very majestic."

"You laugh," Jerry muttered, "but have you ever seen the robes the Supreme Court justices have to wear? We had to take an appeal to Ottawa a few years back and I nearly laughed in the courtroom. Red robes with white ermine collars — they look like Santa Clauses!"

Carl did laugh. "Too bad we didn't know that back in the Good Conduct Club days. We could have borrowed Dr. Blythe's suit and dressed you up while you dispensed your majestic justice from Hezekiah Pollock's tombstone."

Jerry's smile turned wistful. "You know," he said slowly, "I suppose I never apologized to you about all that."

"About the Good Conduct Club?" Carl was surprised. He had long ago made peace with his bringing-up, but had not realized that Jerry harbored any regrets.

"We . . . I . . ." Jerry faltered. "I was too hard on you."

Carl shrugged uncomfortably. "You were a kid yourself. I don't blame you for any of that."

"You almost died, Carl."

What was all this about? It was all such a long time ago; the physical hurts had healed and the sting had gone out of the others. Carl scrutinized his brother's face, trying to puzzle out the reason for this unlooked-for repentance.

"You don't owe me an apology, Jerry," he said, not much comforted when Jerry looked down at his shoes.

After a long moment, Jerry said, "I heard a case this fall. A . . . um . . . well . . . you don't happen to know what Section 206 of the Criminal Code is, do you?"

Carl's blood drained away in frigid eddies and it was a moment before he could answer. "I do."

Jerry did not look up, and Carl had to strain to hear his next words. "I . . . well, I just . . . I realized I owed you an apology is all. For sitting in judgment. I should have done a better job looking out for you all along."

Carl wasn't quite sure what to say to that. It was an old fear — looking up at Jerry from the dock, Jerry pronouncing a sentence and then turning away — but not one that occupied much space in his thoughts. At least not recently, when there were so many more pressing things to worry over.

"What happened to your Section 206 case?" Carl asked faintly.
Jerry raised his head, and Carl was surprised to see tears in his eyes. Even more surprised when Jerry said, "Dismissed."

"Really?"

"Lack of evidence. I . . . I told the prosecutor not to waste my time with any of that nonsense anymore."

Carl wasn't sure what to say to that either. Instead, he pulled Jerry into a hug. There was a thank you in there somewhere, but it was mostly covered over by Jerry's I'm sorrys.

When Nan came to call them to the table, she found the Meredith brothers slouched side-by-side on the sofa, tear-tracked faces smiling broadly as they took pot-shots at the portrait, giggling like little boys.

The North American Harvard gleaming on the runway was the same chrome yellow as their little Piper Cub at home. The damn things never failed to make Shirley's heart skip when he caught them out of the corner of his eye, thinking for a moment that Muggins might spring out at him. But this wasn't home. Where the Cub was snub-nosed and lightly framed, with a cockpit open to the Gulf breeze, the Harvard was square and solid, both seats encased in a canopy of armored glass. It was a warplane and no mistake.

Shirley pulled the strap of his helmet tight and adjusted his goggles. He had supervised hundreds of wings tests by now. He still did a bit of instruction in tactical and night flying, but the junior officers handled most of the day-to-day teaching. Flight Lieutenants Ramsay and Trent and all the rest put the pilot candidates through their paces — solo flight, formations, cross-country — before sending them up one by one to face Squadron Leader Blythe. If a candidate passed the practical exam that Shirley set, he got his wings.

That wasn't the end of an airman's training, not by a long shot. But men who earned Shirley Blythe's stamp of approval were sent on to England and into the cockpits of Spitfires and Hurricanes. Some of them were even now battling the Luftwaffe in the skies over London, holding back the promised invasion one night at a time.

Shirley had given the wings test many times, but it had never felt like this before.

"Ready, Uncle Shirley?"

There was no mistaking Gil Ford, not even kitted out in full flight gear that obscured his golden hair and cloaked the vestiges of boyish awkwardness in a man's garb. The grin said plainly that he had been waiting for this day for a long time. He had sent plaintive, over-confident letters from the Elementary Flight Training School in Saskatchewan over the summer: I know all this already. Geez, Uncle Shirley you could fly loops around these old grannies. Shirley had written back sound advice: Don't get cocky. Listen to those tough old bush pilots. They'll teach you heaps of things you'll never learn in school.

Shirley had tried to keep his distance once Gil arrived at Camp Borden. Couldn't have anyone complaining of favoritism, even though anyone who watched Gil fly for five minutes knew he was top of the class.

But there was no sense letting Gil grow a big head. Let the other cadets earn their wings by meeting the ordinary RCAF rubric. Shirley wanted Gil home alive, and if he couldn't get himself out of a few minor scrapes, Shirley wouldn't pass him.
"You think you're ready, Ford?" Shirley asked in an official, rather than avuncular tone.

"Yes, sir!" Gil saluted.

"Let's see it then."

The ground crew hurried to assist them into the Harvard already positioned for takeoff, doing last checks of landing gear and canopy. Gil slid into the harness in the front seat and began to check his instruments. Shirley took the instructor's seat and strapped in, checking and double-checking and flicking on the intercom.

"Great day for flying!" Gil said. "Just look at that sky!"

Shirley scowled. "Pull down your instrument hood, Ford."

"What?" Gil half-turned in his seat.

"The hood. Cover your canopy."

There was a beat of silence. "But . . . I won't be able to see what's in front of me if the hood is down."

"No visual cues. Take off by instruments."

Gil complied, pulling the opaque cover over the windshield so that he could see nothing but the instrument panel before him. No more chatter. Good. Let him focus.

The next time Gil spoke, it was not to an uncle, but to a superior officer. "Ready on your signal, sir."

"You may proceed, Ford."

The Harvard's engine roared to life. Between the white noise and the hood, there may as well have been no world beyond the bird's yellow skin. Gil rolled his shoulders back and just for a moment, Shirley saw him as he had been at not-quite-twelve, taking off in the old homebuilt for the first time. They had had the wind in their hair then, and no intercom, only the boy's shrieking joy under a limitless sky. No way to go back, though, only forward.

Gil opened the throttle and they were off, gathering speed, tilting skyward, leaving the ground behind. Shirley watched the directional gyro carefully; Gil kept them on a perfectly straight heading the whole time, clearing the runway flawlessly.

"You can remove the hood now, Ford," Shirley said over the intercom.

Gil obeyed. "What would you like to see first, sir?"

Shirley did not answer. Instead, he reached down and cut the throttle dead. Immediately, the Harvard's engine went still, tachometer collapsing toward zero rpms.

"FUCK!" Gil hollered, though Shirley was pleased to note that he must be leaning on the control column at the same time, as they were maintaining flying speed. "I think we lost the engine!"

"Yep," Shirley replied, noting that Gil was positioning them for an emergency landing in a promising meadow rather than among the treacherous pines. That was a good choice: there was a decent chance they'd survive a crash there, whereas the trees were a death sentence. Gil had the Harvard aimed along exactly the path Shirley would have chosen himself if he had lost his only
engine and was going down.

"Good show," Shirley said, opening the throttle again once Gil had committed to the right answer. "Take 'er up."

"You did that on purpose?" Gil's voice cracked on the last word, making him sound half a child in his distress.

"Take 'er up, Ford."

Gil obeyed, though the intercom crackled with dim mutterings.

Shirley let him gain altitude for a minute or two, then closed the throttle again.

"JESUS CHRIST!" Gil yelled from the front cockpit.

"What are you gonna do about it?" Shirley asked, speaking calmly as the plane began to descend.

"I'm gonna die in a goddamn fireball, you crazy son of a bitch!"

"That's no way to talk about your grandmother. Fix it."

Gil responded with a barrage of colorful invective, but he brought the Harvard around in a series of textbook-perfect S turns, lining up for a forced landing in a broad, flat field. Good. They'd stand a decent chance of surviving that as well.

"Alright, go back up," Shirley said, opening the throttle again.

Over the next hour, Shirley ran Gil and the Harvard through the wringer, putting the craft through a dizzying barrage of nose spirals, slow rolls, steep slips, and unpredictable failures.

"Pay attention to that airspeed," Shirley barked in the middle of a spin.

Gil must have listened because they were both still alive when Shirley gave the go-ahead to turn for home.

"I don't even know where we are," Gil groaned.

"Navigate, Ford." Was it wrong to be merciless? He'd face worse over there. He'd get lost at night, in flak, with the Luftwaffe breathing down his rudder, and he'd have to get home. He had to come home.

The sun was setting in orange splendor over Lake Huron, a familiar sight, and a comfort. Gil got his bearings and plotted a course that brought them to Camp Borden within twenty minutes. Shirley told him to put the Harvard down and sincerely considered letting him do so without trouble. But what good would that do?

"By instruments," he said. "Settle into your approach and then pull the hood down again."

"By instruments?" Gil sounded on the point of tears.

"Nice and gentle, Gil," Shirley said, a bit of the uncle showing through. "You can do it."

Indeed, he could. They landed safely. Smoothly even.

The moment the Harvard came to a complete stop, Gil flung off his harness and exploded out of
the canopy, tearing the flight helmet and goggles from his head. Shirley followed, only to have Gil fling the helmet at him full-force. If he hadn't caught it, he would have gotten a nasty bruise.

"What the HELL was all that?" Gil shouted, gray eyes murderous in a splotched and streaky face.

"Your wings test."

Gil scoffed, incredulous. "I watched Pownall's wings test. And Morrison's. You didn't put either of them through half that shit!"

"No," Shirley agreed simply.

"So you're what? Hazing me? Trying to show you don't play favorites?" Gil was wild-eyed, raging and red-faced, pacing a tight arc, his volume well beyond the realm of appropriate conduct in the presence of a superior officer.

Shirley stood immovable, watching him. No signs of dizziness. Hell, the kid didn't even puke, which was more than Shirley would be able to say for himself once all this was over.

A loud throat clearing just behind Shirley's ear made him turn, then snap to attention.

"Is there a problem here, Blythe?"

"No, sir," Shirley said, saluting Wing Commander McMullen.

McMullen returned the salute, then stepped past Shirley to the place where Leading Aircraftman Gilbert O. Ford stood petrified in textbook posture.

"And, you, Ford," McMullen inquired. "Any problems I should know about?"

"No, sir."

"Excellent, Ford, excellent," McMullen said, turning back to Shirley with a congenial smile. "What say, Blythe? Has Ford here passed his wings test?"

Shirley addressed McMullen, but spoke to Gil. "Full marks, sir. The best I've seen yet."
Exchanges of Trust (Reprise)

November 1940

15 November 1940

Camp Borden, Ontario

Dear Kit,

I had quite a day yesterday — eight wings tests, and one of them Gil's. I threw everything I had at him and a few more things besides and he sailed through it all with flying colors. Cursed me out a bit, but I suppose I deserved that. You should have seen him. McMullen did see him — the last bit anyway — and was as impressed as I was. I'm glad he did, because I wanted to recommend Gil for special distinction, but I felt that I couldn't on account of it looking like nepotism. But McMullen spared me the trouble and Gil will graduate top of the class as long as he maintains his marks in classroom instruction.

I'm glad to hear that your lecture went well. Even gladder to hear about Jerry. Who would have thought? I suppose that means I'll have to visit that portrait someday, though don't ask me not to laugh at it.

I have some leave coming to me after Christmas. What do you think? Aster House? Toronto? Lake Huron was ideal, but not in the sort of cold we've been having around here. Our new class of cadets are having some difficulty adjusting — they're Australians and they thought Ramsay was joking when he told them to expect sub-zero temperatures by New Year's.

Gil's class will graduate soon and then he'll be off, too. The new pilots generally get three weeks' leave after their wings parade, but he'll be off to Blighty with the rest after the New Year. Still training, though. I wish we had a couple of Spitfires or Hurricanes here, but we don't, and the boys need to do some training on the real deal over there.

Gil really is something to watch in action, I tell you. He was mad as hell after that wings test, but he came through it all just perfectly. His pals got by as well, and I was very glad I didn't have to flunk any of them. Some of the groups still have a wash-out or two at this stage, but I guess Gil's group has Ramsay and Trent, who are two of our best instructors. Plus they have Gil's wake to chase after, so they all passed.

That's enough shop talk, I suppose. I'd send apologies, but I suspect you won't mind getting a two-page letter for once, no matter what's in it. How is Una getting along? She wrote last week that planning the church festival is taking up all her time, but she didn't sound particularly sorry about it. There was a gentle nudge in there somewhere about writing to my parents more often, so please tell her that I have sent them an account of Gil's success here, which they should enjoy.

Say hello to Mugsy for me. That's a point in favor of Kingsport — a shorter train ride and you wouldn't be able to bring her to the King Eddy. What say? Should I write to Di? New Year's in Kingsport — just like old times?

Yours Truly,

Shirley
P.S. The falcon's name is Nomad (a type of training airplane we have here). Thank you for suggesting the hood to keep her calm. Davenport is very grateful, even if he doesn't know to whom. She still keeps him quite busy, which is the point. I decline to tell you where and how I got her. Can't you just believe that I found her shivering on the doorstep one morning like old Cock Robin? S.J.B.

The splendor of blazing maples and golden elms had burned down to dull browns and ashy grays by November. No matter; the lawn of St. Elizabeth's teemed with color and commotion as the whole congregation celebrated her feast day. Folding tables under the barren branches offered maple-glazed donuts, spiced cider, and sandwiches of every variety, with all proceeds split between the St. Elizabeth's Sunday School and the Red Cross. There were games and contests, a potato-sack race and a sand pit for pitching quoits. Over by the rectory garage, the Lowbridge Boy Scouts had set up a large crate for collecting scrap tinfoil in hopes of making their goal of 100 pounds by Christmas. Children dodged among the throng as their parents perused tables selling colorful mittens and crocheted tams, or sat on the lawn near the stage, listening to the Maylock sisters sing "It's Only a Paper Moon."

Una Meredith stood behind the cookie table with Cecilia Blythe, selling monkey-faces and orange shortbread for a penny and giving jars of summer squash pickles to anyone who could be convinced to take them. Carl had driven them over in Shirley's truck on the condition that the pickle crates were on a one-way trip to Lowbridge.

"Don't you like squash pickles, Uncle Carl?" Ceci had asked.

"I did once," he conceded, "but if there are any left after today, I'll have to bury them at dead of night in the garden."*

Una pursed her lips, but really, after six months of the stuff, she could hardly disagree.

Once he had helped them set up tables and carry crates, Carl had wandered off toward the music, whistling as he went. Una looked after him, wondering what on earth could have been in this morning's letter that had him floating along as happy as he was. Whatever it was had him pressing his hand to his breast pocket as he walked.

"Your monkey-faces came out very well," Una said with a gentle smile for Ceci. "Susan would be proud of you."

"I love to read her cookbooks," Ceci admitted. "Did you know that she left notes on most of the recipes? She said gingerbread cheered Dad up when he was a little boy, so I've been making it as often as I can get both sugar and molasses."

"That's kind of you," Una said. "And of Susan, to take such notice."

Ceci nodded, golden-brown curls bobbing emphatically. "Susan knew what everybody liked best. She said that Uncle Shirley loves homemade fudge and that Aunt Rilla should never have a silver-and-gold cake for her birthday because she has a prejudice against them. Did you know that Uncle Walter loved Queen Pudding?"

"Yes," Una said, able, after all these years, to keep the pang out of her expression.

"Wally likes it, too. I wrote that in. Do you think it's alright for me to add my own notes in the book?"

Una wrapped a woolly arm around Ceci's narrow shoulders. "I can't think of anything Susan would
"Then you'll have to tell me your favorites as well," Ceci said. "Susan made all sorts of notes for Uncle Carl and how to make certain recipes vegetarian, but I don't remember seeing any for you."

It had been a long time since Una had read a cookbook as hungrily as Ceci did. She resolved that next time her niece came to visit the little gray house, she would take down her own mother's cookbook and pass on some of the recipes that sustained her in her starved childhood.

"Doughnuts are my favorite," Una said with a squeeze.

Over the course of the afternoon, the congregants of St. Elizabeth's showed hearty approval for the wares on offer, even carrying away the majority of the pickle jars, though whether they wanted them for the squash or for the glass remained a mystery. Una relished the opportunity to chat with Ceci, who had started her freshman year at Lowbridge High that fall and was evidently settling in well, despite several teachers' evident surprise that gentle, careful Cecilia was Walter and Jemima Blythe's little sister.

Una was just wrapping a nickel's-worth of cookies for Mr. Anderson when Amelia Newgate appeared at the table, mouse-brown hair flying out of her pins, face pale and sweaty. Wee Georgie hovered behind her, his brow knit with more concern than Una could bear to see on a ten-year-old's face.

"George, will you help Cecilia with the cookies for a moment?" Una ask-ordered, already stepping around the table to catch Amelia's elbow.

The boy nodded, staring after his mother as Una escorted her away.

Una got Amelia as far as the rectory garden before the latter swayed dangerously, grasping at Una's arm for support.

"Steady now," Una crooned as she helped her to a seat on an overturned crate. "Put your head down. That's right. I'll fetch you some water."

Una turned to go, but Amelia caught at her skirt. "Oh, Una, wait! I'm afraid I need more than that. Can you help me up to the rectory?"

"Of course."

The problem became apparent when they reached the rectory water closet and Amelia shimmied out of blood-soaked knickers. The elasticized fabric of her girdle had protected most of her dress, but there was still a visible stain on the sprigged cotton.

"I'm so sorry," Amelia said. "It came over me all in a rush and I knew I would faint . . ."

"Never mind that, dearest," Una said, stoppering the sink and running the tap. "Mrs. Williams keeps a bag of rags for cleaning under the sink here. Do take them; I'll run over to the mission box and see if I can't find anything for you to wear while we wash out your dress."

As it happened, the charity box was quite full, the regular sorting having been neglected in the run-up to the festival. Una scrounged a passable floral housedress that would be terribly long on Amelia, but would do in a pinch, and augmented it with a paisley shawl that could be deployed to cover any future mishap. She returned to find her friend sniffling into the sink as she rinsed her
underclothes.

"There now, Amelia," she said, offering her handkerchief. "Are you feeling any better?"

Amelia blew a loud, restorative blast and hiccuped. "A bit. The cramps are still bad, but I'm not going to faint."

"Let me get you a hot water bottle."

"No, it's alright, Una. I just want to get cleaned up enough to go home."

Una nodded sympathetically and took the girdle to wring out while Amelia worked on the knickers. She refreshed the bloody water twice, rinsing and rinsing.

"Do you . . ." Una hesitated, "do you always bleed so much?"

Amelia wiped her nose and gulped air. "No. I thought . . . well, I'm a week or two late and I thought I might be pregnant again, though it's very foolish. It's ten years since Georgie was born and I'm too old for any of that . . ."

Una felt a pang. Amelia had been anxious over this and she hadn't noticed. It had been a busy time, with harvest and planning for the festival, but she chastened herself nonetheless.

"Don't look like that, Una," Amelia pleaded. "I didn't tell you. I knew it wouldn't come to anything."

Amelia's hand was cold and lax in hers, but Una pressed it fondly. "I'm very sorry."

A smile shone through the tears streaming down Amelia's plump cheeks. "Don't be sorry, Una. I'll be fine. It's just one more thing, isn't it? Harvest barely covered our costs this year and the house payment is due to old Mr. Pelham and I don't know how we'll make it, even with the money the girls made at the cannery this summer. But now school's on again and I won't let them fall behind. Maybe it's for the best . . ."

She broke into a wracking sob that said plainly that it wasn't. Una stretched a consoling arm around her friend, letting her ruin what was left of the handkerchief and whispering comforts and promises of help that Amelia was too distressed to refuse.

***

When the sun had slipped behind the treetops and the breeze gone from brisk to biting, Una urged Carl to take Cecilia home to Ingleside.

"We can wait for you," Carl said as he helped break down the tables and fold the cloths.

"No, please, go ahead. I told Faith we'd have Ceci home by suppertime. I just need to speak with Father Daniel."

"But how will you get home, Auntie Una? You don't even have your tricycle."

Una placed a pile of tablecloths in Ceci's arms, chivvying her toward the truck. "Shanks' pony will do for me," she said, brushing off Carl's further offer to return for her in an hour.

It was easy to find Father Daniel, though claiming a moment of his time proved more difficult. He seemed to be everywhere at once, dismantling the stage, thanking the volunteers for their service, receiving the cash box from Deacon Saunders. Una waited patiently, busying herself by collecting
trash from the festival grounds, filling a sack with bits of paper and discarded crusts, and saving a fistful of tinfoil for the Boy Scouts.

"Miss Meredith?" Father Daniel said, approaching when they were the only two left among the indigo shadows.

Una looked up from her garbage to find his round, earnest face tilted in curiosity. She had waited an hour or more to speak with him, but close up, she saw the slump of his shoulders and the creeping redness of eyes that would rather not remain open.

"You're tired," she said. "Forgive me. It can wait."

"I think perhaps I could sit for a moment," Father Daniel conceded. "But a cup of tea wouldn't go amiss. Won't you join me?"

A quarter hour later, the rectory tea kettle sang and Una insisted that Father Daniel stay where he was on the ancient horsehair sofa.

"The festival was a great success," he said, accepting a cup from Una and holding it under his nose to let the fragrant steam caress his face. "We should be able to send the Red Cross a very respectable check."

Una settled herself into the tufted armchair with her own tea. "I'm glad to hear it."

"I was afraid the rain wouldn't hold off, but we were lucky. The games all went swimmingly and those Maylock girls can really sing, can't they? They're lovely in the choir, of course, but they could sing for the radio! Deacon Saunders told me . . ."

Una let him rehash the day's events, sipping her tea and wondering whether she should have gone with Carl after all. It had been a long day and the Newgate family's difficulties would be no different tomorrow.

"Now, what did you wish to tell me, Miss Meredith?"

"It can wait," Una said.

"We're here now," he smiled. "Why don't you get it off your chest?"

Una settled her cup into its saucer and sighed. "I'm quite worried about the Newgate family," she confessed. "Mr. Newgate is poorly and worse every year, and they have to keep most of their potato crop just to eat. Mrs. Newgate came to me today and . . ." Una hesitated, not wanting to betray confidences, even to a priest. "She hasn't been well either," she ended feebly.

Father Daniel rubbed an eye with his knuckle. "What do you propose, Miss Meredith?"

"I don't quite know," Una confessed. "I know that Mr. Newgate has applied for a pension, but he might not get much from it, even if he is approved. Perhaps we might help him find a job that is easier on his back than farming. In any case, I think the family will need some relief this winter."

Father Daniel frowned into his cup. "I see. Well, I can certainly ask around about work. We do have a little in the parish funds for charitable relief at home. It isn't much, mind you, but we can keep them fed at least until some decision is reached about Mr. Newgate's pension."

"Thank you," Una said. She would have said more, but the frown was still etched in Father Daniel's face and he did not look up from his tea. It was an unusual posture for the convivial priest
and Una found the direction of her concern shifting. "Is something amiss, Father?"

He let out a long sigh, quite the most despondent sound she had ever heard from him.

"Why is it," he asked, "that I am only just now finding out about all this?"

Una blinked. "I'm sorry?"

Father Daniel clicked his cup into his saucer. "I've been rector of this parish for a year and a half," he said, exasperation evident in his voice. "I think I've been doing a decent job. I've certainly done everything I can to serve the congregation. But sometimes . . . it feels like the people don't trust me."

It had not occurred to Una that her dilemma might have any implications beyond the Newgates' obvious need. Certainly she had not meant to impugn Father Daniel in any way.

"They do trust you," she said hesitantly.

"Evidently not," he said. "If they did, they would bring their problems to me. But they don't; they go to you and leave me to hear only what you don't solve on your own first."

In all fairness, Una had to admit that this was perfectly true. There were a hundred little problems that she never brought to Father Daniel's attention — Timothy Drew's colic driving his mother to distraction and Maggie Wallace's rheumatism making it impossible for her to set her bread and Ida Perry's endless squabbles with her daughters-in-law — but why should she? These things could be solved or smoothed over with a helping hand or a listening ear, and no need to trouble the priest over them. There were other things, too — things that required more trust than even a priest could build in a year and a half.

"They've known me a long time," Una said. "And sometimes . . . sometimes there are things that they can't tell to a priest."

Father Daniel's brows contracted. "What sort of things?"

Ordained or not, Una had a duty to the secrets that people entrusted to her. "Women's things," she said vaguely.

The harsh note in his chuckle startled Una and put her on her guard. "It shouldn't matter that I'm a man. I'm a priest, for goodness' sake. I'm supposed to counsel everyone — man, woman, child . . . it shouldn't matter, should it?"

Una pressed her lips together and said nothing. A glance toward the window showed the first tentative drops of rain. It would be better to get going before the skies opened.

"I really must be getting home," she said, clearing her cup and saucer and putting out her hand for Father Daniel's dishes.

He did not give them. "Forgive me, Miss Meredith. I didn't mean to grumble. I was only distressed to learn that there are troubles among my flock that I am not privy to. Clearly, I must work harder to gain their trust."

Una could have left well enough alone, nodding agreement and ending the conversation there. How many times had she done just that with Father Kirkland, swallowing a disagreement along with her tea to preserve harmony? If pressed, she would not have been able to articulate what loosened her tongue in Father Daniel's presence, except maybe to guess that their lessons together
had made her used to a bit of gentle sparring.

"I think," she said, "that there are some things they will never tell you. The women at least. That isn't your fault and you shouldn't count it a deficiency in yourself or your effort."

This seemed to surprise the priest, and his surprise surprised Una in return. Had he really never considered that there were sins and sufferings that no woman would lay at the feet of a powerful man, well-meaning but still relatively unknown, who might condemn or misunderstand? What woman would confess to him that she resented her breastfeeding child for driving her to exhausted delirium? Or ask for help treating a venereal disease before her husband returned from sea? Or admit how many bruises hid beneath her clothing? Certainly the women of Lowbridge had never spoken of these things to Father Kirkland and she suspected that they did not tell Dr. Parsons either, except when strictly necessary. Una wondered whether the Glen women had taken Dr. Blythe and Jem into their confidence. Certainly they were both more sympathetic than Dr. Parsons and more familiar than Father Daniel. But intimacy required trust, and Carl never saw any doctor but Di.

"It isn't your fault," Una said, meaning it as consolation.

"Everyone should be able to trust a priest," Father Daniel said dejectedly. "Sex shouldn't matter."

"It shouldn't," Una agreed, the tightness in her chest emerging as a clipped tone. "But it does."

"So I should just resign myself to perpetual inadequacy?" he asked, ruffling like a wet hen. "I'm unable to minister to my whole congregation just because I'm a man?"

Father Daniel might be tired and he might be agitated, but not even the most absent-minded minister could have missed the hot flush on Una's face as she set her teacup down on an end-table, not even bringing it to the kitchen. Neither could he have missed her abrupt exit from the sitting room, nor the emphatic click of the front door as it closed behind her.

***

It was raining in earnest now, leaving Una sodden and shivering before she had walked a quarter mile. The burning sensation in her throat might have kept her warm if she had not released it as sobs, lost amid the splash and patter of raindrops.

Really, this was very stupid. How had a quiet cup of tea and a routine bit of parish business gone so far awry? She was over-tired, that was all, and Father Daniel was as well.

But exhausted or not, Una could not deny that Father Daniel's words had stung her out of all proportion. Was she so jealous of her small domain that she couldn't stand to have a priest minister to his own congregation? No one likes to be usurped, but there was need enough in the community to keep half a dozen pastors running from dawn til dusk. Besides, there was little danger that the women of Lowbridge would start bringing all their problems to Father Daniel anytime soon, so what was there to grudge him?

Una circled this problem round and round without coming any nearer the point until a low rumble interrupted her thoughts. At first, she thought it might be thunder, but no, it was getting louder. Una paused in the road and looked over her shoulder to find a single headlight approaching, attached to some growling, low-slung vehicle.

"Miss Meredith!" Father Daniel called from under his dripping Sou'wester as he pulled Jenny up to idle beside her.

"What are you doing?" Una shouted over the roar. "You shouldn't be out here!"
"Neither should you!" he yelled back. "I'm sorry! I don't know what happened back there! I upset you somehow and I'm sorry!"

Una shook her head, sending trickles of water running down the back of her collar. "It's not your fault! I'm only tired and want to go home!"

"Let me take you!" Father Daniel bellowed.

Una eyed Jenny dubiously. The motorcycle was slick with rainwater, rattling like a rock tumbler, and had no obvious second seat.

"All aboard!" the priest said, scooting all the way forward on the seat to make just enough room for Una.

She hesitated. That was an awfully little bit of seat and she never would have sought a ride on Jenny under normal circumstances. But it was raining and Una was done in and she wanted nothing more to be transported home to the snug security of her own bed.

"Hold your skirt away from the chain!" Father Daniel advised as she slung one leg over Jenny's croup.

Una did as she was bid, gathering her sopping skirt tight around her legs. After a moment's timidity, she clutched Father Daniel around the waist, fingers slipping over the surface of his mac. If he wasn't warm, he was at least solid, which was an undeniable comfort. The engine revved into a more insistent roar and they were off, rumbling down the Lowbridge Road and into the pouring night.

Notes:

*The fate of Anne's leftover pumpkin preserves in Anne of Windy Poplars.

**For Una and the doughnuts (and cookbooks) see Rainbow Valley, chapter 9: "Una Intervenes."
Shoutout to everybody out there marching, donating, organizing, and calling their elected officials to protest police violence. You're doing amazing work and I'm proud to stand with you. Keep it up. #BlackLivesMatter #EndPoliceViolence

December 1940

The reports came from trappers on both sides of the lake. First attempts to reach the spot where wreckage would have fallen if the reports were correct were hampered by ice, thick enough to hold the weight of men near the shore, but treacherous and broken up further out.

- The Charlottetown Guardian, 16 December 1940

On the morning of Gil's wings parade, Shirley dressed with extra care. Rilla and Ken Ford would be in the audience today, up from the city to see their boy receive his wings. Most of the graduates would be promoted to the rank of Pilot Sergeant, but the few who had distinguished themselves in training would be commissioned as Pilot Officers. McMullen had given Shirley permission to be the one to pin Pilot Officer Ford's wings and to present him with the certificate of special distinction for graduating at the head of his class.

Shirley pulled the strap of his Ingersoll Radiolite tight. He wondered whether the erstwhile Captain Kenneth Ford would salute him when they met. Ken was a civilian now and not under any obligation to show deference to a superior officer, but Shirley meant to stick close to McMullen and see what happened. He straightened his tie in the mirror and tried not to look smug.

***

There were flurries of snow at breakfast-time and Shirley delayed his usual coffee and eggs to check the meteorology reports. They had been revised since last night, warning of snow squalls in the area, where before they had predicted only light precipitation. Shirley didn't bother checking in with McMullen before he got on the blower to Sgt. Dixon and ordered him to ground all flights until further notice.

"Yes, sir," Dixon replied. "But sir, we've just sent out five kites to do one last round of formation flying before the wings parade."

"Which ones?" Shirley asked.

"Some of the new Nomads, sir."

"No, I meant whose cadets?"

"Ramsay's, sir."
"Thank you, Dixon."

Really, it was a good thing he had skipped those eggs. All the way to McMullen's office, Shirley's stomach twisted in knots. Of course it was Ramsay going out for one last practice. Ramsay would be leaving them after today, off to take a post like Shirley's at one of the new SFTSes. He'd want to show that his cadets were the cream of the crop. And the boys would have been game for it, Gil Ford leading the charge, no doubt. Had they even bothered to check the weather?

"Sir?" Shirley said, knocking perfunctorily as he entered the office.

McMullen looked up from the speech he was practicing.

"Sir, I've grounded all flights. The weather is getting worse."

A raised eyebrow was McMullen's only reproach for Shirley's presumption in issuing such orders. "If you say so, Blythe."

"I do. But sir, Ramsay has already taken his students up for a formation exercise."

"Ramsay?" McMullen said, smoothing his mustache. "That group wouldn't happen to include one Gilbert Ford, would it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go get some coffee, Blythe. They'll be back in a couple of hours."

"Yes, sir."

Shirley did not go to the mess. Instead he donned his overcoat and climbed the ladder-like steps on the exterior of the control tower, startling the single, scarf-swathed air traffic controller. There was no ground-to-air wireless at Camp Borden. Even if there had been, the chances of communicating through the intensifying storm would not have been good. Unable to call Ramsay home to base, Shirley stood silently before the wall of windows, breathing in long, slow breaths as he scanned the sky for any hint of yellow amid the gray.

***

By noon, there was a foot of snow on the ground and conditions so bad you could hardly see the hangars from the tower. The air traffic controller — Pickering, wasn't it? — had generously shared his own coffee, but Shirley was loath to drink more than a cup and risk the jitters. He had just lit a third cigarette when Pickering pointed a finger skyward.

"Call Sgt. Dixon," Shirley ordered. "Get the ground crews out here."

One sun-yellow Nomad floated down through the swirling snow, kissing the runway and skidding before coming to a safe stop. Then a second, a third, and a fourth. Shirley searched the clouds for the final plane, but saw only a pearly haze, empty and silent. Fear prickled at his edges, but no, it wouldn't do to get ahead of things. Talk to Ramsay first.

Slipping down the slick steps to the runway, Shirley turned the lapels of his greatcoat all the way up as a barrier against the driving snow. Ramsay was already climbing out of his kite, dark eyes huge behind his goggles as he recognized Squadron Leader Blythe stalking toward him. It was difficult to tell in the snow, but Shirley thought he saw him shudder.
"Sir, I . . . I . . ."

"Who's missing?" Shirley asked, already knowing the answer.

"F-F-Ford, sir," Ramsay shivered.

"Get inside," Shirley ordered. Then, barking at Dixon's technicians, "I want all these pilots inside and warm within five minutes, is that understood?"

He did not stay to hear the yessirs.

Shirley did not carry Ramsay to headquarters by the scruff of his neck, but that didn't stop the younger man from cowering like a frightened pup. For once, Shirley was glad when Davenport popped up at his elbow, sending him off for towels and more coffee.

When Ramsay stood before McMullen's desk, ash-pale, with his dark hair plastered to his scalp, Shirley almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

"We saw the storm coming," Ramsay chattered. "I signaled the boys to bank right and avoid it, but I guess Ford didn't see the signal. When we came out the other side of a cloud, he wasn't with the others. We circled and looked, but soon there was nothing but snow and we had to punch it for home."

"What time?"

"1057 hours, sir."

"That's when you lost him or when you turned back?"

"That's when I noticed he was missing, sir. We stayed out looking for another 30 minutes until it got too bad to see anything."

"Where were you?" McMullen asked as Shirley chewed the inside of his cheek.

"Uh . . ." Ramsay looked toward the map table. Shirley cleared the stacked files obscuring the map, scattering them across the floor with a swipe of his arm.

"Here, sir," Ramsay said, pointing to the thousand lakes of the Muskoka region to the north. "East of Georgian Bay, north of Lake Simcoe."

"Any other details?"

"Visibility was very poor, sir."

Shirley steeled himself to ask what he needed to ask. "Do you think it's possible that Ford was able to put down safely?"

To Ramsay's credit, he maintained eye contact. "If anyone could, it's Ford, sir."

McMullen dismissed Ramsay with orders to clean himself up and find out if Pownall or Morrison or any of the other cadets had noticed any additional details. Shirley was already rummaging for a pencil and ruler.

"How long could Ford fly without refueling, Blythe?" McMullen asked.

"About seven hours, sir."
McMullen checked his watch. "If he's still airborne, he has a couple of hours left. He may navigate back on his own if the visibility improves."

"Yes, sir."

*It won't.*

"If not, can he land by instruments in a white-out?"

"Yes, sir."

*As long as he's not over a lake. Or a forest. Or a mountain.*

"Alright. In that case, we're going to assume that Ford is sitting pretty somewhere and that his biggest problem is going to be the cold. You devise a search grid, Blythe. I'll assemble the junior officers and explain the situation before wings parade."

Shirley was stunned. "Wings parade, sir?"

"The families are already arriving. We'll keep it short. Can't send the boys out searching in this mess anyway."


"I'll ask the chaplain to find them. What are their names?"

"Rilla, sir. Rilla Ford. And Kenneth . . ."

Mere hours ago, Shirley had imagined facing Ken today. But not like this.

"*Rilla,* you say? Alright, Blythe. Carry on. I'll be back."

When McMullen left, Shirley took one deep breath and tackled the map, working over it in a haze of trigonometry, guesswork, and sublimated terror.

*Devise a grid.*

*Narrow the search.*

*Remember to breathe.*

When Davenport came to check on him, Shirley sent him for every meteorology report he could lay hands on, then spent the next hour plotting the trajectory of reported snow squalls, attempting to determine which was the one Ramsay had reported hitting. He got a lucky break when Ramsay returned, bringing Pownall's recollection that he had seen the lights of Gravenhurst shortly before things went pear-shaped. They bent over the map together, measuring and muttering.

***

"Are you scared?" Shirley asked, taking a knee in front of the golden-haired boy.

"*No,*" Gil snapped, though his italics did not still the pale, slender fingers as they worried the strap of his flight goggles.

Shirley had a moment of doubt. True, the kid had aced all the drills and quizzes he had set for him on the ground. Gil was a born pilot to his fingertips, but was he really ready to fly? After all, he
was still a few months shy of twelve. Shirley would be with him every step of the way and could take over the controls if Gil panicked, but he didn't want to set him up for failure. Better to wait than to have his first attempt end in disappointment and a bruised ego.

Shirley looked over his shoulder at the treeline, where his own father was sitting in a canvas camp chair with a newspaper, waiting to watch Gil's first takeoff. Dad waved a broad, genial hand and Shirley waved back, wondering if perhaps the pressure of having an audience might not be making things worse.

"Listen, Gil," he said, turning back to his nephew. "It's alright to be afraid. In fact, it's better to know that you're scared than to pretend that you aren't."

Gil evidently found that difficult to believe, judging from his scowl.

"I mean it," Shirley continued. "Everybody gets scared."

"You don't," Gil challenged.

A grim chuckle hid somewhere deep in Shirley's chest, but he knew better than to let it out.

"Course I do," he said.

"Really? When?"

Shirley could hardly say, *when Carl went to buy bread from a boulangerie* or *when Mother Susan came to the hangar with a spice cake instead of a goodbye* or *when you ran away from home and knocked on my door*. But the storm-eyed boy still needed a real truth, not a child's lie.

"I was scared the first time I tested one of my homebuilts," Shirley admitted honestly. "I built the whole plane myself, and I knew that I'd be in real trouble if I had made any mistakes."

That seemed to be a fear that Gil could understand. He nodded, his brow relaxing. "What did you do?"

"The same thing I did in the war," Shirley said, both because it was true and because he knew it would focus Gil's attention. "I took slow breaths to stay calm. I trusted myself and my work, knowing that I had checked everything twice. And I talked to myself."

"You talked to yourself?"

"Yep. When you're scared, your brain goes every which way and it's hard to focus on what you need to do. So I talked myself through every step. *Put on your harness. Check your instruments. Go easy on the throttle.*"

Gil thought for a minute, then grinned like a Cheshire cat. "I didn't think you were much for talking."

Looking back, it might have been the first time Gil had addressed him as a person, rather than as an authority figure. Shirley had smiled and tapped his own temple with a long, brown finger. "On the inside."

That made Gil laugh, all italics and fidgeting and nerves floating away in the brisk wind off the Gulf.

"Are you scared?" Shirley asked again.
"A little."

"That's alright. You'll be brilliant. And I'll be right there with you. Now, let's both take a slow breath together."

***

Half an hour before wings parade was scheduled to start, McMullen returned to the office leading three astonished civilians. They were dressed festively, flowers pinned to Rilla's green blouse despite the season, Ken's shoes shined and polished despite the snow. Shirley's guts felt like water, but he stood up straight. God, Victoria looked so much like her mother at sixteen he might have called her Rilla by accident. As for Rilla herself, Shirley recognized the haunted look their mother had worn the last time he had seen her. And Ken... well, Shirley diverted his gaze, delaying the moment when he would have to absorb that scathing look of accusation and know that for once, he deserved it.

"Victoria, sweetheart, why don't you wait in the chair out in the hall?" Ken said gently to the girl with the ruddy-brown curls.

"Flight Lieutenant Ramsay will be pleased to escort you," McMullen said, snapping his fingers at Ramsay and motioning him toward the door.

Neither Victoria nor Ramsay seemed particularly pleased by this dismissal, but they obeyed orders, closing the door behind them as they left. Shirley would have followed them gladly, but it was his duty to stay and he would not add shirker to his derelictions.

McMullen cleared his throat. "Mr. and Mrs. Ford. I'm afraid I have troubling news. This morning, your son Gilbert went out on a routine training mission and has not yet returned."

There was a beat of suspense, in which nothing moved save the twitching of Ken's jaw and the drifting snow against the windowpanes.

"Gil... is... missing?" Rilla asked, bewildered.

"Yes, ma'am. Technically."

"Technically?" Ken glowered. "What does that mean?"

McMullen adopted a conciliatory tone. "It's not terribly unusual, Mr. Ford. Inexperienced pilots frequently get separated from their training groups. They generally put down safely in a field somewhere and hitch a ride back to base with a local farmer. We don't officially report them missing until there's some reason to believe they might be in trouble."

Shirley flicked a glance at the window behind McMullen, where a floodlight illuminated a streak of swirling snow, trailing off into darkness.

Rilla had followed the same train of thought and was staring at the window, transfixed. "It's so cold..." she murmured.

"The men are dressed for cold-weather conditions, Mrs. Ford," McMullen said. "It's much colder at 20,000 feet than it is on the ground, and that's what their equipment is made for."

"Commander McMullen," Ken said, his voice gruff and low. "Is there any chance that Gilbert... that is, is there any hope that he is still alive?"
McMullen bristled at this bald doubt. "Of course, Mr. Ford, of course! Why, young Ford's an excellent flier, perfectly capable of making a safe landing somewhere. As soon as the weather clears a bit, we'll be sending our search teams out to find him. Squadron Leader Blythe has been working on the plan all afternoon."

Together, Rilla and Ken turned toward Shirley, who was dismayed to find that it was not, in fact, possible to will yourself into invisibility. Yes, he was working hard to put everything right, but the flash in Ken's eyes said plainly enough that he'd always suspected that Gil would come to grief on Shirley's watch. Now Ken was vindicated and it was all Shirley could do to absorb the blow and remain standing.

The clock on the bookcase chimed and McMullen excused himself to conduct the wings parade.

"My apologies for having to leave you, Mr. and Mrs. Ford," he said, shaking hands again. "I've arranged for you to stay the night at a guest house in town — lovely spot, my wife recommends it. Squadron Leader Blythe will see you settled, and we'll send word as soon as there's anything to tell."

The click of the door latch reverberated through the silence that McMullen left in his wake. Rilla and Ken stood rooted to the carpet, staring at the spot where he had been a moment earlier. Shirley knew he was supposed to say something — a word of condolence? encouragement? apology? — but nothing came. When Rilla lifted stricken hazel eyes to his, he had nothing to offer her.

Ken was the first of them to thaw. In a sudden motion, he turned, taking one long, menacing step toward the map table and jabbing at Shirley's chest with a finger that badly wanted to be a fist.

"You . . . you . . ." Ken spluttered, struggling for mastery of his tongue.

"Ken!" Rilla exclaimed, catching at her husband's sleeve. "It isn't his fault."

"It is his fault," Ken hissed. "When you command men and one . . . goes missing . . . it's on your head!"

For once in his life, Shirley agreed entirely with Ken Ford.

***

A dogfight was an altered state. Before it began, you might know what day it was and which way was up and where you were and how you got there. But as soon as it started, the ordinary rules of time and direction and place didn't apply anymore. Seconds might be hours or the other way around, and every little sound and flash was amplified to fill the entirety of your very tiny universe. Instinct and experience combined in an alchemy of decisive action somewhere beyond conscious thought, and you had to trust yourself and your training. Slow breaths. Talk through it. Draw a bead. Fire. When it was done, you emerged as from a pool, surprised to find that the wider world still existed and that somehow it was still Thursday.

In after days, Shirley found that he could not reliably reconstruct that night in anything like chronological order. There was only a series of impressions — shaded squares on the map, coordinates blooming over a page from the pencil he wore to a stub, the comforting rationality of a ruler's edge. At some point, Davenport brought a sandwich, which Shirley ate medicinally. There was coffee, too, though he didn't taste it, and cigarettes, which he only noticed when they ran out. At some point, McMullen asked him to clarify his thinking — why here instead of here? — and Shirley gave satisfactory answers.
"It's a good plan," McMullen said. "We'll send the boys as soon as the weather clears."

***

There was no sunrise, only a gradual lightening of the flat gray sky. The meteorology reports that Shirley snatched from Davenport's hand were better than yesterday, but far from clear. Still, the snow had stopped, and if they were going to wait for completely ideal conditions, they might as well sit tight til spring.

"What do you think, Blythe?" McMullen asked, standing in the yard outside Headquarters and surveying the cloud cover. "Should we send them up or wait til tomorrow?"

Shirley turned his face skyward, frigid wind biting his nose and ears. Gil had been out in this for a day and a night. How much longer could he last?

"It's your call, sir."

"I know it is," McMullen said. "But I value your opinion."

Shirley hesitated. Would he send the search party if it were Pownall out there? Or Morrison? They were all under his protection, not just Gil. But if Gil were here now, wouldn't he be begging for the chance to find his friends?

"I think we should send them, sir."

McMulled nodded. "I quite agree. Still, it's no picnic out there. I won't order anyone up, but I'll allow volunteers to go."

"Yes, sir."

"Ramsay!" McMullen bellowed at the dark-haired Flight Lieutenant who had been hovering at the minimum respectful distance ever since they'd come outside. "Assemble the boys in Hangar A. I want only qualified pilots — instructors and the new graduates. No students."

"Yes, sir," Ramsay called, slipping in the snow as he hurried to comply.

***

"... won't require anyone to join the search. This is strictly a volunteer operation. The weather's not as nasty as it was yesterday, but it's still hairy, no doubt about it. Still, Squadron Leader Blythe has drawn up a sensible search grid and I think we've got a shot at finding Ford."

If there had been a rat in the hangar today, you would have been able to hear it in the pauses between McMullen's statements. There were fifty men gathered, every one of them minutely attuned to the proceedings. Most were attired in battle dress; some already had goggles in their hands. It was less a question of whether they should be ordered into the air than whether they could be stopped.

"If you wish to participate in the rescue effort, we'll send you out two to a kite," McMullen explained. "Instructors will fly, new graduates will ride along as observers. Now then, do we have any volunteers?"

It would be impossible to say which of the fifty hands shot up first, but Shirley would have given the prize to Ramsay.
"Alright, then," McMullen said, puffing out his chest. "Every flight instructor should choose an observer. Squadron Leader Blythe will assign you a section of the search area."

The hangar floor boiled into action as instructors claimed their favorite students. Nearly every man in Gil's class was here, along with most of the junior officers, even those who were assigned to other classes and had likely never met him. Shirley saw Ramsay shake hands with Pownall while stocky, reliable Flight Lieutenant Trent clapped Morrison on the back.

They could do this. The men were willing and the weather was holding and if they could spot the wreckage . . . no, the landing site . . . they still might be able to get to Gil in time.

Shirley took up a piece of chalk and began assigning map coordinates.

***

"We'll find him, sir," Ramsay said on the runway, just before he climbed into the cockpit of his yellow Nomad.

Shirley squinted out over the snow. Would Gil's yellow fuselage be visible? Would the drifting snow have covered it already?

"If you run into weather, you turn back immediately," Shirley ordered.

"Yes, sir," Ramsay said, saluting.

Shirley sent him on his way with a salute and a pang, wishing he were going as well. But someone had to run this show, keep track of everything, narrow down the search perimeter. He felt fettered, earthbound as he was, and would much rather have been strapping on a harness than sending the others. He watched Ramsay and Pownall lift free and diminish until their yellow speck was lost amid the clouds. Then Trent and Morrison and another and another and another until all of Camp Borden's newest pilots and their teachers were airborne at once, searching the snow-blanked countryside of Ontario for their missing classmate.

***

The first searcher to return was Flight Lieutenant Holyoke, who leapt from his cockpit, stammering as he told what he had seen. McMullen took down the coordinates and deployed the recovery vehicles.

Shirley did not wait for a ride. He went directly to Sgt. Dixon and ordered him to re-fuel Holyoke's kite. Then he took it out by himself, flying low over the snowbound landscape, searching for the unlooked-for disaster. He thought he had considered all the possibilities, but imagination had nothing on reality.

***

When Pilot Officer Gilbert O. Ford staggered back to Camp Borden, soaked, exhausted, and on the verge of hypothermia, McMullen waited only until he was stabilized before bursting into the infirmary to demand a full report.

Rilla and Ken came next, hollow-eyed and disbelieving in their relief, and Victoria sobbing with gratitude.

"Where's Uncle Shirley?" Gil asked.
At the moment, Shirley was in the air alone, circling a spot on the shore of a frigid lake at the edge of the search grid. He had spotted one ghastly yellow wreck in the shallows, but not the other. It was here somewhere, though.

*Not Gil’s, thank God.*

Holyoke had seen it with his own eyes, watching in horror as the Nomads piloted by Flight Lieutenants Ramsay and Trent collided in midair, broke apart, and plummeted to the ice-black waters below.*

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Notes:

*This episode is inspired by a series of real events, but all the names and many details are fictional. This story is a work of fiction and does not reflect the actual actions or motivations of the real historical people involved. For coverage of the real graduation-day crashes in December of 1940, see the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, "Student-Pilot Is Missing on Wing-Qualifying Trip" (Dec. 13, 1940), *Toronto Daily Star*, "Newly Winged Mates Seek Lost Camp Borden Aviator" (Dec. 13, 1940), *New York Times*, "Five Canadian Fliers Lost" (Dec. 14, 1940) and others. In all, Camp Borden lost nine cadets and instructors to fatal crashes between October 30 and December 13, 1940.
To Those Who've Fail'd

December 1940

To those who've fail'd, in aspiration vast,
To unnam'd soldiers fallen in front on the lead,
To calm, devoted engineers—to over-ardent travelers—to pilots on their ships,
To many a lofty song and picture without recognition—I'd rear a laurel-cover'd monument,
High, high above the rest—To all cut off before their time,
Possess'd by some strange spirit of fire,
Quench'd by an early death.

- Walt Whitman, "To Those Who've Fail'd"

When the delivery boy handed him a telegram, Carl's throat closed over and the world seemed to shift beneath his feet.

But no, it wouldn't happen like this. Dr. and Mrs. Blythe were Shirley's official next of kin, and if anything telegram-worthy happened to him, Carl would only hear about it second-hand.

The typed message said only K. Eddy 515. Please. It wasn't until Carl was on the train headed west, a newspaper unfolded in his lap, that he saw the front-page item from Camp Borden — Wreck of One R.C.A.F Plane Recovered, No Trace of Second — and started putting pieces together.

It was an overnight train, but Carl couldn't sleep, picturing Shirley alone in the hotel, not sleeping either. When they pulled into Toronto's Union Station at noon, Carl was the first passenger off, dodging through the crowd and nearly running the few short blocks to the King Edward hotel.

A ruse or two later, he was standing before room 515, knocking and knocking again.

No answer.

Carl wrung his hands. Perhaps Shirley had only fallen asleep. But if he didn't answer the door soon, Carl might have to come up with some reasonable excuse to ask the manager to break down the door.

One final knock and the door cracked to admit Carl into the blue-smoke haze.

Shirley still wore his service-dress trousers, his tunic discarded on the floor and his tie hanging undone from his flapping collar. By the rawness of his eyes and the evidence of the ashtray, he had consumed nothing but cigarettes for however long he had been in the room.

"Is it Gil?" Carl asked, heart in his throat.

Shirley shook his head, but did not elaborate.

Carl sagged with relief. If it wasn't Gil, it could wait.

There was no point asking Shirley to narrate, not in this state. Instead, Carl focused on coaxing him into a bath. He sponged hot water over Shirley's shoulders until the knots were no longer visible to
the naked eye. Then he tucked him into bed and stroked his hair until he fell into a stiff, shallow sleep. There were new lines to his face that either hadn't been there in August, or hadn't been quite as noticeable in the gentle light reflecting off the lake.

As quietly as possible, Carl collected all the scattered bits of Shirley's uniform. He hung them person-shaped on a hanger on the outer doorknob with a note asking housekeeping to have them pressed. Carl left another note on the nightstand — Back soon. Stay here. — just in case Shirley woke to find him gone. He wouldn't get far without clothes anyway. Sleep. Then food. Those were the easy parts.

***

"I've gone back over it a hundred times," Shirley said, shaking his head and pushing away the remnants of a sausage roll. "I'm sure I assigned them to different search areas. They should never have been anywhere near one another!"

Carl refilled Shirley's cup with hot, strong tea. "From everything you've said, it was just a terrible accident. Do you really think you could have prevented it?"

Shirley pressed his lips together. "I should have gone myself. It's cowardly to send men on a mission and stay behind."

"And then who would have coordinated the search?" Carl asked, unimpressed. "Just because you were on the ground doesn't mean you weren't helping."

"I should have been in a cockpit!"

A retort gathered on the tip of Carl's tongue, but he swallowed it. Let McMullen scold; what Shirley needed was sympathy, even if he was a bloody fool.

"I know you feel awful over it," Carl said, placing a consoling hand on the knee peeking out from under Shirley's towel. "They were good men and it's a terrible loss."

For the first time in an hour, Shirley's posture eased. All through the telling, he had been coiled and brittle, sending Carl's reassurances pinging harmlessly off his armor. Now he slumped as much as Shirley ever slumped. Perhaps they might actually get somewhere now.

"It's only . . ." he began, "only . . . would I have sent them at all if it hadn't been Gil? Was I really being objective? Thinking clearly about the operation? I was so desperate to find him that I put all the others in danger."

"You make it sound like it was all your doing," Carl said gently. "But McMullen approved the search, didn't he? And you said everyone was eager to go. You didn't force them."

"No," Shirley conceded. "But I did assign them their coordinates. I might have made a mistake. I might have put them too close together. I . . ."

Carl reached across the little table and caught Shirley's hands. "Stop. It was an accident. I don't think you made a mistake. But even if you did, it was still an accident. Two planes crashing into one another in midair . . . no one could have predicted that."

"It should have been me up there," Shirley repeated. "Even if they agreed to go, I should have gone, too. Shared the risk with them . . ."

"If you had gone, they still would have collided."
"I could have found Gil myself," Shirley muttered. "I did go up, you know. Afterward. I... I found one of the wrecks. After the rest came back, I went out and found Ramsay's wreck on the shore of the lake. Trent must have gone into the water. I looked and looked..."

Carl tightened his hold, trying not to imagine the snarl of twisted metal jutting from a dirty crater in the snow, and failing utterly.

"That's why McMullen sent me on leave after the funerals. I led the recovery. It was..." he stopped himself short, and Carl wasn't sure whether or not he should be thankful that Shirley had regained enough self-control to censor himself. "...it was very bad," he finished feebly.

"You led the recovery?" Carl echoed, unable to banish images of what that might have entailed.

"It was the least I could do." Shirley blew out a long breath, drawing his hands away and dropping his head into them. "How do people do this, Kit? The officer bit?"

It was an honest question, but not one Carl had an answer for. He did, however, feel a surge of affection for the man asking, who had done what needed to be done in an awful situation, holding himself together until Carl arrived to take over the job.

"You're asking the wrong person," Carl said, unable to suppress a tender smile. "I was in the Army three full years — I was at Vimy Ridge and Hill 70 and Passchendaele and Amiens — and never got promoted, not even once!"

"You must have been pretty hopeless."

"Even so!" Carl protested. "Couldn't they have made me a corporal as a courtesy? I was there for years."

Shirley sat up, rubbing life back into his face with both hands.

"It should be easy," he said. "It's just a matter of figuring out the greatest benefit for the smallest risk. But when it was Gil out there..."

Carl shook his head. "It's different when it's one of your own."

"They were all my own."

"Gil's different."

"So that's it? I just throw logic and proportion out the window as soon as things get personal? I'm no officer. I told Sam that once, and it was true."

Was it? In Carl's experience, men loved the officers who were willing to share their hardships and respected those who demanded high standards from both themselves and the men under their command. A good officer was brave but not reckless, and never risked a man's life unless it was absolutely necessary. Carl supposed it was possible that there might be men who would make better officers than Shirley, but if winning the war hinged on finding many of them, Canadians might as well start brushing up on their German.

"You could write to Jem, you know," Carl said gently. "He might have some advice about keeping balance between caring for the men and sending them into danger."

"You think Jem kept balance?" Shirley asked in surprise. "Maybe. But even if he did, Jem was an officer for about ten minutes before he got captured. I don't know whether he ever ordered anyone
over the top."

"Ken did. Ask him."

Shirley laughed at that, a short, incredulous heave of breath that ended in a whimper. "God, it was so bad, Kit. I can't even tell you. Rilla was all pale and Ken was so angry. He wasn't even wrong — it was my fault."

Oh ho, so that was it. Now things made a bit more sense.

"I never thought I'd hear Ken Ford's words coming out of your mouth," Carl said.

"He was right, though," Shirley said despondently. "Gil was my responsibility. I lost him."

"And you found him."

"Found himself, didn't he?" Shirley grumbled. "The little shit. I came back after finding the crash site, expecting to find Rilla weeping over his frozen corpse, and there he was in the infirmary, eating Jell-O."

"Did you scold him?"

"Course not. I was so damn glad to see him. But still . . . you say you'd give anything to keep them safe, but . . . four lives? For one? It doesn't check out."

Carl reclaimed one of the broad, brown hands and bent briefly to kiss it, noting the faint lightness of the watch outline on Shirley's bare wrist.

"Mathematics aren't a lot of help when there's someone you care about in the mix."

Shirley sighed in exasperation. "Doesn't that prove that I can't be trusted? I sent four men to their deaths for nothing. Worse than nothing. For my own selfish reasons."

"It wasn't for nothing. The went to save a fellow airman."

"Well, good work," Shirley muttered. "Saved him so he can go off to goddamn Fighter Command."

"He was always going to do that eventually. You helped him do it well. Now he can go stop the Nazis from invading England. And you'll stay here and train others to help him."

"I should be the one helping him."

That got Carl's attention. This flying instructor business was bad enough, but it was merely a pale echo of the long-ago days when he had expected word of Shirley's death to come at any moment. He'd been afraid in the trenches, of course, but always much less afraid of gas or bayonets or shells than of opening a letter from home that started with, Dear Carl, I'm afraid we've had a telegram . . . .

"You did help him," he said as if picking his way across a minefield. "You taught him to fly in bad conditions. You made sure he had the skills he needed to keep himself safe."

"There's no keeping safe over there!" Shirley said, his voice rising. "The RAF can barely defend London, let alone go on the offensive! The Brits are already exhausted, the Yanks refuse to get involved, and we're sending over brand new, untested pilots who are lucky if they complete two missions before a recovery crew has to hose what's left of them out of a wreck . . . ."
Abruptly, Shirley stood and began to pace the room, towel flapping around his knees. His long legs meant it was only possible to take three strides in any direction, but he took them with such purpose that it seemed he might burst the walls and sail into the night.

"You're doing everything you can . . ."

"I'm not!"

Carl almost said, *what else could you do?*, but didn't want to hear the answer.

"You're needed here," he said instead, not bothering to clarify whether he meant in Canada or at Camp Borden or in this room.

"I'm needed *there*."

Carl stood up and planted himself in Shirley's path, feet spread wide, arms folded tight as he stared him down with one blue eye. The back of his throat was burning and his fingers dug into his arms, but he still managed to speak steadily. "Your maths are off again," he said coolly enough to halt Shirley's pacing.

"What?"

"How many pilots do you graduate from Camp Borden these days? Now that the full program's all up and running?"

Shirley frowned. "About fifty a class."

"And a class every month?"

"Every three weeks."

"So every three weeks you send fifty pilots to Britain. Call it . . . eight hundred a year?"

"Eight hundred sixty-seven," Shirley muttered.

"So you're thinking you want to go to England with Gil because one Shirley Blythe in a cockpit is worth *eight hundred sixty-seven* other pilots?"

"Maybe."

"Christ, you're arrogant. What are you going to do? Win the whole fucking war single-handed? The next Billy Bishop, right here. Why not just fly to Berlin, kill Hitler, and send everybody home right now?"

Carl had not meant to be funny, but Shirley snorted all the same. "Well, now I know there's really a war on if Carl Meredith is swearing!"

"I do swear," Carl said drily. "Sometimes."

"When you're really upset, you say *Christ*."

"*Christ.*"

"But I don't think I've *ever* heard you say *fuck* before."

"Well, you're a real *fucking* idiot."
"Am I?" Shirley came to stand toe-to-toe with Carl, who refused to back down. The whole looming, taciturn posture might intimidate green cadets, but it was less effective on someone who could close his eye at any moment and conjure gangly, dripping, laughing Shirley standing soaked in the shallows of the Glen Pond.

"You are. That crash wasn't your fault and you know it. You can't win the war on your own and you know that, too. You're just scared for Gil."

"Am I?"

"Yes. And that's alright. It's very hard to watch someone you love run toward danger. Or fly, I suppose."

Shirley had the decency to look abashed. He had memorized all those letters once upon a time; did he remember them now? Don't be in such a hurry to come over here, Shirley. I thought I knew what it would be like, but I didn't . . . Don't enlist, Shirley. I mean it. Carl hadn't been able to delay him then, not even for a single day, and it seemed unlikely that he'd have any more success now.

"I would do it, you know," Shirley said quietly.

"Do what?"

"A one-way mission to Berlin. Kill Hitler. If the numbers were ever that good — two lives to stop all this misery . . ."

"Two?"

"Sure. His and mine. I owe four, Carl."

Carl read the anguish in Shirley's face and his heart sank miserably. It wasn't a matter of reason or mathematics. Only a matter of time.

"I know you would," Carl said. "Please don't."

31 December 1940

Willemstad, Curaçao

My Dear Carl,

Forgive me for taking so long to reply to your letter of this past summer. I wished to make some quiet inquiries to a few colleagues and you know what it is to send overseas mail these days. Fortunately, I was able to get a letter through to a friend in Scotland and another to a colleague who has moved his family to the United States from Oxford for safety's sake. Rest assured that I used only my own name and presented my questions as arising from my own observations.

I am pleased to report that both of my correspondents were utterly unsurprised by the presence of single-sex couples among various avian populations. My erstwhile Oxfordian informs me most reliably that he has observed several instances of male-male pairs of penguins in his researches in the Antarctic, even witnessing some that have attempted to hatch rocks that they treat as tenderly as they would any egg. Somewhat frustratingly, he neglected to relate more particulars, choosing instead to digress into a diatribe on American manners, which I will spare you.

The news from Scotland was equally interesting and a good bit more informative. My friend there
is not university-affiliated, having given up her own work to care for her family. However, her children are quite grown up (though, as she says, not yet grown up enough to leave the nest, thank God), and she has made a habit of observing the greylag geese that inhabit the country around her home. She has made very good notes regarding the local population over a number of years. Her observations are so detailed that she has gotten to know individual birds and given them names.

She tells me quite reliably that in each of the last eleven years, the proportion of male-male couples among the greylag resident on her estate has remained between 16% and 19% of all mated couples. The greylag mate for life, as I am sure you know, and she reports that the male-male couples are quite as committed as any others, engaging in all activities and behaviors that one might expect from any mated pair. One male-male couple in particular have become her especial friends, living as they do along one of her favorite walking paths (she has named them Achilles and Patroclus).

She does not report any female-female couples among her greylag, but she does note another curious feature of their "domestic arrangements" as you call them. In one case, an established male-female pair took a second male into their family. My correspondent informs me that all three acted as parents to the goslings hatched from their nest and that the two males continued as a pair after the death of the female.

As to the evolutionary significance of this bonding (which occurs at such extraordinarily high frequency) my friend provides no ready answer. However, she has observed anecdotally that Achilles and Patroclus are excellent lookouts and do more than their fair share of guarding over their flock while the others are feeding. She says that they are not abnormally aggressive toward other geese, but if a fox or a stoat should dare to come near their gaggle, they become quite fearsome.

Truly, she has much to say on the subject and such wonderfully thorough notes that I have encouraged her to write up an article — not just about single-sex pair bonding, but about the behavior of greylag geese in general. If she obliges me, I will be sure to send a copy to you, even if it is not possible for her to have it published in an academic journal. As you well know, so much knowledge goes unrecognized due to the prejudice against naturalists who lack a university affiliation. Perhaps someone will claim to "discover" this when it is more convenient, never caring that others have known it long before.

There now, I have written quite enough about birds — though when can I indulge such enthusiasm, if not in my too-infrequent letters to you? I must observe the niceties of society and tell you that we are all very well here. Bram is putting the finishing touches on an encyclopedia entry about elephant beetles, which means that he has gathered several live specimens. Lotte and Antje find them enchanting and have taken to carrying them around on their shoulders like parrots and chattering to them in both Dutch and English. Pieter is coming along in his drawing — I enclose for you a small watercolor of a conch that I must say is a remarkable piece for a boy of nine, though perhaps there is a bit of maternal pride coloring my assessment.

As to my own work, I have taken on a commission to illustrate for the same encyclopedia company that has given Bram so much work lately. It is engaging work, even if I do miss being away on expedition. Perhaps when the children are older we shall all go back together. And of course I must be perfectly frank and acknowledge that I would not be able to draw a single feather if not for being able to employ both a nanny and a cook, which is regarded as an extravagance in Canada, but is quite the usual habit of white people on the islands here.

Tell me all your news, Carl. We are so fortunate to have our family safe here, though we've heard nothing from Bram's family in Holland since the spring. Please know that you are always in my
prayers, as is Shirley. I know that this is a very difficult season. Tell Una that I know I owe her a letter and send her a kiss by this one. In spite of everything, her letters have been quite cheerful lately, and I cherish them, as I do you all.

Love to you always,

Nellie

Notes:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers 
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all

- Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

Shirley found the Australian students exhausting. The first group had arrived in November and the second group just before Christmas, not that Shirley had noticed at the time. When he returned from leave, they seemed to be everywhere. They had an unflagging bonhomie that turned every blizzard into a snowball fight and every walk from barracks to hangar into a bawdy concert. They smiled an awful lot.

But even Shirley had to admit that the Aussies had sent their best in both the first cohort and the second. When their high spirits bubbled over — for example, when LAC Kellogg pushed his Harvard to 400 miles per hour, causing enough engine damage to make Sergeant Dixon swear a blue streak — the most effective method of discipline was confining them to quarters, away from the fun.

There were other new arrivals, too: New Zealanders, Newfoundlanders, and the occasional Free Frenchman, besides the Yanks who came in on their own conscience and were not turned away. They were good pilots, and if Shirley sometimes heard them grouse about Bloody Bastard Blythe and his impossible standards, well, some measure of distance was best for everyone.

One drizzly evening, the infantry side of Camp Borden sent over their resident variety act to entertain the flyboys. The concert promised to be a jolly affair, featuring a twelve-piece swing band, a guitar-strumming cowboy, various comedians, and the operatic stylings of Lt. Ross Hamilton, who was famous for his performance as the buxom, be-sequined soprano Marjorie. So famous, in fact, that Marjorie had appeared in an official government recruitment film — "Letter from Camp Borden" — that played in cinemas from Vancouver to Charlottetown.

"Are you sure you don't want to come along, sir?" Davenport asked, bouncing on the balls of his feet when he came to deliver the day's mail.

"You go along, Davenport," Shirley said, as eager to have an evening to himself as he was to avoid spoiling their fun. "Take the rest of the night off."

Davenport’s thankyou sir was shouted over his shoulder as he vanished through the door, tripping down the echoing hall.

Shirley allowed himself the luxury of kicking off his boots and lounging on the bed as he sifted through his letters. One from Carl, of course, but he'd save that for last. A thick envelope from Di and a parcel from Mum, and a nearly flat letter all the way from England.

The thin flap parted readily to reveal Gil’s chaotic chicken-scratch, making up in enthusiasm what it lacked in both length and formality. Shirley smiled at the exuberance radiating from the page — gee, Uncle Shirley, you should see these Spitfires, boy do they have some pep to them! — and
read it through twice. Gil's training was nearly complete; any day now, he would take that Spitfire up on a real mission — he might be doing it right this very minute. The weather would be clearing soon and there would be an offensive somewhere, but East or West, Gil would be in the air. All the slow breathing and trust-his-training in the world wasn't quite enough, no matter how hard Shirley tried to believe Carl that they were all where they could do the most good.

Di’s letter was more sedate, filled with enough jokes and tidbits from the hospital that she almost managed to cover up her disappointment at the cancellation of their planned reunion at Aster House. Shirley did feel a pang of conscience over that — with Sylvia gone to England, Kingsport must be a lonely spot for all it was so busy.

Second-hand news from Charlottetown was that Nan and Jerry had given Beatrice permission to join the Canadian Women's Army Corps as a typist after she graduated from Charlottetown Ladies' Academy next month. According to Di, the only obstacle was that Bea was as slight as Nan had been at her age and needed to clear the 105-pound weight requirement. *I have advised her to adopt a strict diet of cream puffs, beefsteak, and calisthenics, and to enlist her sisters in cheering her to the finish line. Dettie in particular has the makings of a fine drill sergeant — you might consider taking her on if you ever find you need help.* Shirley chuckled, simultaneously pitying the officer who got a daughter of the Charlottetown Merediths for a secretary and envying the consequent efficiency of his administrative operations.

The parcel from Mother contained a book, a tin of homemade toffee, and a letter. Mother wrote mostly of the Ingleside children: Ceci's top marks in English; Jemmy's zeal for the new Victory Loan campaign; assurances of Wally's and Sam's good health. It was the sort of letter she might write to anybody. All except the end:

*This evening, I was sitting under the trellis in the garden, watching the daffodils nod in the twilight breeze off the harbour. I once told Susan that after I was dead, I would come back to earth in daffodil time to visit all the dear spots I had loved in life. She did not think much of that, as you may well imagine, and scolded me for believing in ghosts. But I thought of her this evening, and of you, and of the day you came into the world so suddenly and precariously. Happy birthday, sweetheart.*

*Please accept this book with my love. It is not my intention to lure you into a literary club or any other sort of confidence. I offer this as a gift only because it made me think of you and I dared let myself imagine that you might find something worthwhile in it.*

*I once told you that a line of poetry was not a convincing argument. I was so very wrong and have been throughly ashamed of myself ever since. You were right and I am so desperately sorry.*

Shirley folded the letter and sighed. It had been years since *the iron had entered into his soul* and *the bitterness of the old grievance was in no whit allayed or softened by time.* And yet, Shirley was *conscious of an odd feeling of regret.* He was not one to turn the other cheek; he had walked away from that creed a long time ago and never looked back. Still, on a practical level, it did take a lot of energy to tend his *outraged dignity* and the truth was that he was tired.

Was that forgiveness, then? Letting go of the righteous pain of a still-raw wound because it cost too much to keep licking it open forever? What did it mean to forgive someone who didn't deserve to be forgiven? Carl might say that was kindness; Una would call it grace. Shirley doubted he had enough of either to go giving it away.

The volume was *Poems of Emily Dickinson.* Shirley opened it, but did not get past the endpapers. There was an original sonnet there, inked in his mother's flowing script. Had she ever written him a poem before? If she had, he couldn't remember it.
I built my nest of dreams upon the shore
And feathered it with down from my own breast,
Awaiting chicks to nurture and adore,
My songs the blithest trilling of the blessed.
When new-hatched joy was cruelly subdued,
Not even precious gems could compensate;
Though each returning spring increased my brood
And feathered hope perched singing on my gate.
Each fledgling bore my heart in soaring flight:
A dauntless rooster and a thrilling lark,
A double-yolk that trebled my delight,
A nightingale that warbled in the dark.

But surely there's another loved as dear;  
I chirp my penitence and hope he'll hear.

Shirley ran a thumb over the place where his name-pun marked the volta. Very like Mum to write a poem as a gift and still make it about all herself. No, that was uncharitable. She had written her children into a little word puzzle and made his name the keystone. It wasn't nothing.

He broke off a piece of toffee and lay back on the pillow with the book, letting the candy dissolve into smooth sweetness on his tongue as he began to read.

"Is it really alright to plant them this early?" Father Daniel said, pushing rust-colored earth over the spinach seeds Una was sowing in the rectory garden.

"Yes. They like the cold. You leave the next row empty and plant it three weeks from today so that you won't have too much spinach all at once."

Father Daniel chuckled. "I've learned my lesson there and no mistake. I don't know if I can stand to plant any squash at all this year."

The rectory garden was a bare rectangle of churned soil raked into passably parallel rows. The mossy reek of last year's ripe compost and yesterday's warm rain promised future abundance. For now, there were only spinach seeds in a sproutless row and an empty trellis waiting for pea tendrils.

"Don't plant the squash yet," Una said, dusting her hands on one of Mrs. Williams' spare aprons. "Nor the tomatoes either. I suspect you planted those too early last year and that's why they didn't take."

"Perhaps," Father Daniel frowned. "I worried that they wouldn't have time to ripen if I left them too late, though."

Una stood, surveying the spinach row with satisfaction. "You can start the tomatoes indoors. If you grow the seedlings in trays in the kitchen, they'll sprout safe and sound and then you can transplant them out here when the ground is warmer."

"How will I know when the time is right?"

Una ducked her head. "I'll tell you."

She gathered up trowel, seed packets, and the other impedimenta of her task, tucking them safely into a basket with a borrowed pair of Father Daniel's gloves. She had arrived that morning for their
scheduled lesson only to find the priest muttering over an almanac, penciling in timid notations and erasing them immediately. His mind was clearly miles away from Introduction to Ascetical Theology, caught up in the more temporal concerns of carrot husbandry. Daunted by the prospect of another year of horticultural catastrophe, he had thrown himself upon Una's mercy, spending an hour peppering her with questions as she drew up a planting plan. A spot of lunch and a sip of tea, and then out into the feeble April sunshine for the practical portion of the unplanned lesson.

"You're quite an accomplished gardener," Father Daniel said, leaning on the fence and dabbing his brow with a handkerchief.

"Hardly," Una demurred. "Our kitchen garden is just enough to keep us fed and have a bit left over for the Newgates."

"How are the Newgates these days?"

"Doing alright, I think. Archie's pension came through. Only 10%, but it's still a help. And Mr. Pelham is letting them pay this year's lease when they can."

"That's Christian of him," Father Daniel said, picking at a patch of drying mud on his cuff. "Do you know, Miss Meredith... I've been thinking about what you said after the festival..."

"No," Una interrupted, hugging the basket tight against her stomach. "I shouldn't have said anything. It wasn't my place."

"It certainly was. Don't you see? That's the trouble. This parish is very much your place. Even after two years, I still feel an interloper among the people. Not that they haven't been very kind, of course, but... I still don't know them as I should. And they don't know me."

He did not seem agitated, only thoughtful.

"It takes time," Una agreed.

"Yes, but the right kind of time," Father Daniel said earnestly.

He took a breath as if to say something more, thought better of it, and then sallied forth again: "I have been thinking... one of the required courses for your program is the Deaconess Practicum. You're supposed to do service in the community and I'm supposed to report on your progress. It seems a bit silly. So I thought... perhaps we might turn the tables. I could accompany you when you visit people — not just the ones who need sacraments — and help you, I suppose. You could show me what to do."

Una considered the priest in his mud-spattered coveralls, an uncharacteristically bashful cast to his expression as he waited for her answer. Standing by the garden fence in coveralls, swiping at a dirty streak on his face with a dirtier sleeve, he might have been anyone's father or husband, a little nervous to attempt something new.

"I think they'd like that," she said.

"Really?"

Una was forced to smile. "Perhaps not at first. It's a great honor to have a priest in your house, and most people will want to serve you tea with their best china and not let you anywhere near the kitchen. But they'll get used to you."

"You'll help me, though, won't you?"
How many times had Una Meredith heard that question? The answer was always yes, of course. It was only the thrill that was new.

"Yes," she said, fixing a flyaway strand that had escaped from her black braid.

"Wonderful! Tomorrow?"

Una nodded, keeping her face carefully hidden as she carried the gardening tools back to the rectory.

Notes:

*AOGG Chapter 28: “An Unfortunate Lily Maid,” cobbled together from a few sentences.*
The next morning, Una rapped at the rectory door at nine. The smile wilted on her lips when the
door opened to reveal a scowling Mrs. Williams, feather duster still in hand.

"Hello, Mrs. Williams," she said pleasantly. "I've come for my lesson with Father Daniel."

"Too early for lessons," the housekeeper grumbled. "Father Caldwell is working in the garden, and
I'm still cleaning the parlor."

"Oh, we won't be in your way. We only need the kitchen for a little while, and then we'll go out."

This did not mollify Mrs. Williams to any great extent, but she did step aside, muttering that priests
didn't belong in the kitchen at all and that they had better leave things in decent order.

Una slipped into the dark hall, hurrying to remove herself from Mrs. Williams's line of sight. In the
kitchen, she set her basket of ingredients on the table and snuck a peek into next week's stew,
gurgling sluggishly in the largest of the iron pots. Shades of Aunt Martha, but it looked hearty
enough.

A spring breeze ruffled the gingham curtains framing the window over the sink. Una leaned
against the basin, looking down over the back lawn to the garden, where Father Daniel was raking
compost into the rows set out for onions and carrots, a wide-brimmed sun hat shading his face. He
seemed intent on his task, the rake moving in a regular rhythm as he worked his way down the
row. When he reached the end, he rested a moment, turning his face toward the rectory.

Before conscious thought intruded, Una had raised her hand in greeting and called, "Daniel!"

This was followed by a little yelp, hopefully less audible than her ill-considered shout. Una bit her
lip, hoping that perhaps Father Daniel would assume that his rightful honorific had been lost as it
crossed the lawn, rather than omitted. He had certainly heard her, though, and beamed at the
window as he returned her wave and set aside his rake.

Una withdrew into the kitchen, chastising herself for the lapse as she tied on an apron and patted
her hair flat. There was enough blurring of lines already, what with the new interpretation
of Deaconess Practicum, to say nothing of indelible memories of motorcycle rides in the rain. The
situation called for decorum.

"Good morning, Father Daniel," she said emphatically when he stepped through the kitchen door.

The priest chuckled as he removed mud-caked boots, setting them beside the trays of tomato
seedlings. "Good morning, Miss Meredith. Forgive me; I was not expecting you quite so early.
Allow me to go change and then we can be on our way."

"I came early because we need to bake first."

"Bake?"

"Yes," Una said, beginning to unpack her ingredients. "The first rule of visiting is that you should
never go empty-handed."
Father Daniel surveyed the butter and onions and butcher-paper packages dubiously, but went off to change out of his gardening clothes. By the time he returned, Una had already mixed up a pat of pastry dough and set it to cool in the ice box. She handed him an apron to preserve his black clerical shirt as they chopped carrots and browned pork in the skillet, overpowering the swampy fug of the stew with the sharper scents of cloves and garlic.

"It smells like Christmas," Father Daniel observed, bending low over the skillet.

Una was not quite prepared to delegate the task of rolling and cutting dough, but she allowed Daniel to fill and crimp the pastry shells, arranging the little half-moons on baking sheets for the oven. He was absurdly delighted when they came out crisp and fragrant, even more so when Una demonstrated the marvelous powers of an egg wash on the second batch.

"We'll bring these on our visits," Una explained. "One thing you must understand is that people will try to feed you wherever you go, even if they haven't anything to spare. You must never leave them poorer than you found them."

"I'm afraid I can't actually cook on my own," Father Daniel said, sliding another round of pies onto the cooling rack. "And I doubt they'd thank me for..." his eye slid to the churning stew.

"Then plant an extra row of each vegetable," Una said crisply. "Even people who won't take charity will find it difficult to say no to a visitor sharing the bounty of his garden."

The solemn nod did not obscure the laughing crinkles gathered at the corners of his eyes. "I believe I have a reputation to live up to on that score. Perhaps I'll plant more squash after all."

"No, please!" Una laughed. "We've only just recovered! Perhaps carrots this year; if they run riot, at least we can make cake."

"A bargain," Father Daniel chuckled.

When the pies were cool and the kitchen tidy enough to escape Mrs. Williams's glowering sanction, Una and Father Daniel packed the pies into baskets and set off on their rounds. They chatted as they walked, about gardening mostly, though church affairs always managed to creep in somehow. A late Easter had meant that the Altar Guild had been more than ordinarily pleased with the floral arrangements; the Munro family meant to commission a brass memorial plaque for their Charlie; there was some internal dissension in the choir that neither of them dared approach near enough to decipher.

Una was surprised when the Mitchell residence appeared before them, not having realized that it was such an easy walk from St. Elizabeth's. The visit turned out to be easier than anticipated as well, since Mr. Mitchell was wholly recovered from his most recent tussle with malaria. The children, elated now that they need not tiptoe around the house, fell upon the pies like a horde of locusts and got a round scolding from their mother for behaving like ruffians in front of a priest. Father Daniel assured her that his presence required no bottling of youthful exuberance and settled in to talk war news with Mr. Mitchell while Una helped Mrs. Mitchell hang out the wash.

The second visit was calmer; Mrs. Foster was eager to show off her newborn son and to share the wonderful news that her husband had been promoted from Ordinary to Able Seaman. Her sister served tea in cups whose gilt rims were chipped in several places, and accepted a basket of pies with earnest gratitude.

The last stop was a call on old Mr. Pelham, the Newgates' landlord, who had broken a hip in the last icy week of winter and had not yet recovered. The comfortable, mansard-roofed house was not
on Una's regular rounds, as the Pelhams were prosperous enough to regard gifts of pie with indifference. But Una genuinely liked the old man, and stopped off to trade the last of the pies to a neighbor in exchange for a generous bouquet of her marvelous daffodils.

"Does Mr. Pelham like daffodils?" Father Daniel asked as they stood side-by-side on the porch, waiting for admittance.

"Most people do, don't they?"

As it happened, most people did not include Mr. Pelham's son Dennis, who answered the door with a sneer.

"My father is unwell," he said, preparing to close the door in their faces.

"Yes, I know," Una said resolutely. "But Mrs. Newgate has asked me to call on him particularly, and I think you will find that he does not mind the intrusion."

Dennis frowned and seemed on the point of refusing.

"I don't believe we've met," Father Daniel said, extending a hand to the man. "I am the Reverend Daniel Caldwell, rector of St. Elizabeth's Church. Very pleased to meet you, Mr. . . . Pelham, is it?"

Mr. Pelham the younger could hardly refuse to introduce himself to a priest, not even one who flashed a smug moue at Una as they followed him up the stairs to his father's bedroom.

"Why if it isn't Miss Meredith!" exclaimed the elderly Mr. Pelham from his nest of pillows. He set aside the book he had been reading and struggled to sit up straighter, grimacing against the pain.

"Mr. Pelham," Una smiled, bending to kiss his cheek. "It's been far too long. Please accept my apologies along with these flowers."

"No need for apologies, child. I'm pleased to see you. Dennis!" — this with a snap of the wizened fingers — "Fetch a vase and do see that someone brings up tea for Miss Meredith and her gentleman friend."

Dennis left the room muttering as Father Daniel introduced himself and Una brought chairs close enough to the bed that they could chat comfortably.

"Now, I will warn you, Padre," Mr. Pelham said, "I am a dyed-in-the-wool Methodist and I attend the Methodist preaching every time I'm able and have little enough patience for all your stained glass and Common-Prayer falderal."

Father Daniel laughed. "I'm afraid I've left both back at St. Elizabeth's. I can fetch the Common-Prayer Book if you'd like to scold it in person, but the stained glass is awfully heavy."

"He'll do," Mr. Pelham said with a wink to Una.

"Now, Mr. Pelham," Una said, flushing pink as she took his hand, "we can't have you teasing members of the clergy or they won't ever come back."

"I'm afraid I don't have much reason to look forward to many future visits, unless they be with the Almighty," Mr. Pelham said, not unhappily. "So why don't you tell me all the news while I can get it. How are the Newgates getting along?"

They chatted awhile, Mr. Pelham taking occasional swipes at the Church of England to see what he
could get away with and Father Daniel parrying amiably. Eventually, a gray-faced woman in impeccable black silk swept in to introduce herself as Jane Pelham and serve them tea from a silver tray.

"Don't sip yet," Mr. Pelham whispered when Jane had disappeared back into the hall. "Let me drink first so you'll have a warning if it's poisoned."

"Mr. Pelham!" Una exclaimed, though beside her Father Daniel vibrated with laughter. "Whyever would you say such a thing!"

"Oh, they're waiting for me to die, the both of them," Mr. Pelham said, slurping his tea. "You know, it's a real blessing that God allowed that Jane and my Dennis to marry one another, so they can only make each other miserable and not go spreading it around."

Father Daniel spluttered into his cup and even Una felt the urge to giggle was nearly past enduring.

"They'll inherit the house," Mr. Pelham said comfortably. "And there's enough money put by to keep them happy, if they're capable of the sentiment. I've already given the rest to the Methodist Relief Committee for the orphans and refugees. Lord knows there are enough of them nowadays. No sense in waiting for these old bones to crumble into dust before they get their cheque."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Pelham," Una smiled. "Though I hope you won't leave us too soon."

"I'm saved, Miss Meredith. Don't you grudge my home-going."

"Be that as it may," said Father Daniel, "would you mind very much if we prayed together? Nothing out of the Common Prayer, I promise."

Mr. Pelham balanced his teacup on the stack of books beside him and reached out his hands, one to Una and one to Father Daniel, who prayed,

Merciful Father, we pray that you will wrap Mr. Pelham in your love and comfort him in his time of illness. Please guard the refugees and orphans whom Mr. Pelham has remembered so generously, and extend your mercy to all who suffer.

"And please tell my Emily that I will be arriving shortly, so she needn't fret much longer," Mr. Pelham added.

Amen.

Later, walking past Lowbridge High on the way back to St. Elizabeth's, Father Daniel sounded thoughtful.

"So that's what you do every day?" he asked.

"It's not so different from what you do," Una said.

"It is, I think," Father Daniel mused. "When I'm called to give sacraments to the sick or attend a deathbed, I've always tried to keep the proceedings formal. Solemn. So that they have weight. This was . . . fun."

"It was a good day," Una agreed. "Sometimes it's a bit messier, when people actually need help nursing or doing unpleasant chores. But yes. Sometimes, it's . . . fun."

"Did I pass?"
"Pass?"

"It's a lesson, isn't it?" he asked. "Deaconess Practicum. You're the expert."

Una directed her smile downward, beaming at the red dirt road as they turned into the St. Elizabeth's lot. "I'll be sure to write up a formal report," she said.

"Do," he said, stopping at the step and turning to face her. "And I want to go to the others as well. The ones that are less fun. Sick people and unpleasant chores. Don't just bring me to the Mr. Pelhams."

"There aren't many like Mr. Pelham."

"I have no doubt."

They stood facing one another before the rectory door, Una fidgeting intently with a loop of thread that had come loose on the hem of her basket lining. This was the time for some sort of farewell, though what sort, exactly, remained unclear. They had been together all day, cooking and walking and talking and visiting together, and Una had not felt shy at all, but all of a sudden, she found that she could not look up. What was the matter with her? It was only Father Daniel.

The pause was definitely awkward now and Una knew she must break it. Must say something or do something or at the very least look up and meet Father Daniel's eye. She could do that. She would. In three, two, one . . .

The rectory door swung open, the sudden motion making Una jump. She did look up, into the equally startled face of Mrs. Williams.

"Goodness!" the housekeeper exclaimed. "Forgive me, Father Caldwell, I did not expect you to be loitering on the stoop. I'm just on my way out now. Your supper is on the stove and meals for the week in the icebox."

"Thank you, Mrs. Williams," Father Daniel called as she departed. "I hope you'll have a very pleasant evening."

"I'm afraid I must go, too," Una said. "I have supper to make at home as well."

"When can we go out again? Not tomorrow, I'm afraid I must prepare my sermon. And not Sunday, of course."

"Monday, then?" Una squeaked. "Though of course I'll see you on Sunday. That is, it's not my week to prepare the altar, but I'll be at the service, of course."

"Of course. I look forward to seeing you there."

"Yes."

"Alright."

Oh, why was this so awkward? All she had to do was leave.

"Goodbye, then," Una said, apparently to her toes. She kept her steel-buckled shoes firmly in the center of her field of vision all the way across the yard to the place where she had left her tricycle. She did not look back, not even when Father Daniel called his own farewell as she pedaled away. There was no chance either would ever admit it, but she thought he might have said, "Goodbye,
Una.

Carl woke in total darkness. When he tried to open his eyes, his head throbbed so intensely that he retched. The whole right side of his face was an indecipherable agony. He couldn't bear to reach up to touch it for fear of what he might find. Or not find. A blur of impressions: bare dirt beneath him, moaning nearby, a tang of blood in the breezeless air, a small, warm something quivering in his tunic pocket.

Cricket.

Carl reached up to stroke the rat, who chirped a greeting. Wherever he was, he wasn't alone. "Take that one," said a businesslike voice. A woman's voice, speaking English. A woman? Here? Close at hand, there was a scuffling of boots, a grunt, and a man groaned as he was lifted up and away. Something brushed against Carl’s arm as they moved the wounded man. Wounded. Yes, a wounded man was being carried away. Carl focused on Cricket, the tiny heart under his hand beating so fast it felt like a purr.

Someone crouched in the vacant space at Carl's side and he jumped at the touch on his shoulder. "Be still, Private," she said placidly. "I'm going to take a look under this dressing."

Carl licked his lips, but his throat was completely dry. He could only whisper, "Where am I?"

"You're at the Casualty Clearing Station."

"My head . . ."

"May I take a look?"

Carl nodded, gasping at the pain that jolted his skull when he moved. The bandage was coming loose under the nurse’s capable fingers, but even when it fell away, Carl still could not see. The nurse clucked her tongue.

"We'll get you into a bed as soon as the orderlies come back," she said briskly as she re-wrapped.

Carl had to know. "Please. How bad is it?"

The nurse did not answer right away, but when she did, she said, “It’s not as bad I thought it would be. But I expect you'll be going home."

Then she was moving away, on to another patient.

Home? Home to the Glen or home as in my heav'nly home is bright and fair?

Carl kept one hand on Cricket, but slipped the other underneath, feeling for the little lump of silver pinned to his shirt. It was still there. Whatever happened, he hadn’t lost it.

Cricket squirmed, and Carl knew what had to be done. A hospital was no place for a rat, not even one as soft and sympathetic as Cricket. The orderlies would return at any moment. Moving gingerly, Carl scooped the little fellow-mortal out of his tunic and dared one last caress before setting him down in the dirt.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Now go before anyone sees you."
Carl woke with a start, chest heaving. His nightshirt and pillow were damp with sweat, and the sheets tangled around his feet. A furry body much too big to be a rat was pressed against his side, making soft noises of concern.

*Mugsy.*

*Just Mugsy.*

Moonlight through the curtains cast a pale, silver light over the bedroom, bright enough for Carl to see with one good eye. The washbasin. The cluttered dresser. The little china bowl on the nightstand where he placed Shirley’s RFC wings when he took them out of his breast pocket each night. He’d forgotten once and spent an awful hour searching through the laundry, thinking they were gone forever.

Carl had found them then, and he found them now. They were cool and solid in his palm, the sharp points digging in as he squeezed.

With the other hand, Carl patted the side of his face. He’d lived with the scars from Amiens longer than he’d lived without them, though they weren’t usually the ones that tormented him in the night. Over the years, his most frequent visitors had been Sgt. Donovan burning in the barn, and the fly-eyed men of his section in their gas masks, and the slippery, spongy corpses underfoot in the trenches near Mouquet Farm. Every now and then, it would be an unburied German soldier rotting on the wire who had become a sort of landmark, or a wounded horse screaming as it dragged its guts through the mud near Ypres. Then there were the plane crashes, but Carl didn't like to think of those, even to tally them. All told, a visit from Cricket was really one of his more welcome nightmares.

Muggins whimpered. She was warm and soft, and so was the bed. Warm and soft and real. Carl dug his fingers into her fur, relishing the closeness of the strong, solid little body. He wouldn’t sleep again tonight — he was an old hand by now and didn’t harbor unrealistic expectations. Better to get up than try in vain to sleep and end up spending hours lingering in the twilight with its monstrous shadows.

Carl eased himself out of bed and traded his clammy nightshirt for a fresh one. In slippers and dressing gown, he crept out into the living room and toward the kitchen, wings still clutched tight. Muggins, evidently having decided that Carl should not be left alone, followed at his heels.

There was a plate of gingerbread under the cake dome, and the tea things all set out as if Una had expected a midnight wanderer to need them. She didn’t miss a trick, Carl thought as he stirred the coals in the stove.

Things had been so much worse since Christmas. He wasn’t up *every* night, but he watched the sun rise more often than not. It wasn’t really something to mention in a letter — what could anyone do from a distance? — but Una had noticed. They didn’t really talk about it. Still, the cake dome stayed stocked, no matter how dear sugar was.

When he’d had his tea and Mugsy had licked the saucer clean, Carl washed his dishes and trundled back to bed. The dog hopped up beside him, making herself at home among the quilts. Carl scritched her ears in thanks, saying a brief prayer of gratitude that he was in his own house, in his own bed, and didn’t have to send her away. Then he lighted his lamp and took up a bulky new book that was setting the conservation world by the ears. He would just read one chapter to compose his mind. Five minutes later, he was lost to the world and the troubles of the world.*
Notes:

*Rainbow Valley*, chapter 28, “A Fast Day”
Special Duties

April 1941

I never hear the word "Escape"
Without a quicker blood,
A sudden expectation –
A flying attitude!

I never hear of prisons broad
By soldiers battered down,
But I tug childish at my bars
Only to fail again!

- Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

Shirley checked his Radiolite. How was it possible that this wings test had only been going on for ten minutes? It seemed like hours.

"Watch your airspeed there, Ballantyne," Shirley said over the Harvard's intercom.

Really, Leading Aircraftman Ballantyne was doing fine. He could be a little smoother on those S-turns and no one would ever write home about the beauty of his barrel rolls, but he was competent.

"Take us up to 20,000 feet, please."

How many wings tests had Shirley done? With the larger classes graduating every three weeks, he rarely had time for anything else these days. He certainly didn't mind giving up classroom instruction; the junior officers were welcome to it. But it did get a bit monotonous, spending all day every day running students through the same series of maneuvers over and over again.

"Alright, Ballantyne, I want a stall turn at full power."

It wasn't that Shirley had stopped caring. His standards for the wings test were still high, though the long shadow of his reputation had become more fearsome than the actual rubric. No cadet passed who didn't fulfill the requirements. Still, the urgency had gone out of Shirley's performance, like a touring company that has had its overlong run extended to another hundred one-horse towns.

"I'm going to put you into a spin, Ballantyne. Show me how to get out of it."

It had been a year since the first wartime recruits had left Camp Borden for service in Britain. The men who had sat in Ballantyne's seat had defended London during the Blitz and harassed German forces as they contemplated a cross-Channel invasion. Some were well on their way to becoming aces; others were listed on the memorial plaque outside of McMullen's office. Shirley couldn't honestly say that he remembered many of their names, but he knew that every one of them had gone into battle with the best training the British Commonwealth Air Training Program could give them.

"Come on, Ballantyne, get us out of this spin."

After a slow start, BCATP was finally running at full tilt. A dozen Service Flying Training
Schools were operational and Noorduyn Aviation in Montreal was churning out new Harvards at a rate of three a day. The RCAF even had a school for flight instructors — many of them combat veterans who had earned a quieter posting — to keep the training schools well staffed.

The RAF was pleased, or, at least, less displeased. In fact, McMullen was expecting a visit from a contingent of RAF Air Staff any day now. Training continued apace, though everyone had put an extra measure of spit and polish into making themselves and Camp Borden presentable for inspection.

Except Shirley. Shipshape was his natural state, but even if it hadn't been, he would not have put in any special effort. All week, he had spent his off-duty hours in front of the fireplace in the officer's mess, the volume of Dickinson open on his lap.

Dickinson had little in common with Whitman. Everything in her world was so small — even the poems themselves — nothing at all like Whitman's boundless, yawping love for the vast, teeming world. Shirley had always thrilled at the sweep and freedom of that.

On his first reading of the Dickinson, Shirley had felt a flare of anger. He didn't quite know why. Was it only lingering resistance to accepting a gift from his mother? When he read it a second time, he recognized it as defensiveness. Dickinson made him feel like one of Carl's bugs under a magnifying glass, and it was not entirely comfortable. *I never hear the word "Escape" without a quicker blood . . .*

"What seems to be the problem, Ballantyne?" Shirley barked, annoyed that they were still in a spin.

"Sir, I don't . . ."

A sudden bang rattled the aircraft hard enough to toss Shirley against his harness. Within seconds, a column of acrid, black smoke was pouring from the front of the plane, enveloping the canopy in an impenetrable cloud.

Shit.

"Sir . . ."

"I'm taking over the controls, Ballantyne," Shirley said. "Prepare to deploy your parachute."

The commands were clipped and precise, even as Shirley consciously regulated his own breathing.

*Take a slow breath.*

*Throttle down to idle.*

*Ailerons to neutral.*

*Rudder hard over left . . . more . . . more . . .*

The Harvard bucked and groaned as Shirley fought to bring it under control. A spin meant that one wing had stalled more than the other, and the trick to pulling out of it was to equalize the wings. Easier said than done, especially when it had gone on as long as this spin had. The black cloud had subsided somewhat after the initial burst, but there was still enough smoke to make Shirley wonder whether he would be able to restart the engine even if he did manage to ease the plane back to equilibrium.

Ballantyne said something over the intercom, but it came to Shirley as the garbled mutterings of
some underwater creature. Was the kid panicking or was it only the intercom on the fritz?

"Stay where you are," Shirley said, not sure whether Ballantyne could hear him. "I'm going to bring us out of it now."

In a spin, with the ground rushing up to meet you and the empty-bellied sensation of falling, it was counterintuitive to lean in. The primitive part of the human brain screamed *UP UP UP* and *BACK BACK BACK*, but an airplane wasn't human. If you wanted to break a spin like this, you had to tell that blundering, earthbound animal-brain to shut the hell up so you could think like a machine. The important thing was to get the wings equal, even if that meant flying straight down toward the ground.

Another slow breath. In the next second, they'd find out whether they'd be bringing this Harvard home to Borden or bailing out over the Ontario countryside.

*Sharp and fast.*

Shirley jammed the control column forward with his whole strength, ignoring the jumbled exclamations from the intercom.

*Down.*

*Down.*

*Down.*

Now they were screaming toward the earth, aimed directly downward. Terrifying. But both wings were equal.

"Hang on, Ballantyne," Shirley said, blinking sweat out of his eyes. If this didn't work . . .

The engine did not respond on the first try. Nor the second.

Shirley swore fluently under his breath. He was on the point of ordering Ballantyne to bail, but wanted just one more try. He opened the throttle once more, gritting his teeth as it rattled, spluttered, and then roared back to life.

*Not out of this yet.*

Clenching in concentration, Shirley pulled the Harvard into a gentle, swooping curve, bottoming out of the dive at an altitude where you could count the individual sheets on clotheslines below. Ballantyne whooped triumphantly from the front, no intercom necessary to hear that. Shirley was not quite ready to join him. After all, he still had to put this kite down somewhere safe, and who knew where they were or when the engine might go again.

Luckily, the gods of aviation were sated. Scanning the ground for a likely forced-landing site, Shirley was astonished to find the broad, familiar runway of Camp Borden not a mile distant. Perhaps there would be no need for an emergency landing in some unpredictable field or marsh; he could just bring the damaged kite home to Sgt. Dixon, who would no doubt have some choice words of his own.

Not that it would be easy to land this heap. The Harvard was limping more than it was flying, and Shirley was having an awful time controlling it. It wasn't just the engine either; if he had to guess, the rudder hadn't much liked that rough treatment. Add in the obscuring smoke and it was going to be a landing to remember.
"Brace yourself," Shirley warned Ballantyne.

They were still losing altitude, slipping, slipping, slipping. Worse, the controls were fighting Shirley as hard as he was fighting back. If he could get this thing on a proper heading, it would be a goddamn miracle.

Knowing that he wouldn't be able to circle for a second approach, Shirley wrestled the Harvard into alignment with Camp Borden's main runway. Certainly they must be a sight to behold, trailing smoke and shuddering like a leaf. Well, hopefully Dixon would have the sense to greet them with fire extinguishers.

Slowly, carefully, Shirley eased the Harvard toward the ground. The plane growled and spat and threw off enough black smoke to make a tire fire envious, blocking the view as completely as any instrument hood.

*If Gil can put this thing down on instruments, you can, too.*

A damn sight harder than taking off by instruments, that was for sure. On takeoff, you could lift and lift until you lifted free, but coming down, the unforgiving ground stayed exactly where it was. Cut the throttle too early and you'd make a lovely crater.

*Easy now.*

When the landing gear slammed into the ground, Shirley's teeth knocked together and his shoulders wrecked against the harness again. Still, he had brought the Harvard safely home to solid ground with only a few bruises and a sweat-drenched flightsuit for souvenir.

The moment they rolled to a stop, Shirley and Ballantyne scrambled out of the smoking aircraft, jumping the last few feet to the runway. They landed to the roar of fire extinguishers and hearty cheers from a crowd of cadets and instructors who had obviously watched the whole thing. Men in battle-dress and flight jackets pressed in, clapping Shirley on the sore shoulder and shouting their admiration.

"Wizard flying, sir!"

"The longest spin I've ever seen!"

"That smoke!"

When Shirley emerged from the press, he found himself standing before a grinning McMullen, who wore a pair of binoculars around his neck. He was flanked by two RAF Air Staff officers in sharp wool and gold braid. Shirley ran a sleeve over his face in an attempt to sponge away the worst of the sweat, then saluted.

"Hell of a landing, Blythe, hell of a landing," McMullen beamed, reaching out to pump Shirley's hand. "Good of you to put on such a show for our guests."

Shirley's heart was still tripping along at an unsustainable speed, but his voice was inflected with a smile. "All in a day's work, sir."

McMullen could barely keep a lid on his delight as he gestured to his two companions. The older man, straight-backed and jowly with dark brows over shrewd blue eyes, wore the wide sleeve-stripes and single star of an Air Commodore. The younger, a Group Captain according to his many-striped sleeves, was thin, straw-haired, and snaggletoothed, radiating good cheer and enthusiasm.
"Squadron Leader Blythe," McMullen said in official tones, "Allow me to introduce you to Air Commodore Houghton and Group Captain Ruggles. They're inspecting all the training schools."

"Marvelous flying!" Ruggles grinned as he pumped Shirley’s hand. "You may be just the man they're looking for!"

"That was certainly most impressive, Blythe," Houghton agreed in an accent that made Shirley suspect that Air Commodore might not be the man's only title. "McMullen informs us that you were a top-10 ace in the Great War?"

Shirley grimaced. "That's top-10 for Canada, sir, not the whole RAF."

"Indeed. Tell me, how old are you, Blythe?"

"Ah . . ." Shirley had to think a moment. "I was 42 earlier this month, sir."

"I see." Houghton gave Shirley an unabashedly appraising look up and down. Satisfied that he had found whatever it was he was looking for, he gave a curt nod to McMullen.

"Go get yourself cleaned up, Blythe," McMullen said, face split with glee. "Then come 'round to my office, alright?"

"Yes, sir." Shirley didn't know what all this was about, but he was certainly glad to be excused to the privacy of his quarters to puke in peace. He was even grateful for Davenport, who had laid out fresh towels and immaculate service dress, right down to the socks. Standing in the shower, leaning against the tile as smoke and sweat ran away down the drain, he wondered what the hell Group Captain Ruggles had meant by "they" and why anyone might be looking for someone who knew how to crash in style.

***

When Shirley reported to McMullen's office, he found the three senior officers conferring over a file spread open on the desk. For once, it was the only file in sight, McMullen having evidently made an effort to impress by getting his own house in order.

"Come in, Blythe, come in," McMullen said, waving Shirley toward one of the armchairs and taking the other for himself. It seemed that rank had the privilege of the desk chair, with Air Commodore Houghton settling into McMullen's usual seat while Ruggles perched impishly on the window sill. All three of them looked enormously pleased in a way that made Shirley wonder whether he was about to be inducted into some sort of secret fraternity or devoured.

Houghton rapped a knuckle on the open file. "Wing Commander McMullen has been so kind as to provide us with your file," he said. "Most impressive, I do say."

"Thank you, sir."

"Your DFC citation alone is quite a thrilling read."

Shirley wasn't quite sure what to say to that, so he stuck with, "Yes, sir."

"Excellent flying skills, a sterling record as an instructor — tell me, Blythe, why aren't you commanding your own SFTS already? This is just the sort of file BCATP looks for in a commanding officer."

Shirley relaxed a little. If they were just going to offer him a command, that was easy enough to
"I'm satisfied with my current position, sir," he said. "Forgive me, but I much prefer flying to paperwork."

"Yes," Houghton said slowly. "McMullen has already told us you have turned down opportunities for advancement in the past. Happier in a kite than in a meeting, are you?"

"Yes, sir."

"I can't say I blame you, Blythe. Still, a man of your abilities may be . . . underemployed in your current capacity, don't you think?"

Shirley bristled slightly at this. Hadn't he just proven that he was right where he needed to be?

"Training is very useful work, sir," he said slowly, feeling that it was a foolish thing to say to an Air Staff officer whose job was to oversee the training program.

"Of course it is, Blythe. And your dedication is much appreciated. But BCATP is fully operational now. We have plenty of excellent flight instructors."

"Yes, sir," Shirley agreed, feeling wholly adrift. What was the man getting at?

"Allow me to ask you a few questions," Houghton said, making it an order rather than a request. "You are fully qualified to fly advanced aircraft and have instructed pilots in various specialized techniques, including night flying, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are a decorated RAF veteran and a current RCAF officer who has rejected promotions that might ground you, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"You can fly the hell out of one of those mulish Harvards, correct?"

"I suppose so," Shirley said, unsure where all this was heading.

"You are unmarried and have no children. No dependents, is that correct?"

Just what in hell did that have to do with flying?

Shirley ran his thumb in a circle over his closed fist. "Yes, sir."

Houghton nodded, nearly satisfied. "One last thing, Blythe: How is your French?"

French?

"I studied French in college, sir," Shirley said, bewildered. "I suppose I can read it alright, but I can't honestly say that I speak it."

Houghton looked over his shoulder at a grinning Ruggles. "You owe me a drink, Ned," he drawled. "He's not completely perfect."

"Close enough!" said Ruggles, evidently not much displeased at having lost a bet that Shirley could not begin to fathom.
Shirley was reluctant to ask, but he was beginning to grow frustrated. Turning to McMullen, he raised his brows in silent appeal.

"See here now, Blythe," McMullen said. "The RAF has a proposition for you."

"Indeed," Air Commodore Houghton confirmed. "What would you say, Squadron Leader Blythe, if I told you that one of our many tasks on this tour is to identify talent for a very special posting with the RAF?"

*Special?*

"I would ask what sort of posting, sir."

"And I do wish I could tell you. But the truth is that specific details are unavailable to men of my humble rank and station."

*Unavailable to an Air Commodore? What was the man playing at?*

Houghton fixed Shirley with a frank blue gaze. "All I can say is this: I have been ordered to look for men of exactly your description for a special duties posting much more sensitive than BCATP training. The brief requires excellent flying skills, extreme discretion, and ideally at least a smattering of French."

*If they wanted men who spoke French, did that mean . . .*

"You want to send me to the front lines?" Shirley asked, mouth gone dry.

The Air Commodore's smirk was a subtle thing, conveying certainty without committing to it in any incriminating way. "Rather behind them, I suspect."

*Behind the lines? Special duties?*

It sounded dangerous and ill-advised and . . . important.

"Come now, Blythe, we can't have a man of your substantial abilities doing nothing but routine wings tests day in and day out. Leave that to the others."

"It's valuable work, sir," Shirley objected. "We're sending thousands of pilots to defend Britain."

Houghton leaned across the desk, half threatening, half conspiratorial.

"We'll never win this war by hanging back," he said. "There's no defense like an offense."

Houghton wasn't wrong. With summer coming, the Nazis would mount a major operation somewhere, perhaps even the long-rumored invasion of England. The blow could fall any day and then what? A year ago, the Nazis had pummeled Holland, Belgium, and France into submission with terrifying speed. If they could land that same punch across the Channel, could Britain withstand the blow? They would fight to the last and the loss of life — military and civilian alike — would be staggering. Anything that could be done to disrupt German plans would save untold numbers of lives. That wasn't hyperbole; it was just mathematics.

Shirley looked to McMullen, unsure if he would rather his friend urge him to go or forbid it.

"It's a wrench to let you go, Blythe," McMullen said, swishing his mustache, "but it's a job that needs doing and you're the right man for it."
"What do you think, Blythe?" Houghton asked.

I think Carl's going to have kittens.

The watch on Shirley’s wrist seemed to be ticking hard enough to break the skin, but that didn’t stop him asking, “When do I leave, sir?”
April 1941

By the time Shirley arrived home for his last leave before shipping out, Carl had composed himself. The letter had landed in his hand like an anvil — *I am taking a special duties post in England* — but it wasn't unexpected. Really, it was a surprise that it had taken this long.

Carl hadn’t slept much since then, but he was calm when he drove down to the Glen station. He was late on purpose, so that Shirley was whittling under a nearby oak when he arrived, a twig stripped bare under his knife. Neither spoke as he folded himself into the passenger seat, thumb strumming the edge of his duffel bag as they rumbled away toward the house.

"Kit . . ."

Carl held up a hand for silence. "Is there anything I can do to stop you?"

"I guess not."

"Then I don't want to fight about it."

What was the sense in struggling against a rip current when you were already in it? You could spend your whole strength against the implacable sea and never progress an inch, or you could stay calm and let it carry you along until the you were through the worst, battered and gasping, but still alive.

"This isn't about you," Shirley muttered.

The truck lurched to an inelegant stop in the middle of the road as Carl applied the break with more decision than grace. Shirley's wince at the grinding screech was oddly satisfying.

Carl swiveled round until he could look at Shirley directly.

"That is abundantly clear."

Shirley had the good sense not to offer a retort, waiting for Carl to start back down the road and speak when he was ready. They rattled away from the village, past the turn-offs for the Upper Glen and Harbour Head, down the quiet, grass-sprouted road that led to Lowbridge.

Eventually, Carl sighed. "You're here for two weeks?"

"Less a day for getting to Kingsport."

"Any last requests?"

"I'd settle for a *hello*."

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**In the Dark (Reprise)**

Chapter Summary

Content warning: suicidal thoughts
Brakes again, squealing with a rasping shudder almost as loud as the gritting of Shirley's teeth. "Maybe I could give you some driving lessons while I'm here . . ."

Carl turned again. "Hello."

"Hi."

It was awfully good to see him. Even like this, shifting his shoulders uncomfortably under the crisp blue uniform Carl wanted to hate. Two weeks? And then . . .

"We're going home to change," Carl said, gruff enough to cover the hitch in his voice.

"Change?"

"You need a mac. And a sweater."

"I'm not really supposed to be seen out of uniform . . ."

"Then we'll make sure no one sees you."

Shirley opened his mouth, but closed it again. Good.

Carl turned back to the wheel and set the truck in motion again, keeping his eye resolutely on the road. Shirley remained silent long enough that conscience began to prick. Only two weeks. Then he'd be off on whatever harebrained, perilous, accursed . . . what in hell did *special duties* mean, anyway? Nothing good.

With a sigh, Carl fished in his jacket pocket, coming up with a small box wrapped in plain brown paper. He hadn't had the heart for anything more festive.

"What's this?" Shirley asked when Carl tossed it into his lap.

"Birthday present."

"For me?"

"Anyone else here have a birthday recently?"

The paper crackled as Shirley slid the box free; the cardboard top gave a tiny pop as it flexed open.

It had always been difficult to buy gifts for Shirley. Even moreso now that he couldn't really bring much of anything wherever he was going. Something useful, then. A sleek silver lighter, embellished with a fan of crisp lines radiating like a sun translated into cool, moonlit shimmer.

"It's beautiful," Shirley said quietly.

"It's useful."

"It's beautiful *and* useful."

"Yeah, well. You shouldn't smoke so much."

A patch of warmth bloomed on Carl's passenger-side thigh, the light pressure of Shirley's hand a little too timid.

"Thanks. It's perfect."
Carl didn't stop the truck again. Instead, he dropped one hand from the wheel to cover Shirley's, pressing it firmly in place.

***

They took to the sea, of course. Oh, they would return with a few days to spare for other people, but not just now. For ten days, the Sweet Flag roamed from Cape Breton to the Gaspé Peninsula and east to Channel-Port aux Basques on the coast of Newfoundland. Muggins chased seagulls along the shale beaches of Anticosti Island and whined in protest when she was confined to quarters at Rocher aux Oiseaux.

"That's quite a climb," Shirley said, eyeing the slippery gangway that led to the Jubinville's lighthouse at the top of the cliffs.

"You're scared of heights?" Carl called over his shoulder.

The Jubinivilles were delighted to see Carl and to meet his deckhand. Even more delighted when Shirley addressed them in simple, halting French, gone rusty since his days running rum from St. Pierre.

He spoke French of the "pardon my" sort when Carl took him out to the cliffs and showed him how to rig up a safety harness to move over the shit-slick, wave-dashed rocks.

"This is what you do out here?" Shirley shouted over the roiling surf. "Alone?"

Carl shrugged as he tested the tension of his lifeline. "Sure. What did you think I do?"

"I thought you watched birds!"

"I do. Up close."

"Have you ever fallen in?"

"Yes."

"Carl!"

"What? That's why I have the harness."

"It's dangerous!"

"Are you coming or not?"

They had to hunt a long time, paying out their lifelines to the limit, climbing one cliff and another to search and search the new-laid herring gull nests. By the time they found what Carl was looking for, they were both covered in filth and drenched with sweat and sea spray.

"So it has a lot of eggs?" Shirley asked, peering dubiously at the superclutch in question.

Carl smiled as he banded the nesting gull. "Six instead of three."

"And that means . . . two females?"

"Usually."

"How can you tell?"
Carl brandished his calipers as if that were any proper answer.

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On the tenth night, they found a little island off the southern coast of Newfoundland and went ashore. The Magdalens were too busy these days, what with the RCAF landing reconnaissance planes along the sandy strips. There were reports of U-boats in the area. Probably just fish stories, but it didn't hurt to be vigilant. The merchant vessels that sailed up the St. Lawrence from the interior were currently keeping Britain fed with good Canadian wheat, and it was only a matter of time before the wolfpacks noticed the soft underbelly of the lightly-defended Gulf. So the Sweet Flag made for Newfoundland, with its granite-gray crags smiling their cold, toothy smiles as iceberg season approached.

"Maybe we should stay onboard," Shirley said, eyeing the broken shore. "It's cold."

"I need rocks."

"You need rocks?"

"Something steady underfoot," Carl said, knowing that even the rock shore was temporary. There was a vast scale beyond human experience, in which a single life or a single war or a single species was nothing more than the futile struggle of ants in the gleam of a million million suns. Carl knew ants. They had triumphs and sorrows, animosities and loves, as people did. He had always taken that commonality as a sign that their struggle was not — could not be — futile. Perhaps it was the other way around.

There were no lights, not even stars penetrating the cloud cover of a lowering sky.

"Let's go back to the boat," Shirley said.

Carl did not answer. He stood at the cusp of the lapping Atlantic, letting the sea wind scour his bare flesh in the failing twilight. If he stood this way long enough, exposed on the darkening shore, he would eventually reach equilibrium with it. The cold would creep in along his edges, turning his skin cool and hard, conquering his extremities before it reached anything vital. His body would fight back for a while, heart pumping warm blood, brain slowing to conserve energy, but they couldn't hold out forever. How long would it take to blend into the lifeless shore? Hours? Days? It would be much faster if he stepped into the water.

"Hey," Shirley said, the warmth of his chest and arms a jolt against Carl's already cooling back. "Come on."

Carl allowed himself to be trundled back into the little boat and rowed back to the Sweet Flag in silence. Down below, Muggins lay curled on a cushion in the galley. She lifted her head as they passed, but evidently concluded that Shirley was up to the task of tucking Carl into the bunk. When he doused the lamp, the cabin plunged into a dark so flat and black that an eye open or closed or gone made no difference.

"You're freezing," Shirley said, shivering a bit himself as he pulled the blankets around them and added the tobacco-stripe quilt over the top over the top. The covers bore Carl down into the bunk until the soft, firm pressure of the mattress below and the soft, firm pressure of the blankets above offered a different sort of equilibrium.

Shirley reached to gather him in to his oven-warm body, but Carl turned over instead, knees to knees at odd angles. Even breathing one another's breath, it was too dark to see faces, so Carl laid a
cool hand to Shirley's cheek instead, needing some way to measure him.

How little flesh covered the human jaw. Was there really only an eighth of an inch between smiling face and grinning skull?

"Is your new post really in England?" he asked.

A longish breath and a fluttering of the pulse under Shirley's ear.

"What makes you think it isn't?"

"You spoke French to the Jubinvilles."

"Well, they speak French."

"How considerate of you."

Shirley's throat bobbed under Carl's fingers. Here, too, life was so poorly guarded. A single cut just there or a swift blow there, and it would be over in moments.

"The base is in England," Shirley said half-apologetically.

"And the French is for cocktail parties, I assume."

Shirley reached to cover Carl's hip with an impossibly warm hand, but Carl twitched away, unwilling to be placated.

"You won't tell me anything more than that?"

"That's all I know."

"You promised to always tell me more than half."

"I don't know that much myself."

Carl dropped his hand, retreating into the inky black embrace of the directionless void. The bunk was small, but he might have been utterly alone in a limitless universe if not for the radiating heat that warmed his face like the star-side of a lonely planet.

"You know that it's dangerous," he said.

"Flying's always dangerous."

"Not like this. You . . . you could . . ."

Carl couldn't choke out the words, but Shirley's voice was level. "I could die?"

You weren't supposed to say things like that aloud. They conjured gruesome, ghastly, groveling things that would come to find you, even in the featureless dark. A chill went galloping up and down Carl's spine.

Suddenly, a small spot seared in the center of his chest. For a confused moment, he thought that perhaps he had been shot, but no, being shot felt like a punch, not a burn. This was a single, round point of heat. A fingertip.

This time, Carl did not move away. One fingertip became two, then five, then a whole searing
palm pressed to his chest.

Carl placed his own hand over the knuckles and peeled the hand away, not in refusal, but to bring the fingers to his lips and kiss each glowing tip. There was a sharp intake of breath when he sucked one into his mouth, drawing its ember in, caressing and coaxing until the spark caught and spread and his fear began to melt under its borrowed heat.

They had the shorthand of all lifelong partners, in which years of gesture and touch had mapped familiar routes. Riding a current larger than either of them, they could nonetheless steer, branching off at this oft-traveled fork or another, sometimes following meandering streams to tranquil lagoons, other times seeking out the thrilling rush and roar of rapids.

This was not like that.

There had been a rupture somewhere atop some distant mountain that had smoked and belched at a safe distance for a long time, but now the innards of the earth were creeping implacably down its slope, obliterating the landmarks and remaking the very rocks.

Fumbling, they knocked elbows and clashed teeth, misjudging distances they had measured countless times before. An off-target kiss left Carl apologizing for bashing Shirley's nose; the blankets tangling around their feet sent Shirley crashing too hard onto Carl's chest.

"Oof!" Carl grunted, breath rushing out in a reproach.

"Sorry!"

Under other circumstances, it might have been funny. As it was, the apology held a note of panic.

"Stop," Carl gasped. "Just stop."

Shirley obeyed as best he could, though his shuddering breath defied all orders. "I'm sorry," he panted. "Sorry. Are you alright?"

"Shhhh."

Carl shut his eye against a stinging tear, willing himself still, ordering each breath in and out, in and out through his constricted throat. They had said goodbye before — too often, it seemed — but always fluently. Never like this.

He could go to pieces later, in the blank, yawning future, but not now. They would not end this way, failed and flailing, they would not.

"Shhhh," Carl repeated.

Slowly, deliberately, he skimmed palms over tense arms and heaving shoulders and quivering throat until he held Shirley's face firmly between his hands, a mutual anchor and a place to start over.

"Start here," he said, following his own train of thought as he pressed a gentle kiss to lips that frightened him with their reticence.

"I don't know if I can," Shirley whispered, though they were close enough that Carl felt the shape of the words better than he could hear them.

"You don't know if you can kiss me?"
“That’s not what I meant.”

“Just kiss me, then.”

"Without bloodying your lip this time?"

"My lip's fine," Carl said, demonstrating by extending it across the infinitesimal interval. "Check for yourself."

Coaxing with tiny touches, he drew Shirley into a soft, unhurried kiss that belonged to some other universe, where they had world enough and time. If this was going to be the last time, Carl wanted to convey a little of what all the others had meant to him.

The kiss lingered and deepened. What was darkness, after all, against pliant lips and audible pulse and the enveloping smell of fresh-baked bread stronger than the lingering stink of birds? Some toothed cog slid back into place and set the laws of their tiny universe purring along once more.

Shirley got an arm around his waist and pulled him in tight.

"Doing fine so far," Carl sighed.

It could have been minutes or it could have been hours, cloistered together under the smothering weight of the blankets and the irresolvable dark and the relentless siss of the sea. Their lips did not wander tonight. Instead, Carl pinned Shirley down with a kiss that went on and on as he worked his way through their clothing. Shirley gasped when they finally slid together, warm and slick in spite of the freezing depths just beyond _Sweet Flag_’s fragile hull. No danger of cold equilibrium now, not with two clasped together and blazing so brightly they might have warned ships at sea.

Sometime later, Carl fixed his fingers in Shirley's hair, holding him still against his shoulder as he dozed. How many lovers had lain this way down through the centuries and unfathomable millennia? How many had swallowed their tongues — *no, don't go, I need you too much* — and affixed a dishonest smile as they bid a last farewell? This wouldn't be the last war, either, and there would be another million million goodbyes, forever and ever until the sea wore the rock shore away to nothing.

"There's a poem like this, I think."

"Huh? What?"

"A poem," Carl repeated, groping for a title or a line and coming up empty. "One of yours."

"Mine?"

"Your Whitman. There's a flag or something calling a boy off to war and the father is trying to stop him from going . . . *beckoning with a long finger* . . . I can't remember exactly."

"*Come up here, dear little child,* Shirley whispered thickly, "*to fly in the clouds and winds with me and play with the measureless light.* I didn't know that you knew that one."

"Well, I don't have your terrifying memory for it. I don't suppose that begging kept the boy at home, did it?"

A puff of breath against his collarbone: "No."

"Then I'll just ask you for a promise."
"Anything."

"Hear it first," Carl said, brushing fingers along the close-cropped hair. "You keep choosing to leave. I know you feel like you have to go, but it's been your choice every time. I know you'll do what you have to do over there, and I know that might mean that . . . that you won't be coming back. But promise me . . . if you ever do have a choice in the matter, promise that you'll choose to come home in the end."

"I'll come home, Kit."

Carl grimaced. "You can't promise that. But if you have a choice . . ."

"Yes," Shirley interrupted. "I promise."

He said it like he meant it, and Carl had no doubt that he did, or at least that he wanted to.

There was a rustling movement and Shirley pulled away, letting a long finger of cold air rush in between them as he rummaged for something among his discarded clothes. He was back in a moment, though, clicking the silver lighter into brilliant flame. Carl winced at the sudden brightness and then again at the way the flickering fire threw skull-shadows across Shirley's face.

"I need a promise, too."

"Anything."

Shirley found his hand, gripped it, held fast. "You have to take care of yourself. No more falling into the sea. Can you do that? Be here when I get back?"

Carl licked his lips. If it were still dark, he might have hidden, but Shirley had never liked to say goodbye in the dark.

"Yes," he said. "I promise."

And he meant it, or at least he wanted to.

Notes:

*Tennyson, "Vastness" (1885), imperfectly quoted in Rilla of Ingleside, Chapter 19: "They Shall Not Pass"
They came in like a herd of elephants, front door clattering, Muggins disarranging the hall carpet with her overwrought scrabbling, boots clunking to the floor where they were dropped. Shirley murmured something audible only as a low rumble and Carl laughed. That was good. Very good. Una had feared quiet.

"Hi, Una," Carl said, tripping over Muggins as they crossed the kitchen threshold together. He bent to kiss her cheek, wreathing her in good, clean scents of sweat and sea breeze, with the acrid bird stink only faintly discernible underneath. "Sorry we're late."

"I wasn't counting hours," she said, though the chime of the mantel clock chose that very moment to register an objection.

Shirley hung back in the doorway, cradling a newspaper-swathed bundle in the crook of his arm, only stepping into the sun-yellow kitchen when Una spread her arms in welcome.

"Hi," he said, returning her embrace with his unburdened arm.

"Shirley," she said, holding him close despite the state of his sea clothes. "It's so good to see you."

"We brought you something," he said when he released her, holding out the damp newspaper bundle — BRITISH CAPITAL HAS HEAVIEST AIR RAID OF WAR — quite distinctively fragrant in its own right.

"You brought me . . . a fish?"

"Carl says you've been eating more meat lately. Is fish meat?"

"It's a striped bass," Carl said as he rummaged in the cookie jar. "Shirley caught it just out past the mouth of the harbour. It's barely dead."

Una took the fish from Shirley and felt a rebellious twitch at the corner of her mouth. "I didn't know you knew how to fish," she said mildly.

Carl got his sleeve up just in time to keep a mouthful of crumbs from spraying across half the kitchen.

"And I didn't know you knew how to tell a joke," said Shirley.

"You'd better watch out for her," Carl warned. "She's been in awfully high spirits lately."

Una ignored this provocation, setting the fish amid the half-chopped, half-peeled vegetables on the table. She crossed the kitchen to the telephone to retrieve a small stack of messages scribbled on violet notepaper.

"Faith and Jem have organized a supper at Ingleside tomorrow night. Nan and Jerry and the girls are coming out from Charlottetown, but not Di, I'm afraid."

"Don't worry," Shirley said. "I was planning on calling her tonight and asking if we can stay over at Aster House before I have to report to the ship."
"You're going to Kingsport, too?" Una asked Carl.

"Just for a couple of days."

She peered at her brother, noting the purple shadow of more than one sleepless night under his eye, deeper than the smile he wore. It would be good for him to visit Di.

Una nodded, then turned to Shirley, hesitating briefly. "There's also . . . your mother called. She wants you to come down to their house tomorrow afternoon for tea before the supper."

Una had been awfully surprised when Mrs. Blythe had called, trying to recall whether it was the first time and concluding that it must be. Officially, neither Mrs. Blythe nor Dr. Blythe acknowledged this house, not even in a medical context. Certainly they had never darkened its door.

"I don't like being summoned by them," Shirley grumbled. "I'll see them at Ingleside with the rest."

"Wait," Carl said, laying a pacifying hand on Shirley's arm. "They just want to see you. What if . . . could you invite them?"

"Here?"

"Yes," Carl nodded earnestly. "Invite them for tea. Here. Let them come here."

"Do you think they would?"

Carl shrugged. "Call and ask them."

"I don't know . . ." Shirley pressed his lips into a thin line, ruminating. "What if they're horrible?"

"Then you can have the satisfaction of kicking them out."

Shirley did not seem wholly convinced by this prospect, though he also had not dismissed the idea outright. Una had already begun taking mental inventory of the pantry. She had spent the afternoon baking for tomorrow's supper and could certainly spare a pie, besides which there were still plenty of pear preserves . . .

"Is it alright with you, Una?" Shirley asked. "If my parents come here?"

"Of course," she answered, surprised he even felt the need to ask.

Shirley gave a tiny groan of protest, but if he had been looking to Una to sink the idea by withholding hospitality, he was truly grasping at the breeze. Carl gave him a tiny nudge toward the telephone; Shirley handled the receiver as if it might bite him. The whir of the dial and then . . .

"Hello, Mum. It's Shirley . . . You, too . . . Yes, I'm back. I leave for Kingsport on Friday . . . Listen, I don't think I can come down to your house tomorrow afternoon, but I was wondering if you and Dad wanted to come here instead . . . No, I'm not at the hangar. I'm at Carl and Una's house . . . Yes, I'm staying here . . . Yes . . . Do you know where it is? On the Lowbridge Road? . . . Yes . . . Say three o'clock? . . . Alright, I'll see you tomorrow . . . You too, Mum. 'Bye."

Carl's eyebrows had inched up toward his hairline with each exchange. He blinked solemnly at Una, who could only shrug.

When Shirley turned back into the sunny kitchen, he seemed as bemused as either of them.
"I suppose I ought to bake something," he said.

Carl guffawed in disbelief. "What does one bake for the prodigal parents?"

Una took an extra apron from the peg behind the door and, smiling, held it out at arm's length.

"No fatted calf in this house, I'm afraid," she said. "But there's some rhubarb in the garden."

"Should we take down the pictures?" Carl was standing by the mantel, fretting with a framed snapshot of the two of them on a Caribbean beach.

Shirley took the frame from his hand and set it back in its place. That had been the day Carl had met the dolphin in the turquoise shallows near Havana; just look at his grin.

"It was your idea to invite them here," he said. "Now you don't want them to actually see the place?"

"I just want them to be comfortable."

Shirley took Carl's tweed-jacketed shoulders in both hands and planted a kiss on his forehead, just where the worry lines were deepest.

"That's up to them, not you. Don't put anything away."

Carl nodded, but continued to fiddle with knick-knacks as Shirley went to check on things in the kitchen. He and Una had spent an hour in companionable quiet over the mixing bowls, assembling a rhubarb crumble that no one was likely to taste. By way of apology, Shirley had revealed that all Susan's rhubarb creations contained an unrecorded dram of ginger ale; Una had promised to tell Cecilia to make a note.

"Can I help at all?" he asked, watching Una fill the kettle.

"No," she said. "I wouldn't want you putting your uniform at risk."

After a week and a half at sea in a mac and fisherman's sweater, it felt good to be back in blue. Shirley could hardly admit as much to Carl, who had winced to see him all brushed and polished, but the truth was that he felt better able to meet his parents dressed this way. They might think of him as a perpetual infant, but that didn't mean he had to feel like one.

A knock at the front door sent Muggins careening down the hall, barking her head off.

"Do you want me to get it?" Una asked.

Shirley adjusted his cuffs and rolled his shoulders under the tunic. "No. I'll be fine."

***

"What a lovely room," Mother said, surveying the frame-crowded mantel and overstuffed bookcase from her perch on the edge of the sofa. "Those orange and green geese are particularly striking."

"They're Carl's," Una said, offering a tray of teacups to both of Shirley's parents.

It really was a talent, Shirley thought, to deflect attention from oneself so skillfully. Una Meredith had the knack of always being present but never taking up any space, not even conversationally.
See how she redirected Mother toward Carl in two words, refusing to step out of the background herself? Masterful.

"Yes," Carl was saying. "My friend Nellie Meijer drew them. She's a wonderful illustrator. She draws for encyclopedias these days — plants, birds, insects . . ."

Dad nodded along, over-expressing interest. "Does she work with you at the Department of Fisheries?"

"No," Carl said, taking a cup. "We were friends at Redmond. She lives in Curaçao now, drawing from life. The geese are Orinocos, from the Orinoco River in South America."

"Oh," Mother said pleasantly. "Well, they're lovely."

Una disappeared into the kitchen with the tray and conversation lapsed. Shirley looked across the room to see Carl motioning for him to say something — anything — to his parents. Something . . . anything . . .

"Thank you for the toffee," Shirley blurted.

Mother and Dad swiveled their attention and Shirley was very glad of his uniform.

"Did you like it?" Mother asked, gray eyes wide and hopeful.

"Yes. It was very good. Sorry, I meant to send a thank you, but everything happened just after it arrived . . ."

Mother was shaking her head vigorously, smiling all the while. "Not at all, sweetheart. I'm just pleased that you liked it. I'll send more, if you like, when you're in England."

"The sugar rations in Britain are very tight," Dad said knowledgeably. "Meat, butter . . . they're even rationing jam and tea over there."

"Yes," Shirley said. "It makes sense; the U-boats sink an awful lot of merchant ships, even in the convoys."

This was, perhaps, the wrong thing to say, given the ferocity with which Mother and Carl contended for the prize of ghastliest pallor. But it was true. Shirley had no doubt he'd be able to cadge whatever small luxuries he required with the help of good pay and a deck of cards, but parcels of candy would not go amiss in besieged Britain. He had a sudden memory of Ida Trumbull, the little girl who had such an appetite for the fudge Susan used to send when he was training at Andover.

That seemed a safe enough topic, so Shirley told his parents what he remembered of the Trumbulls and what England was like in the last war. It seemed easier to talk about a war that was over and won than about one that was still uncertain. Carl nodded along encouragingly, supplying a small prompt here and there to keep the conversation alive. Dad asked about how aeroplanes had changed since then; Mother wondered if he knew anything about where he'd be stationed this time.

"All I know is that I'm supposed to report to RAF Newmarket. It's near Cambridge."

"Newmarket . . ." Dad mused. "I believe we may have gone there. When we went back in '28. The famous racecourses are there."

"Oh!" Mother perked up. "Yes, I remember. We met some of the jockeys and went walking out on
the heath. I got into such a lot of trouble for renaming the horses."

"Renaming?" Carl asked, intrigued.

"They had such silly names," Mother said, relaxing into the telling. "There was a beautiful bay mare named Scuttle, of all things. Scuttle! That wasn't her right name at all! She should have been a Lady Arabella or a Sweet Afton, definitely *not* a Scuttle!"

Dad chuckled. "You nearly caused a brawl, Anne-girl, when you told the other spectators that her owner must be a fool to give her such an ugly name."

"Well how was I supposed to know that she belonged to King George?" Mother sniffed.*

Dad and Carl both laughed merrily, and even Shirley smiled. This was alright. It was going fine.

Una returned with a fresh pot of tea and plates of rhubarb crumble.

"This is wonderful, Una," Mother said after her first bite.

"Shirley made it," she said, vanishing as quickly as she had arrived.

"It tastes familiar," Dad said. "Just like . . ."

"It's Susan's recipe," Shirley confirmed.

"Oh. Well. It's very good."

They ate and chatted, finding other innocuous topics to fill the hour. Dad told an amusing story about being summoned to the Drew household for a birth, only to find that the patient was one of the Percheron mares. Carl followed with a reenactment of Muggins's disagreement with a bull seal over control of a stretch of beach, which was resolved only when the incoming tide staked its own claim.

Mother smiled. "I remember the first time I saw a seal on the shore in Avonlea. It was one of those silver-specked harbor seals, all sparkling wet, and I was convinced that it must be a mermaid."

"A very loud mermaid!" Carl laughed.

"Not Tennyson's sort at all," Mother agreed. "Not a golden ringlet in sight."

Their shared merriment made a lovely tableau. This had been a good idea after all.

"*I started early, took my dog / And visited the sea,*" Shirley said, to the evident surprise of all. "*The mermaids in the basement / Came out to look at me.*"

Carl and Dad nodded pleasantly, glad to have Shirley contributing to the conversation. But they did not know their Dickinson.

Mother did.

"That's one of my favorites," she said tremulously. "Did you enjoy them?"

Shirley chose his words carefully. "I'm still thinking them over. But I read them."

Mother nodded, her timorous smile poised on the edge of hopefulness.
When it became apparent that neither would say more, Dad stuck in his oar for the sake of the dying conversation. "I'm not familiar with that poem. Not Tennyson, I presume?"

"No," Mother said. "It's Emily Dickinson."

"I've never read her," Dad said. "Is it all mermaids and fancy?"

Now it was Shirley's turn to chuckle. "Hardly. Though there are a few you might like. Dickinson on faith, for one."

"Faith?"

Shirley smiled at his mother, sharing a joke for what felt like the very first time. She was already giggling before he began to recite:

\begin{verbatim}
Faith is a fine invention
For Gentlemen who see!
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency!
\end{verbatim}

Dad threw back his head and laughed at full volume. Carl, too, and yes, everything was alright.

When they had settled, Mother wiped a merry tear from the corner of her eye. "We're due up at Ingleside soon. The girls will be so glad to see you both, I'm sure. And Jem as well. He's been talking about it all week, hasn't he, Gilbert?"

"Yes. We're all glad you could come home, Shirley."

All four rose from their seats and there was a momentary pause as they tried to determine how best to take their leave when they were all headed to the same destination.

As usual, Dad rode to the rescue, extending a friendly hand to Carl. "Thank you for having us."

"You're welcome any time."

Carl looked across at Shirley, the slight elevation of an eyebrow inviting him to contribute to the farewell.

Shirley extended his own hand to Dad, then ventured a dry peck on Mother's cheek.

"Thank you for coming."

***

In the pressing dark of the wee sma's, when even April birds had not yet begun to twitter, Shirley slipped through the sitting room and toward the kitchen. He had expected to have it to himself, but the gentle flicker of candlelight announced Una's presence as clearly as the delicate fragrance of jasmine tea.

"I didn't know you could still get jasmine tea with the war on," Shirley said, taking a cup from the hutch and slipping into a chair.

"A Christmas gift," she said, pouring. "From Nellie."

Shirley would have thought that the war in China would have made jasmine tea impossible to get anywhere, but he did not press the point. The tea was floral and vaguely soapy, but it slipped down
easily enough. Shirley watched Una as she sipped, the long black braid draped over the shoulder of her quilted dressing gown making her look half a child. Other women might cut their hair for fashion or convenience, but Una Meredith wore hers like a stained-glass allegory, belonging to no time and every time.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't realize you were awake."

She brushed the apology aside. "How is Carl?"

"Asleep."

"I'm glad to hear it. When I heard the door, I was expecting him."

Shirley doubted she had meant it as a reproach, but there was a little sting there just the same. How often did the Merediths share a predawn tea? More often than he'd like to know, probably.

Cecilia Meredith's blue china cup was warm in his hand, the curve of the familiar pattern soothing as he traced it with his thumb.

"Una," he said stiffly, "I hate to ask anything of you. But . . . letters. Where I'm going, the censorship . . . I don't know how strict it will be. I was hoping you might give me permission to use your name."

"Of course."

"I know it's not fair. I'm sorry."

"It's perfectly alright," Una said, blue eyes dark in the unsteady candlelight.

"I'll write to you, too, of course."

She smiled her sweet, wistful smile. "You mustn't spend any of your time writing to me, Shirley. Not when Carl . . ." she paused, swirling the dregs of her tea before whispering, "he lives for your letters, Shirley. Don't ever stop writing."

"I won't."

"Promise?"

He seemed to be making an awful lot of vows these days. But this one wasn't really asking much, was it?

"I promise."

Una reached for the teapot and refilling both her cup and Shirley's.

"There's something else," Shirley said, hesitating. "I . . . um . . . I made out a will. I left the Piper Cub to Gil, and a little money for you and Di, but Carl gets the rest. I just . . . I didn't want to upset him. But someone should know that it exists. There's a copy at the bank in Lowbridge."

"That's very sensible of you," Una murmured to her tea.

"I brought home some cash, as well. For . . . I don't know. Whatever you need."

He'd thought it all out. Tried to make things as easy as possible for them. Provide was the word. It shouldn't be so hard to talk about.
"It isn't fair, is it?" Una said unexpectedly. "Not just the letters. Why does the military pay married men more when they do the same job as unmarried men?"

Shirley shrugged, relieved to be diverted to a simpler topic. "It's just the way things are."

"It isn't right. Would you be a better flier if you had married one of those girls people were always throwing at you?"

How strange to find Una Meredith so bold. Was it the deaconess training, Shirley wondered, or only the confessional freedom of this witching hour? No, she had told a joke the other day as well. Something was definitely different about her.

"No," he smirked. "Those poor girls. None of them ever had a chance."

"I think maybe one did."

"Oh?" Shirley asked, genuinely surprised. "Who?"

"Me."

"You?"

Una set down her cup and looked directly at him, all her usual diffidence burned off in the quivering candlelight. It cast the blue of her eyes and the sheen of her hair in liquid motion, though she did not move.

"If you had married me," she said evenly, "you could have lived here always. You never would have had to sneak out before dawn or hide your truck. No one would have bothered you about finding a nice girl. The RCAF would send an extra check every month and if anything were ever to happen to you, they'd send the telegram here. No one could have said anything against it."

"I feel bad enough about the letters, Una," Shirley muttered, dropping his gaze to place where his thumb ran along the side of his teacup. "I never would have asked you to do anything like that."

Another wistful smile. Why was that always the word that came to mind when he thought of Una? Wistful. Mournful and dreamy and yearning. Other people moved through time in a straight line, getting older, changing. Una seemed preserved in a sort of perpetual longing, nostalgic for things that had never happened and could never be.

"I know you wouldn't," she said. "But I almost asked you once."

"You did?"

"Yes. It was a few years after you and Carl came home from Redmond. I was quite ready to propose to you."

"Why didn't you?"

"I asked Carl first. He was . . . not in favor."

No, he wouldn't have been. When was this, exactly, Shirley wondered. Before Wilkie's proposal? After? Either way, no, Carl would not have been in favor.

"I might have said yes," he admitted.

"I think that's why Carl wouldn't let me ask."
What would it have been like to live here right from the start? To call this house his home without apology? To wake up here every morning? To know when the Merediths had tea in the dark or, better yet, to help them sleep til sunrise?

Useless speculation.

Shirley tried to drink the last of his tea and found it impossible. He stood and crossed to the sink, rinsing his cup and setting it in the drainer with a tiny click.

When he could speak, he said, "I'm glad you didn't ask."

"Why?"

"Carl says you may have some better prospects these days."

Una looked down into her cup, retreating into her familiar posture of abnegation. "He shouldn't have said that. It isn't true."

It only took a single step to stand behind her, bend low, embrace her around the back of the chair.

"I hope you're wrong about that."

Shirley squeezed Una gently and kissed her cheek, just at the corner of the wan smile.

"You should go back to bed," she said very quietly. "You still have a few hours."

Shirley did as she bid him, padding silently toward the living room, leaving Una with her perpetual teacup and her quavering candle, waiting wistfully for the coming dawn.

Notes:

*Scuttle, a three-year-old mare owned by King George V, won the 1928 1000 Guineas Stakes at Rowley Mile Racecourse at Newmarket.
This evening, I went away up the hill and prowled about the Disappointed House by moonlight. The Disappointed House was built thirty-seven years ago — partly built, at least — for a bride who never came to it. There it has been ever since, boarded up, unfinished, heart-broken, haunted by the timid, forsaken ghosts of things that should have happened but never did.

- L.M. Montgomery, *Emily's Quest* (1927)

It was a pleasant walk from Aster House to the St. Columba's, which Carl attempted to enjoy, despite the residual fragility of his head. He was used to the city in winter, when the sidewalks were slippery with graying ice and the wind whipping off the harbor was strong encouragement to hurry from one warm shelter to another. Now it was May and lilacs bloomed in every dooryard, crowding the air with the perfume of ever-returning spring. It was impossible to escape them, even at Aster House, where the cloying scent had mingled with the strong coffee Di had poured down his throat when he woke in the early afternoon. It had been a long time since Carl had gotten properly drunk, but tea was plainly inadequate after seeing Shirley off at the harbour. It had been cathartic to drain a bottle with Di and talk a little and cry a little and fall asleep on her bed curled together like kittens. Coffee and a bath and more coffee and Carl was just about able to drag himself out into the floral-fragrant evening for the supper date he had arranged in soberer times.

The Second Presbyterian manse boasted a particularly fine lilac bush outside one of its jutting bay windows, obscuring the interior with clouds of purple blossoms. A cluster of starlings pecked the earth at its base, their iridescent plumage shining green and purple and daring anyone to see anything other than a pleasant tableau.

Carl was neither deceived nor deterred. He tightened his grip on the bouquet he had poached from Aster House's front garden and rang the bell, hoping his bowtie was straight.

Edith Marckworth answered the door with a dazzling smile.

"Mr. Meredith! How good to see you again. Anthony was so pleased when you called to say you'd be in town. Do come in!"

Carl offered the bouquet along with the little customary tidbits of praise for the house, the lilacs, the new way of styling her hair that was so becoming. He'd missed his customary visit last year, though he and Anthony had continued trading their usual letters. They were the sort that could be read aloud in any company, only rarely hinting at what they had once been to one another and could be again if they only had a phonograph and a pot of rouge and a locked door.

"Carl!" Anthony emerged from the recesses of the house to embrace his friend while Edith went off to find a vase. He was warm and solid, his clerical collar peeking out from a cozy sweater that enveloped Carl in welcome comfort. When they broke apart, Anthony kept hold of Carl's shoulders, peering at him with concern. "I want to say you're looking well, but you're a bit green around the gills."

"Sorry," Carl chuckled. "I had a long night. I don't hold my liquor well anymore."
"You never did."

"Maybe not. But you! You look very well."

It was true. Anthony appeared to be in robust good health. It was a great comfort to let him curve a friendly arm around Carl's shoulder and lead him to the dining room.

The Marckworths kept a merry table. They were the sort of family that played games over dinner, requiring one another to answer fanciful hypotheticals or contribute morsels of knowledge to the collective store. Tonight, in honor of their guest, Anthony asked his brood what type of insect they would most like to be. Little Gladys was very sure she'd like to be a ladybird, while Paul and David squabbled over who had claimed tarantula first. Carl settled this by pointing out that tarantulas were not, in fact, insects, and placating them both by naming a variety of gruesome wasps.

"What about you, Mr. Meredith?" Harry asked.

Carl smiled fondly at the half-grown eldest who was beginning to look so much like his father as he had been at Redmond. "I've always loved ants best."

When the meal was done, the children helped their mother clear the table while Carl followed Anthony to his office, settling into the lilac-shaded bay window seat. It was the sort of lush, wood-paneled room that would have had a well-stocked bar cart if it had not belonged to a minister. As it was, the whiskey lived in a bottom drawer with a pair of cut-glass tumblers that sent refracted rainbows flickering giddily along the spines of many sober and learned tomes.

"Only a very little bit for me," Carl apologized. "I really did overdo things last night."

Anthony handed over a single finger of amber liquid that smelled like a campfire. "Are you in town long?"

"No. I go back tomorrow. I just came to see Shirley off to England."

"England? I thought he was training cadets in Ontario."

"He was," Carl said taking a timid sip. "He took another post. Wanted to be closer to the front."

"Hence the long night?"

"I got a little sloppy with Di Blythe."

Anthony raised his glass as if to sip, but was prevented by the smile that widened into a soft chuckle.

"What?" Carl asked.

"Nothing. Just . . . it's really something, you know?"

Carl did not know. His furrowed brow prompted more laughter but no more information until he gave in and asked, "What's really something?"

Anthony rolled the tumbler in his hand, watching it slosh. "The two of you. Still together. Gosh, how long has it been? Twenty years at least."

Carl shrugged. "Closer to thirty."

The toasting glass might have been mocking if it has been less heartfelt. "That calls for
The whiskey burned the inside of Carl's nose as he drank, but the spreading warmth in his chest was worth it. Truth be told, he didn't feel particularly happy, but it felt churlish to say so, particularly in this house.

"Thanks," he said.

Carl might have left it at that, but there were so few opportunities to talk, to really say something worth saying, and he found himself incautious in his curiosity.

“What about you?” he asked. "I've always wondered . . ."

Anthony poured himself another measure. "Wondered what?"

"Are you happy?"

Anthony paused, poised over the glass as if he had forgotten whether he had finished pouring or not yet begun. "Yes," he said quietly as he set down the bottle. “I am. That is . . . I have so much. My children. My congregation . . . ”

Carl raised an eyebrow in eloquent inquiry.

"You must believe me about Edith," Anthony murmured. "I do love her. We're the very best of chums."

Carl thought of the dinner table, the banter, the Marckworth children in all their glowing good health, and Edith presiding with a smile. It wasn't a bad life, at least not to look at from the outside.

"Is that enough?"

Anthony's face sagged and Carl's conscience chided him. What did it matter? It wasn't kind to ask. A half-formed apology was halfway to his lips when Anthony sighed.

"Nobody gets everything they want, do they? Not even you, I expect."

"No," Carl conceded quietly. He and Una had done all they could to make the little gray house a home, but it was a very quiet one, and empty, for all it was so small. "Not everything."

It was a simple truth, and like many simple truths, speaking it aloud opened space for more honesty. Anthony took the place beside Carl in the window seat, pulling his feet up on the cushions and letting his head loll back against the frame.

"You would have made a wonderful father."

Carl tapped his toes against the edge of the carpet. "Maybe," he shrugged. "Do you remember Nellie Fletcher? My friend from Redmond?"

"Sure."

"Shirley wanted me to marry her."

"No he didn't."

Carl smiled down at his own feet. "No. You’re right. He didn't. But he told me to consider it. She liked me. A lot. And I . . . well . . . I'm not quite like you and Shirley. I could have loved Nellie the
“way she loved me. It wouldn’t have been an act.”

“But you chose Shirley anyway?”

“Of course I did.”

Anthony clicked his tongue and took a long pull on his drink. "Did you ever tell Nellie why?"

"Yes. Have you ever told Edith?"

Another sip. For a moment, Carl thought he would get no answer. But at length, Anthony croaked, "Yes."

No need to ask a follow-up. He would tell or not, but it was his choice.

“I meant to keep my vows,” Anthony said on a sigh. “And I did for a long time. But then I . . . strayed. I felt so ashamed of myself that I resolved to stop, and I did. But then a few years went by and I stumbled again, and then again. I felt awful about lying to Edith. I do love her, Carl, and I didn’t want to hurt her. I prayed and prayed and kept coming back to the truth will make you free. That seemed like a terrible idea, but I couldn’t continue on as I was. So, I told Edith everything.”

“You did? When?"

“About eight years ago.”

Carl was honestly surprised. Not that Anthony had stepped out; he was as human as anyone else. No, he was surprised by the obvious warmth and affection he had observed all evening. How old was Gladys? Five? Maybe six? Definitely not eight.

“And she wasn't angry?"

Anthony chortled darkly. "Oh, I wouldn't say that. But she loves me, and I love her. We talked. A lot. She listened to me and tried to understand, and even though she was very, very angry, she was sorry, too, that I’d been struggling alone. There were things that were making her unhappy, too — things she had been keeping in and didn’t know how to talk about — but she was able to trust me because I’d finally trusted her. And now we’re so much closer than we were before. I realize that sounds impossible, but you must believe me. We can tell each other anything now. Everything. Neither of us has any secrets anymore."

"She forgave you?"

"Yes. And I forgave her. We go on forgiving each other and being as generous as we can. I think that's really what it means to love someone — helping them find their happiness without jealousy and finding your joy in theirs.”

Carl was still skeptical. Could two people who needed such different things ever truly thrive together?

“What does that mean?” he asked. "In practice, I mean.”

“We have an understanding. We have our life together. And we have our own private lives as well. Edith has a very nice gentleman friend who adores her.”

Carl was sure it could never work. Someone would get terribly hurt.

Anthony nudged him with a toe. "You mustn't think our life is a tragedy, Carl. Go ask Edith."
Maybe it's not exactly the life she expected, but it's still a good one."

Carl was not convinced. "You lied, to her, Anthony," he said quietly. "Maybe you had good intentions, but you were lying to her from the start. What kind of choice did she have when you were finally honest with her? What could she have done? Asked for a divorce? Risked losing her children and humiliating you both in public? She should have had a choice from the beginning, but you didn't let her. It wasn't fair."

Anthony studied the bottom of his cup. "I know. You're right. It's no excuse to say that the world isn't fair either. I wasn't honest with Edith before we married, and that was wrong. But I've spent the last eight years making amends and you must believe me when I say that we've found a way that works for us. It might not work for everyone, but I think there are more roads to happiness than most people have dared to imagine."

Perhaps. Goodness knew the Lowbridge Road had a loop or two in it where most roads had only bends.

"So . . . you're happy?"

A complex emotion rippled across Anthony's expressive face, never resolving into one Carl could name. He knew his friend well, but not well enough, and perhaps there were depths at 45 that had simply not been there at 25.

"I've made my choices," Anthony said, "and I don't often regret them."

"But you do sometimes?"

"Only when I think about you."

"Me?" Carl's brows shot up and Anthony laughed.

"I didn't quite mean it like that," he said, pausing to take a fortifying sip. "Well, no. I did mean it like that. But I knew that you were a lost cause right from the start. Gosh, Harry used to tease me about you, right from the very first night we played darts together. But no, I meant . . . when I think about what you have with Shirley. It's hard not to be jealous."

It seemed improbable to Carl that anyone could envy his life. From the inside, it was all goodbyes and disappointed houses and inescapable anxieties always fluttering at the edges of his mind, grown from butterflies to bats now that Shirley's transport was out in the middle of the North Atlantic. But the soft, sympathetic gaze of his old friend saw clearly enough, and it was enough to make a sob gather in Carl's chest, here in the wood-paneled, hearth-warm office under the lilac bush that hid them from the street. The only way to stave it off was with a smile.

"Harry really used to tease you about me?"

Anthony pulled a face and relaxed against the window frame. "You were awfully cute. I hated Shirley."

"Did you?"

"Sure. But there wasn't a fella at Redmond who didn't hate one or the other of you. Except maybe Harry."

Carl raised his glass. "To Harry."
"To Harry," Anthony echoed. "And we never really hated you."

The Westland Lysander at the RAF base in Newmarket was painted black. Matte black. A black so flat and unrelenting that it seemed to drink light in, rather than reflecting it. Nothing at all like the daffodil-yellow Harvards back at Camp Borden.*

"They look bloody fearsome in daylight," Squadron Leader Grayson was explaining, "but we don't fly during the day. Only at night and only at the full moon. With luck, the Jerries will never see you and you'll never see them."

Shirley ran a palm over the fuselage of the Lysander — Lizzie to her friends. She reminded him absurdly of an old chantey of Captain Malachi's — round in the counter and bluff in the bow — stubby and blunt, her short, tapered wings mounted nearly as high as the Piper Cub's, giving a similar impression of rabbit ears. She had fixed landing gear, rather than retractable, with two enormous, ungainly bulges dangling from her undercart. Shirley was reminded of Nomad trying to fly back to Davenport carrying a fat gopher, wings pumping hard just to stay airborne. Gil would certainly take the piss out of him for flying this nugget.

But the Lizzie had other qualities to recommend her. For one thing, she could fly remarkably slowly. Admittedly, this feature had not served the RAF well in the campaign over France in the spring of 1940, but it was a tremendous asset if you wanted to land in a dooryard. Furthermore, the cockpit sat very high over the body, poking up above the wings to give an excellent field of view for reconnaissance and photography. It wasn't an aircraft that was good at everything, but it was very good at something specific.

"The full moon, sir?" Shirley asked.

"That's right," Squadron Leader Grayson confirmed. "We fly with no lights, so you'll need the moonlight to read your map. No navigator either, I'm afraid — we fly solo with no wireless communication. You'll be doing your own navigating by dead reckoning and landmarks on the ground, such as they are."

Like going back in time, technology-wise. Oh well, that didn't bother Shirley much. He was confident in his maths.

"What about being seen from above?"

"Pardon?"

Shirley frowned. "Matte black will be hard to see against the night sky if you're looking up from an anti-aircraft gun. But if a fighter is flying above you on a moonlit night and looking down, wouldn't a blotched paint job on the uppers be better camouflage?"

Squadron Leader Grayson blinked, a look of mild consternation drawing sandy brows together over his delicate nose. "Perhaps," he said, then drew a notepad from his tunic pocket and scribbled something down.

As he wrote, Shirley scrutinized the man who was technically his commander, though he didn't actually outrank him. Slim and narrow-featured, Grayson couldn't have been thirty. He reminded Shirley of RAF Newmarket itself, which was not a purpose-built aerodrome, but rather several temporary buildings imposed on the Rowley Mile Racecourse. Earlier this morning, after introducing Shirley to the rest of the squadron, Grayson had lamented that he had arrived too late to watch the Duke of Westminster's three-year-old — a fine horse indeed — win the 2000 Guineas
Stakes. Not that they ran on Rowley Mile at the moment, of course. No, the RAF had turned the flat, buttercup-dappled heath into a runway and relocated all races to the nearby July Racecourse, which would have to do for the duration.

"Am I permitted to know what, exactly, you do on these flights, sir?" Shirley asked.

"Naturally, Blythe." Grayson tucked his notebook back into a pocket. "Our main objective is to support clandestine fighters in France. Keep the flame of resistance burning and all that. We work closely with agents trained by the Special Operations Executive for duty behind the lines — sabotage, reconnaissance, organization of resistance networks, wireless communications, etcetera, etcetera."

Shirley had suspected as much, but frowned at the etceteras. "Spies?"

Grayson pursed his lips daintily. "I don't know that they particularly like to be called that."

"Who are they?"

"All sorts. Polish refugees. English gents who grew up in France and are fluent. One bloke was some sort of arms dealer. There are women, too, though we haven't flown any yet."

"And you fly them to France?"

"We fly them to France, Blythe. Sometimes Poland. Norway. Wherever they need to go, really. Sometimes we fly them over in a bomber and they parachute out; other times we hand-deliver them with the Lizzies. Two passengers fit comfortably, three in a pinch. We do extractions, as well: high-profile exiles and resistance leaders and SOE agents who have completed their missions."

"So it's a taxi service?"

"A taxi service!" It took Grayson a moment to decide whether to be outraged or amused, but he settled on laughter. "I suppose it is! A spy taxi! That's very good. But it's not only passengers; we deliver supplies as well."

He indicated the bomb bays, empty now, but clearly renovated to hold some sort of cargo.

"Each bay holds a six-foot cylinder packed with whatever supplies the Frogs have requested. They're starved for munitions, so we send Sten guns, ammunition, plastic explosives. Also wireless equipment, medical supplies — we once sent printer's ink to keep an underground newspaper circulating."

A lifeline. Of course, the French were bearing the brunt of the risk, and no half-dozen Lizzies in the world could deliver enough guns or enough saboteurs to overthrow the Nazis. But they could help the French hold out, worrying the edges of the Occupation with attacks on telegraph wires and power stations, breaking factory equipment and disrupting transportation. They wouldn't do much real damage, but it might help keep spirits up. It was good work. Important work.

Shirley slapped the Lizzie with a flat palm. "When can I begin, sir?"

The question seemed to please Grayson, who smiled genially, looking so boyish that Shirley revised his earlier guess at the man's age downward. Maybe 25?

"You've a fair bit of training to do yet, Blythe. The Lizzies are very particular birds, especially modified like this. You'll be flying at very low altitudes with heavy loads and landing in whatever hayfield or cow pasture the resistance can secure. It's murder on the engines and the undercarts.
Our ground crews are the best in the business, but it's up to you to bring the old girl home to them. So you'll need to practice very short landings and takeoffs. Very short. Plus you'll have navigation training and the other as well."

"The other?"

Grayson's smile tightened into an apology. "We aren't SOE agents here, Blythe. But the nature of these missions . . . well, if you ever do see the Jerries up close, they aren't likely to draw a very fine distinction between passengers and pilots. You'll be trained in evasion, escape, and withstanding interrogation."

Right.

The fuselage was cool under Shirley's palm, the black wings overhead creating a little patch of shade that dimmed the buttercups underfoot. It was probably a good thing that he couldn't put any of this in a letter. Still, he'd be lying if he said he wasn't itching to climb up into the cockpit and see just what Lizzie was capable of.

"Let's get started."

Notes:

*The next several chapters are informed by a book called We Landed by Moonlight: Secret RAF Landings in France, 1940-1944 (1998), written by Lysander pilot Group Captain Hugh Verity.
The consultants from SOE had issued Shirley civilian clothing with the tags cut out. There was a coarse white shirt and a blue roll-neck sweater, along with knobbly corduroy trousers and aggressively nondescript skivvies. Not a single article bore a tailor's mark or manufacturer's label, not even the shoes, which Shirley was supposed to keep stowed with his escape kit.

He would still fly in his boots and flight jacket. If he were ambushed and forced to surrender before he could get away, there was a chance the bits of uniform might get him sent to a POW camp rather than a Gestapo interrogation. Not much of a chance, but a chance nonetheless. If he had an opportunity to evade capture, he would burn the uniform along with the Lysander and melt into the civilian population.

That's where the escape kit came in, with all the essentials: a wad of cash thick enough for bribes or black market food, a map printed on silk that could fold to the size of a thumb, a compass, fishing line and hooks, emergency rations, and — indispensable, no doubt — a black woolen beret.

Shirley tended to think that no hat on earth would make a difference once he opened his mouth. After six weeks of study between training sessions, his French was better than it had ever been, which was to say that he could understand a third of what people said to him and respond with the vocabulary of an especially bright toddler.

Still, the rest of the training had gone very well and Shirley was ready for his final test. He had sailed through the physical conditioning and small arms practice, and impressed the SOE instructors during simulated interrogations. The Lysander pilots didn't receive full SOE training, but they knew enough about sensitive operations that they needed to be able to follow protocol if they were ever captured. If that happened, the goal wasn't to survive. Instead, the pilots were supposed to endure a full forty-eight hours of interrogation in order to give their compromised network enough time to disperse.

In the event that the pilots were able to evade capture after things went agley, they had instructions to return to England as quickly as possible, either by linking up with the Resistance for an extraction by Lysander or by making their way to Spain or Gibraltar and presenting themselves to British authorities there. Tricky, since they'd be carrying false papers, but just get to a consulate and the RAF promised they'd sort the whole thing out from there.
By far, Shirley's favorite part of training had been getting to know the Lizzies. He'd been assigned to Lysander D, code named Odd Duck, and could honestly say that she was right up there with the old Curtiss and the Piper Cub in any competition for his affections. Let other men praise their Spitfires and Hurricanes; Odd Duck was a dumpy little gem and Shirley loved her.

True to her name, she had all manner of quirks, one of which was a fundamental inelegance on the ground. Sometimes, Shirley could barely taxi her from runway to hangar, given her ornery insistence on going in a straight line at all times. But give her a straightway — a very short one — and you'd be in the air and gaining altitude before you even realized you'd begun. By now, Shirley could launch Odd Duck from a cottage lane and put her down safely on a kitchen table.

He had been ready to fly his qualifying mission for weeks, but the Special Duties squadron only flew under the full moon. Shirley watched it wax silver, growing round and fat with each passing night until it lacked only a sliver. Then it was time to suit up.

"Let's see your watch," Grayson drawled, standing by a table in the makeshift headquarters. The tabletop was littered with false papers for one BLANCHET, Sébastien Jean, it being easier to recall a lie when it was half true. There were other things, too — a map, a compass, and a small box marked Personal Effects, BLYTHE, S. J. that already contained Shirley's wallet and identity tags.

Shirley unhooked the warm leather strap and handed over his timepiece, rubbing the cool band it left around his wrist.

Grayson examined it, frowning. "You'll need it for flying, of course, but no rural Frenchman would wear a Radiolite. If you ever have to ditch, destroy it."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't you want a better watch than this?" Grayson frowned. "I half expect it to have Mickey Mouse on the dial."

"I like it just fine, sir," Shirley said evenly.

He concentrated on betraying no emotion when Grayson flipped the watch over and ran a thumb across the back. "TCM?"

He raised a blonde brow, but Shirley could hold his silence for much longer than this.

"Well, think of a plausible cover," Grayson sighed as he tossed the watch back. "In case something goes wrong and someone interrogates you about it."

"Yes, sir." Shirley fastened it back in place and felt more himself, even in these strange and anonymous clothes.

"Any other personal effects?" Grayson asked. "Religious medals? Rings?"

No and no, but Shirley reached into his pocket and produced his old corkscrew knife and the silver lighter, placing them carefully in Grayson's palm.

The knife passed muster with a shrug, being nothing much to look at and useful besides.

The lighter was another matter. Grayson evidently liked the look of it, running his thumb over the hinge in a way that would have made Shirley flinch if he were the flinching sort.

"Best leave it," Grayson said.
The lighter rattled into the box of personal effects, to be reclaimed when Shirley was safe home again.

"Shouldn't I have a lighter, though?" Shirley asked. "In case I have to burn the Lysander?"

The Nazis had been itching to get their hands on a converted Lysander, the better to understand how SOE agents were getting in and out of France. They certainly preferred that it still have an agent or two inside when they captured it, or a pilot at the very least. But if all they could do was capture the machine, that would do well enough. The pilots of the Special Duties Squadron were under very strict orders to destroy their planes if they could not get them off the ground.

"You can use the matches from your kit," Grayson said.

There was nothing left but to find out what, exactly, the qualifying task entailed. It wasn't a real mission; Shirley would carry no passengers until he had proven his mettle. But there was still an objective, which Grayson was now indicating on the map.

"Here it is, Blythe. You will fly under operational conditions — no lights, no wireless, no navigator — to these coordinates: 47.1314 degrees North, 0.1561 degrees West. You will see The Light. Then you will return and report on what you saw."

Shirley scowled. "The Light?"

"You'll either find it or you won't," Grayson smirked. "If you do, you won't be in any doubt."

Shirley would have preferred a straightforward answer rather than this enigma, but there was a job to be done and he would do it, even if he was still not clear exactly what it was. Well, he had coordinates and that was all he really needed.

Dusk settled over the racecourse as Shirley made his final preparations. It wasn't a dangerous mission, not really, not if you didn't count antiaircraft batteries on the coast or the usual hazards of night flying or weather or radio silence.

Now, he sat with pencil and ruler, marking his map with landmarks and approximate flying times. He placed a neat circle around his objective, noting the distinctive bend in the Loire to the north and the straight path of a canal that cut a visible swath to the west.

Out on the runway, the ground crew had Odd Duck oiled and fueled and ready to go. Shirley swung up the spars and into the cockpit, checking his instruments and compass by the cool light of the rising moon. His map was strapped to his thigh with the target area clearly visible as long as he was able to catch a moonbeam.

A ready signal from the torches of the ground crew and Shirley began to prime the engine and cylinders, pumping and pumping until the finicky Bristol Mercury engine decided it was ready as well. The propellor started to spin and then there was nothing left to do but follow the torch path down the runway, pick up a little speed, and lift free, up, up, into the moonlight.

***

The constant growl of Odd Duck's engine was as reassuring as it was ominous, like the rattling breath of a congested child: bad enough, certainly, but much worse if it were to stop. Below, the spectral shimmer of a full moon rimed the lapping waves of the Channel, gilding a path toward the dark shore ahead.

Shirley crossed the coastline at an outrageous altitude more suited to dragonflies than aeroplanes.
But a plane at normal altitude was visible a long way off, so the lower the better for passing over the beaches. He had charted a course between observation stations, and if he had navigated well, Shirley should be able to slip past unnoticed.

The engine noise was a problem, of course. It seemed astonishing that *Odd Duck* didn't wake the whole countryside with her grunting, gnarring grumble. The thrum reverberated from Shirley's chest out to the very tips of his fingers and toes, his whole body vibrating in time with the oscillation of the machinery. But France was dark and sleeping, or dark and wakeful, but impossible to tell the difference in a blackout.

The beach and its defenses behind him, Shirley began to climb. Not high enough to attract the notice of night fighters patrolling the skies for bombers, but high enough that he no longer had to worry about tall trees. It would take another two hours to reach The Light, whatever it was, and no sense flying low the whole way.

At cruising altitude, Shirley took a moment to pencil some notations on his map, recording the time and marking his current heading. Without the lights of Caen and Le Mans to guide him, he would have to rely on dead reckoning to find his objective. It wasn't so very difficult, as long as there were no complications.

There weren't. A little flak here and there. A searchlight to avoid. A squadron of night fighters passing far overhead. But nothing Shirley was not equal to. *Odd Duck* went on grinding through the lonely dark, untethered but for the moon, shining cold and brilliant in a cloudless sky.

Shirley checked the green-glowing Radiolite at intervals, ticking off his current position on the map. The notations were as accurate as they could be, but they were only as good as the fallible mechanisms of watch and compass and airspeed indicator. He'd been especially careful of his compass after hearing one of the other pilots tell how he'd flown fifty miles off course one time, attributing the compass error to *taking his stainless steel whisky flask out of his breast pocket and shoving it into the top of one of his flying boots, very near the compass.*

When he thought he must be close to the Loire, Shirley dipped lower. Yes, there it was, just where it should be, a pewter ribbon of moonlight cutting through the flat black countryside. He followed its cool, glinting undulations until he spied the gleaming limestone buildings of Saumur, the white city that could not be hidden from the moon even when its windows were dark.

No sign of The Light yet.

The target coordinates lay to the south. But there were no lights anywhere and Shirley shifted in his seat, wondering whether perhaps this were a puzzle or a pun. What was the test, exactly? Was it a metaphor?

It was not.

Neither was it ambiguous. Shirley was still miles away when he glimpsed The Light, which couldn't be anything else. Closer, it was a brilliant rectangle on the ground, a harsh outline of electric lights shining brighter than any lighthouse.

There was no mistaking it at all, but Shirley circled twice, memorizing details, making estimates, noting distances. It couldn't be a factory or a depot, not unless the Germans wanted to make it as easy as possible for the RAF to bomb it. No village was lit up like that, not even in festival time, and none of these ancient little towns were built on such precise geometries. Whatever it was, Shirley was very glad to leave it behind.
The midsummer nights were short. By the time Shirley touched back down in Newmarket, the eastern sky was already lightening to gray, with pink and peach not far behind. He left *Odd Duck* in the capable hands of the ground crew and reported to Grayson's office hut, finding the man hunched over an enticingly aromatic cup of coffee.

"Blythe!" he exclaimed. "Right on time. Didn't run into any trouble?"

"None, sir."

"Did you see The Light?"

"I did."

"Describe it."

Grayson sipped his coffee as Shirley recounted what he had seen, including every detail he could remember.

"Jolly good, Blythe," he grinned. "No need to scout the place; the idea is to navigate efficiently under operational conditions and you've done that in spades. Now I imagine you'd like some breakfast and a kip."

"That's all, sir?"

"Yes. Fine work. You'll have a real mission under the August moon."

Shirley nodded and turned to go. There would be eggs and perhaps even bacon over at the manor house serving as officer's quarters. Heavenly coffee, too, though he'd only allow himself a sip or he'd never get to sleep. As it was, Shirley suspected it might be difficult to rest easily.

He turned back to Grayson, who had settled back to his paperwork.

"What is it, sir?" Shirley asked.

"Pardon?"

"The Light? It can't be a military base, not lit up like that."

"Oh." Grayson frowned. "It's a prison camp."

That made sense. Nearly two million French soldiers had been captured last year, and they had to be held somewhere. Although . . .

"I had understood that most of the French POWs were being held in Germany," Shirley said.

"They are. This is a concentration camp for civilians."*

Shirley wasn't certain he wanted to know more, but he had to ask. "What sort of civilians?"

Grayson sighed. "We aren't sure exactly. There are rumors, of course. Nothing concrete. But we're finding camps all over. They make good landmarks, always lit up like that. Floodlights around the perimeter."

Rumors and inference. Maybe it was nothing at all, but Shirley's flesh crept under the coarse weave
of his civilian shirt.

"... some sleep, Blythe," Grayson was saying.

"Sorry, sir?"

"Sleep. You can file your report this afternoon."

"When do I start preparing for my August mission?"

The chortle was not unfriendly, though it still sounded harsh to Shirley's ear. "In August! You'll find we get quite a lot of leave around here, Blythe. You're due back at the quarter moon. Until then, try to have a bit of fun, won't you?"

One Sunday morning in July, Carl Meredith walked into the Glen St. Mary church with Di Blythe and escorted her to the manse pew. Ordinarily, such a sight would have sparked a month's gossip, but in this case it barely registered. After all, Jerry and Nan were home from Charlottetown and it was hardly surprising that the Blythe twins would want to sit together when they had the chance.

Besides, every eye was riveted to the Ingleside pew, where Able Seaman Wally Blythe sat grinning a toothy grin as Zoe Maylock clung to the arm of his Navy blues, her blonde curls and his close-cropped carrots attracting whispers like moths to flame.

"Are they really engaged?"

"And Wally only nineteen!"

"Reminds me of us, dearest."

"It's a wonder young Doctor Blythe allows it."

"Another war wedding afoot, I suppose?"

"Faith says they aren't," Di whispered, leaning toward Carl's ear. "Not officially, at least. Apparently, Zoe's parents are against it for some reason."

"Really?" asked Carl. "I thought it was your parents who didn't approve of Zoe."


Indeed, Jem and Faith appeared to have no reservations about Zoe's presence in their pew, or else their delight at having Wally home for a few precious days outshone any qualms. Perhaps the kids were engaged and perhaps they were not, but they were happy and safe for the moment, and that was more than enough.

Rosemary coaxed the harmonium into a wheezy prelude and the congregation stood to answer the call to worship. Together, they sang the grand old hymn:

\begin{verbatim}
Oh God, our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast
And our eternal home.
\end{verbatim}

Di tucked her arm comfortably into Carl's as they settled in for the sermon. Carl was very glad that
she had asked the hospital for a few weeks' vacation this summer, and that she had decided to come home to the Island. Aster House had grown solemn without the spritely presence of its pink lady, and Carl was glad to be able to offer Di some of the comfort she had offered him. Sylvia was in Basingstoke, writing jolly letters about the myriad ways the Canadian infantry boys found to injure themselves as they attempted to keep busy with endless training exercises. But a letter was not a substitute and even practical Di could not soldier on alone forever. Anthony had promised to look in on her regularly, and had begun sending cheerful, friendly letters once every other week or so, in which reports of Di's continued good health served as thin cover for checking in on Carl himself. Carl couldn't say he wasn't grateful, both for the concern and for the task of keeping up another correspondence.

He put a hand over Di's in the crook of his elbow as Father began to speak.

"Our help in ages past," Father quoted. "The same yesterday, to-day, and forever. When we forget God, He remembers us."****

How strange to sit here, thinking of past, present, and future as unchanged and unchanging. Carl had sat in this very pew twenty-six years ago, in his last boyhood summer, and heard a very similar sermon. Well, perhaps not this very pew. The manse children had always been given to sitting all over the church, and especially that summer, with his eighteenth birthday looming and the end of the war nowhere in sight. Perhaps Carl could have claimed a place in the Ingleside pew then, in the name of friendship, but he had been too afraid of Susan's weather eye. Would she have noticed anything amiss? Maybe not, fretting over the fate of Premysl and Petrograd as all summer the Russian retreat went on — a long-drawn-out agony.**** It was the same now, except that Premysl was called Przemyśl and long since fallen in any case, and Petrograd was called Leningrad and likely to go the same way. The same yesterday, today, and forever.

But there was other evidence that time did not, in fact, stand still. In the pulpit, Father spoke with a voice that was not quite as carrying at seventy-six as it had been at fifty. Susan slept quietly in the over-harbor graveyard under the stone Shirley had chosen for her, near Miss Cornelia and as far as possible from Sophia Crawford. Babies who were neither born nor thought of in that long-ago summer were now rumored to be engaged. And of course, there was the memorial plaque hanging over the Blythe pew — Sacred to the memory of Walter Cuthbert Blythe — that drew Carl's eye no matter which bench he chose. If there was one thing that really was eternal, that was it.

The sermon ended without Carl's noticing. Luckily, Di still had a hold on his arm and he stood when she did. He tripped through the rest of the service competently enough without absorbing a word of it, only really waking when people began to move into the aisles and toward the door. More than a few found excuses to greet one or another of the Blythes, their gawping only lightly veiled by neighborly overtures.

"So do you guess they're official?" Jerry asked, dark eyes flashing as he jostled Carl with his elbow.

"Oh, Jerry, they're children!" Nan protested.

"They're both nineteen," Jerry observed. "I had to fill Jem's pockets with rocks and douse him with cold water twice a week to make him wait that long to propose to Faith."

The church was humming with chatter and there was no way Jem could have actually heard them, but he chose that moment to look up from the fawning attentions of Gilbertine Pollock and shoot an exasperated plea toward the manse pew.

"That's us summoned, I suppose," Di laughed.
"You go on," Jerry said, dropping a kiss on Nan's cheek and holding the pew door open for her and Di. "We'll be along in a minute."

Carl peered at his brother, who nodded good morning to several passing Drews before turning back to Carl.

"You doing alright?" he asked, dropping his voice with genuine concern.

"Sure," Carl lied.

Jerry, who had not gotten to be a judge by being easily deceived, frowned. "Carl, if there's ever anything we can do . . ."

"There isn't."

Jerry swallowed whatever he had been about to say and Carl's conscience pricked. He was only trying to help.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "It's good to see you. Good to see Di smiling."

Over by the window, both Blythe twins were laughing over some shared joke with Faith. They were an eclectic trio, Faith radiant in her neat but sturdy Sunday best, Nan having outgrown the Glen in her silk and lace, Di an unapologetic visitor from another genre in Hepburn trousers. But whatever Faith was saying kept them in stitches the whole time Carl looked.

"I could stand to see you smiling a bit more," Jerry said quietly.

"Well then you'll have to learn to tell a joke."

Jerry smiled ruefully and scuffed a toe of his mirror-polished shoe against the bare wood of the floor. "Ah, well, not much hope in that case."

The Ingleside pew was emptying now, Jem waving over the heads of his children for Jerry and Carl to follow them out into the summer sunshine. Wally led the way, head so high it was practically floating, Zoe Maylock skipping down the aisle at his side. If Carl did not exactly smile at sight of them, his face did soften at sight of their joy.

"Not much," he conceded. "But enough to keep going."

Notes:

*Verity, We Landed by Moonlight, 30. They really did have berets in their escape kits.

**Shirley's training is based on Hugh Verity's account of his training in No. 161 Squadron in his book, We Landed by Moonlight. Verity describes the final navigation test given to him before he was qualified to fly SOE agents in his Lysander. The concentration camp at Montreuil-Bellay, just south of Saumur, held several thousand Romani of all ages (including women and children) for the duration of the war. It was not a camp set up specifically for executions, but conditions were pestilential and many of the people interned there died. It was operated by French authorities, not the Germans.

***From "A Commonplace Woman" in The Blythes are Quoted: "One of the sons of one of them was also thought to have a liking for Zoe. She was very popular. But he thought he had the inside track, not to mention the fact that it was whispered that Dr. And Mrs. Blythe had no great liking for
the affair." The context suggests that "Dr. and Mrs. Blythe" are Gilbert and Anne.

****RoI, chapter 15, "Until the Day Break"
The Relationship Expert

August 1941

It was difficult to eat under the unblinking gaze of a hundred glass eyes. Maybe two hundred. Shirley had not counted. All he knew was that the dining room at the manor house where the pilots of the Special Duties Squadron boarded was dominated by a huge glass case full of stuffed birds. Hawks, ravens, starlings, tiny songbirds perched artfully on bits of branch. One particularly fearsome owl had pride of place in its own dome on the top of the cabinet, glaring at anyone who dared consume an egg under its sharp yellow eyes. There were geese, of course, and ducks, pheasants and quail and really, every kind of bird Shirley could name, plus many more besides. He'd ask Carl to fill in the gaps, but fancied he knew what he might say about ornithology by gunshot. The birds loomed in every room of the manor house, staring their dead stares as the pilots attempted to eat and sleep and prepare for their moonlit missions. Shirley spent as much time as possible in the gardens.

The house was small as far as manor houses went. Shirley shared a bedroom with Squadron Leader Grayson. Yet, it was more than sufficient for the squadron’s needs, particularly since their unusual schedule meant that the house was only full for ten days out of the month. Two of the English pilots were married and spent their new moons at home with their wives and children, returning as if some faerie summons called them hither every time the moon waxed full. The others were younger — boys really — and preferred to spend their time in London or at the seaside, basking in the general adoration of a grateful public. Their work was fundamentally solitary, and while they enjoyed cordial relations with one another, their friendships tended to cluster in twos and threes, rather than in general unit cohesion.

That was fine by Shirley, who was the oldest man in the outfit and not inclined toward casual camaraderie in any case. He spent his days picking his way through French phrasebooks and keeping up his correspondence. He couldn’t write about his work, so he made a point of describing the local fauna to Carl, taxidermy excepted, and checking in on the racehorses for his parents. He even ventured an opinion or two on Emily Dickinson in letters to his mother, who sent him some bits of Walter's juvenilia in return. It wasn't half bad, even if it did sound like it was written before the Flood.

This afternoon, however, Shirley had escaped the manor on a southbound train, rolling through the swales of the English countryside toward the Sussex shore. Sometime around sunset, he alighted on a chestnut-shaded platform amid fields of harvest gold that hid an aerodrome somewhere among them.

The cobbled village streets were quiet, but the pub under the sign of St. George and the Dragon was bustling. The taproom was already packed with airmen, jolly even if they weren’t quite drunk yet. There were a few women in the place — a table of Women’s Auxiliary Air Force drivers laughing over their glasses and half a dozen civilian girls dressed for dancing — but for the most part, the patrons were off-duty RAF boys. One was telling a long, loud story about taking down an Me 109; another was trying to carry four pints at once; a group in the corner had some sort of dice game going. Shirley felt old and tired just watching them.

"Uncle Shirley!"

He turned toward the row of booths and yes, there he was, bounding out of his seat, grinning like a great golden jack-o-lantern. Shirley opened his arms and Gil almost knocked him over with a back-
clapping hug. He was real and solid and positively wriggling with excitement.

"You made it!"

"Course I did. You said it was important."

Gil was already steering Shirley back toward the booth whence he had sprung. For the past month, his letters had been bursting with a single topic, and now here she was in the flesh: Rose Findlay-Stevenson. Or, Shirley corrected himself at sight of her WAAF uniform, Section Officer Findlay-Stevenson. She was a lively woman of medium height, with strawberry-blond hair pinned up in rolls and a wry, too-wide mouth that curled at one corner. If Shirley had to guess, he'd say she was at least four or five years older than Gil. She had a firm handshake and snapping green eyes that admitted no possibility of leniency. Shirley liked her on sight.

"Rose, this my Uncle Shirley," Gil announced. "Uncle Shirley, Rose."

"Section Officer," Shirley said, nodding.

"Sir."
Shirley smiled. "I suppose while we're drinking together I can just be Shirley."

"And you must call me Rose."
Gil clapped his hands. "Drinks. Another round, Rose? What will you have, Uncle Shirley?"

"Whatever you're having."
The kid skipped off to the bar and Shirley settled into the booth across from Rose.
"Gil tells me you're an air traffic controller," he said pleasantly.
"Gil tells me you're God Almighty."
Shirley guffawed. "Sorry to disappoint."
She gave him an appraising look up and down. "Haven't so far."
Oh, Christ, Gil had his hands full here. Shirley was tickled to death.
"How did you two meet?" he asked.
"Over the wireless. Ford decided he liked my voice and told me so every time I guided him home from a mission. He's quite the flirt, your nephew."
"I have no doubt. Though you'll forgive me if I say I'm surprised that that worked."
It was Rose's turn to laugh. "Certainly not! You're none of you as original as you think you are."
"But you're here, aren't you?"
The supple smile softened a few degrees. "One night, he came limping back behind the others. No jokes. No teasing. He didn't say that anything was wrong, but I knew."
Shirley's brows drew together. Gil hadn't mentioned any incidents in his letters . . .
"His kite had taken a few hits," Rose explained. "He wasn't wounded, but his oxygen system had
been damaged. I didn't know that, but I could hear him coughing and he wasn't . . . himself. Wasn't sharp."

Laughter was a distant memory, despite the merriment around them. Oxygen deprivation didn't just lead to shortness of breath — it could cause confusion, impaired judgement, and loss of consciousness. Trying to land three tons of warplane in that state . . .

"He wasn't really listening to orders," she went on. "I knew he was cheeky, but not stupid. That's how I knew something was wrong."

"What did you do?" Shirley asked, voice tight.

"I called him Gilbert. That got his attention. Then I walked him through the whole landing, one step at a time, start to finish. And made sure an ambulance met him on the ground."

Shirley was impressed that she knew how to land a Spitfire, but that wasn't the crucial point at the moment. "Was he alright?"

Rose shrugged and finished off the last sip of her previous pint. "He fainted. I went to see him in the hospital after, which is when he asked me to let him buy me a drink in thanks."

"And the rest is history?"

"History?" This from Gil, who had popped up at the end of the table, balancing three honey-brown glasses against one another.

"I was just telling your uncle your fainting story, since it seems that you forgot it in your letters," Rose said sweetly.

Gil grimaced as he slid into the booth beside her. "I only had to stay in hospital one night. Hardly worth mentioning. I'm sound as a bell."

"Yes, well, I hadn't quite finished the tale," Rose said, the quirk of her lip daring him to stop her.

"It wasn't my fault!" Gil protested. "I was addled!"

"And here I thought you were ready to ring a full peal."

"I am! Only, I was a bit fuddled in the moment."

"A likely story."

Shirley watched the back-and-forth, not knowing what they might be talking about, but watching the way they did it. Eye-to-eye, animated but without rancor, the slightest brush of sleeve against sleeve.

Rose turned toward Shirley, pursing her lips in mock offense. "He forgot my name."

"I never knew your name!"

"Well, he forgot to ask my name. Asked me to go for a pint and then had no way to contact me when he got out of hospital. Didn't even know which tower I worked in!"

"You could have volunteered that information," Gil grumbled, "knowing I was in a delicate state."

Rose unfurled her capacious smile. "And make things easy for you? Never."
Shirley hid a smile in a sip of beer. "I take it you worked it out eventually."

"Every mission after that, I kept waiting to hear her voice," Gil said. "I kept getting assigned to other controllers, though. I thought maybe she had been transferred. I had just decided I'd have to go and start interrogating people at all the different towers when I finally heard her again."

"Yes, and asked me my name right over the open wireless, clever fellow."

"I wasn't about to waste another opportunity."

If Rose had ever really been displeased by his boldness, she seemed to have gotten over her pique. She gave Gil a smile that reached all the way to her eyes, and settled in for a proper chat.

Shirley was pleased to find that he need not contribute much more than the occasional question to keep the conversation rolling. He might have liked to know a bit more about Gil's flying, but for once, Gil's mind was elsewhere. Despite having known one another only a short time, Gil and Rose had any number of stories to share, many of them featuring the exploits of mutual acquaintances or the perpetual challenge of matching up off-duty hours. Shirley's foray to the bar to secure another round did not appear to interrupt the flow of their chatter. He was able glean a few particulars of Rose's background — that she had grown up in a comfortable London suburb, but had an independent streak wide enough to see her working as a telephone operator when the war broke out. She had a passion for radios and for dancing, noting that it was a pity that the WAAF uniforms didn't have much swing to them.

"There's a dance at the village hall later tonight," she noted. "I don't know whether the band is any good, but as long as they can keep a beat, we can make something of it, can't we?"

Gil nodded enthusiastically, then slid out of the booth when Rose excused herself to powder her nose. She pushed through the crowd, collecting admiring glances and a few cruder propositions as she went, turning tipsy flyboys aside with a barbed smile.

When she had disappeared through the door leading to the washrooms, Gil turned eager eyes to Shirley.

"So what do you think?"

"Think?"

"Of Rose!"

Shirley let him dangle a moment, taking a swig of his beer before smirking. "I'm not sure you can keep up with her, Ford."

"Oh, I can."

"You might hurt yourself."

"I really like her," Gil groaned, lolling over the table. "What should I do?"

Shirley grinned into his glass. "Sorry, Ace. This is really not my area of expertise."

"Come on," Gil pleaded. "I don't want to botch this. Give me some advice."

"About women?" Shirley coughed.

"About . . ." Gil lowered his voice conspiratorially, darting a glance toward the washroom door ". . .
There was no swagger to him at the moment, just the earnest avidity of someone who truly wanted to do something well. Shirley wished he could help, but what on earth was he supposed to say?

"What makes you think I know the first thing about it?"

"You always have good advice."

"I'm sure you've gotten plenty of advice on that particular subject."

Gil squirmed against the bench seat, his discomfort reminding Shirley of the two sorts of advice he'd gotten in his own youth. First, from his father, a well-intentioned lecture covering the basics of human reproduction and the duties of a gentleman that managed to be both irrelevant and comically belated. Later, from the other boys in his barracks, crowing tales of a few minutes' fumbling that seemed to provide more pleasure in the boasting than in the inconsequential moment. Frankly, both sorts had struck Shirley as rather grim, and neither bore any resemblance to the laugh-warm haven beneath Mrs. Lynde's tobacco-stripe quilt.

Across the table, Gil gave a glum shrug. "Dad told me it's alright to go with girls, but any girl worth marrying won't let you get away with anything. She'll keep herself pure."

Perhaps the beer had loosened Shirley's reserve. "That's because your dad is a pig."

Gil's eyes widened at this candid assessment, but what the hell. He was grown man and a fellow officer and there was no sense in withholding counsel that might help him carve a little bit of happiness out of this godforsaken world.

"Look," Shirley said, leaning closer. "I assume you've slept with girls before?"

"Uh . . . just the one . . ." Gil said, hiding in his beer as sweat beaded his forehead.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Uhh . . . yes?"

"Did she enjoy it?"

"Uhhh . . ." Gil stalled. "I think so? I'm not sure."

No use sugarcoating this either. "If you're not sure, the answer is no," Shirley said comfortably.

"Well, what am I supposed to do?" Gil asked in a harsh whisper, glancing sidelong toward the washroom door.

Shirley took a long, contemplative sip, giving him time to choose his words. How to translate the core of it into practical advice? His own father had distilled everything into some silly rule about keeping your third shirt button buttoned until you were married. At the time, Shirley had bitten his lip bloody trying not to laugh, but now he felt a pang of sympathy for poor old Dad, who was, after all, trying to condense a sprawling principle into a single concrete rule. It was, to Shirley's mind, the wrong principle, but the challenge was the same.

"Alright, you want my advice? Here it is: Keep your fly buttoned until you can bring her off — consistently — in at least two different ways."

Gil had not been drinking, but he choked all the same. "What?"
"You heard me."

The door-ward glances had become more frenzied, Gil's face gone pale and livid in alternating splotches.

Shirley was unmoved. "It's simple. You have a sacred duty to make sure she has at least as much fun as you do."

"But . . . how . . ." Gil spluttered, goggling.

"I'm sure Section Officer Findlay-Stevenson offers plenty of scope for the imagination," Shirley said blandly. "You might also consider asking her for guidance."

Gil seemed to be inauspiciously tongue-tied, but managed to hiss, "Isn't that disrespectful? I don't want to insult her by implying that she . . . that she knows what she's doing . . ."

Shirley swirled the dregs of his pint. "Well I hope to God one of you does."

"But . . ."

Shirley leaned across the table. "Look, Gil, forget all that nonsense about trying to see what you can get away with. Is that really how you feel about this woman? Like you want to steal something from her?"

"No," Gil muttered, barely audible.

"And the purity stuff, too. There are a lot of miserable ideas in the world, and that's one of the worst. If you both just want a little fun, that's fine. But make it worth her while or don't bother. The question isn't whether you're doing it, but whether you're doing it well."

By now, Gil was beginning to resemble a boiled lobster. Really, if he couldn't even handle an honest conversation, that lovely girl was probably better off without him.

"What if . . ." Gil halted. "What if I'm bad at it?"

Shirley couldn't help chuckling. "You probably will be."

"So what do I do?"

"Practice."

Poor kid looked like he'd been caught in a searchlight. What sort of advice had he been expecting?

"I don't know the secrets to the universe or anything," Shirley continued. "But it always seemed to me that the whole point was to show someone how you felt about them."

"Look at you, the relationship expert," Gil grumbled, conveniently forgetting that he had solicited this advice.

Shirley grimaced, toying with the rim of his glass as he sat back against the cool leather of the booth. "Relationships are a bit more complicated, I'm afraid. If you ever come across any foolproof advice there, I'll be all ears."

Gil shrugged. "Rose says there's only one rule."

"And that is . . ." Shirley was genuinely curious.
"Don't treat her like a lady," Gil said, lips twisting into a rueful smile. "Rose says she's a fellow officer and won't be coddled. It's funny - I always thought you were supposed to treat women like they were precious. But I sort of like it this way. I can tell her anything, even stupid stuff, and she doesn't laugh at me or run off like I thought she would."

"Well, there may be something to that," Shirley admitted.

More than half was all he'd ever promised Carl. Shirley wasn't afraid of being laughed at, but he had to admit to himself that he didn't treat Carl like the fellow officer he wasn't. He didn't want to burden him.

Across the table, Gil was lost in thought, his expression going through a series of impressive acrobatics. Somewhere between astonishment and consternation, he murmured vaguely, "Two ways?"

"That's a bare minimum passing score, Ford."

"Are you sitting an exam?" Rose chirped at Gil's elbow.

He made an inarticulate sound that could only be described as a squeak.

"Studying day and night, I'm sure," Shirley said, finishing the last of his beer.

Across the street, a band started up in the village hall, the lilting warble of a clarinet beckoning through the open window of the pub. Patrons began settling their tabs and drifting out toward the promised dancing.

"I should get going," Shirley said. "You kids have fun."

"Do you really have to go?" Gil asked.

"Gotta catch the train back."

"Will you come down again?" Gil asked, the boy shining through the splendid young officer. "Soon?"

"Oh, I expect you'll find plenty to do without me hanging around playing gooseberry," Shirley smiled as he stood and pulled on his cap.

Gil scooted out of the booth so that he could offer his uncle an embrace. "Thanks," he said, quietly enough so Rose could not hear.

Shirley did not laugh, though there was a merry twinkle in his eye as he bid farewell to Section Office Findlay-Stevenson.

"Keep an eye on that one," he ordered her.

"It's my job, sir," she smiled.

When he reached the door of the pub, Shirley turned back to get one last look. Gil's head was lowered, leaning in close to catch the words from Rose's freshly crimsoned lips over the bustle and thrum of the crowd. They'd be alright.

***

Later, under the spreading branches of the enormous chestnut that shaded the passenger platform,
Shirley waited to see whether the last train north would actually come tonight. Far down the slope, the door of the village hall opened and closed, opened and closed, the intermittent sliver of light mirroring the crescent moon overhead. Hoots of laughter and the tinny ring of trumpets wafted up toward the tracks.

When the radium dial on his wrist showed quarter past eleven, Shirley gave up hope of the train. It was probably possible to beg a bed at the aerodrome, wherever that was. He briefly considered hiking back down to the village to see if Gil and Rose were still at the dance, but grinned to himself and decided not to go poking around dark corners.

Instead, he climbed up into the chestnut tree, a maze of flat black against the star-strewn sky, finding a secure roost in the deep bowl where its several trunks diverged. Settling in, he recalled the old study platform in the apple tree at Ingleside, and Walter's strange desire to sleep on that precarious perch whenever Mum and Dad would permit it. It had always seemed rather foolish to Shirley, especially when there was a perfectly good bed mere yards away. But needs must, and the early morning train would be along to fetch him in a few hours.

Shirley dug around in his pocket for cigarette and lighter, striking the flint twice before it flared. He looked up into the tree, expecting only branches, and jumped when he found two yellow, staring eyes instead.

The flame blinked out as he bobbled the lighter.

Shirley muttered under his breath, fumbling to rekindle the flame. When he did, he found the same two eyes, round and unblinking, regarding him curiously from their perch. A living owl, not a stuffed skin. She tilted her head as if to inquire why any person might want to spend the night in her tree.

"Sorry," Shirley said. "Didn't realize it was occupied."

The owl ruffled her feathers, but did not snap or hoot. She merely stared her yellow stare until Shirley clicked off the light. She was still there a moment later when he lit it again, realizing that this would make a much better letter than the taxidermy, and knowing Carl would want a better description than a pretty big owl. Long, upright tufts on the top of her head. Yellow eyes, alive and intelligent above feathers mottled like bark. He recognized her as the same sort that sat at the apex of the glass case in the dining room, but then again, the two were nothing alike.

Shirley felt a familiar urge and reached for his wallet, shuffling the pictures so that Carl laughed up at him from the deck of the Sweet Flag. The wavering flame rippled across his face, almost as if the photo moved and smiled on its own.

It would be evening in the Gulf right now. Around sunset, probably. Was Carl on the boat right now? Did he have Muggins with him? Or was he already home, helping Una set the table or maybe even writing a letter? He sent one every week, but wrote every day, adding to the missive in different pens or pencil, often with little sketches of bugs or birds in the margins. Sometimes the letters still smelled of the sea when Shirley opened them. They were full of bits of news, making no distinction between the accomplishments of Bruce's children and the success of this year's puffin fledglings, nor between reporting on his latest letter from Anthony Marckworth and the most fascinating article he had read in an ecology journal. Shirley sometimes lost the plot altogether, but it was all there, everything Carl thought or did or felt or wondered, poured out on the page. He wrote about everything, even about his attacks and sleepless nights and the days when he couldn't work at all because he could not get his mind to settle. He'd taken to walking the shore all the way to Mowbray Narrows and back.
Shirley snuffed the flame and put the lighter away, folding his wallet back into his pocket. He wrote, too. Every week. Short letters, full of nothing. What could he say? Nothing about the work, that was for sure. He'd put in bits about the owl and about this visit to Gil, but it wasn't enough.

Look at you, the relationship expert.

If he were home, he would know what to do. That part had always made sense. But keeping a relationship alive just by words? Even the distance between the hangar and the Lowbridge Road had been too much.

It always seemed to me that the whole point was to show someone how you felt about them.

Shirley doubted he could do it in letters. Still, he had to try.

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20 August 1941

Newmarket

Dear Kit,

Letters are not my preferred medium. I never know what to say. In the old days, I would put in some jokes and a bit of news and just hold out hope that you wouldn't forget me before I could see you again. That doesn't seem like enough anymore.

Over the past few days, I've been thinking about these letters. I had a visit with Gil and he wanted some advice - I did my best to give it, though it only made me see where I've been failing. We've always been best in proximity, haven't we? I suppose that's my fault. I'm no good at keeping up by post. I don't even know what to say in person and am happiest when I don't have to say anything at all.

Very hard, then, to say anything worthwhile in a letter. I meant to make this one all about the owl I met last night. I had to spend the night in a tree and I found myself in company with an owl nearly as big as Mugsy, with long tufts sticking up out of its head and huge yellow eyes. I meant to fill up this page with that because I don't know what else to write except that I have to write something because if I don't, you won't know that I'm thinking of you and wishing I could be in two places at once.

Every letter I send you is full of nothing. I can't write about my work, and not just because of the censors. I never know how much to tell you, knowing it upsets you to hear it. I don't want to upset you. At the same time, I wish I could tell you how I love it. At the risk of sounding conceited, I am good at this job. I owe it to the others to do everything I can to help win the war, but it's more than that. This is what I was meant to do. These past two years, I've finally felt useful, and being here feels right in a way the teaching never did. I'm good at this and I feel good doing it. I know that's not likely to bring you joy, so I just don't say anything at all. I write about owls so that I'll have something to fill out the space between Dear and Yours Truly. It would be a kiss if I could manage it, but I can't and am at a loss for substitutes.

Yours Truly,

Shirley

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30 August 1941
Dear Shirley,

You so often tell me the end of things - you'll have a whole silent argument in your head and weigh all the considerations and come out with something at the end, already decided. You rarely let me hear any of the in-between. Thank you for sharing it this time. Write more letters like that last one and I think we might be alright after all.

On my last trip to Kingsport, I had an interesting conversation with Anthony about him and Edith. He said something I've been thinking over ever since, about loving without jealousy and finding happiness in a loved one's joy. I thought of it again when you wrote that I would not rejoice in hearing how you feel about your work. I suppose you're right - I hate this war and all wars and I hate that you are in it and away from home and doing things you cannot write about. But I'm awfully sorry to know that you feel you can't share your happiness with me for fear of my reaction. I don't know what to do about that, other than ask you to trust me a little more. It's true that some things may be hard to hear, but I am not made of spun sugar.

Until your most recent letter, I have not known what to do with your bits of nothing. In the last war, it was enough just to get an envelope with your handwriting on it. It meant that you were alive and safe and even if there was nothing but a few words on a single sheet, that was enough because nothing could ever come between us, could it? But now I worry that you just have nothing to say to me and that scares me more than anything a censor would object to.

Reading that last letter was not pleasant, exactly, but I smiled anyway. Is that strange? It wasn't empty at all. You put something of yourself into it and that's all I've ever wanted.

Someday, we'll have the chance to talk face-to-face, rather than trying to solve things at a distance. In the meantime, write me more letters like that so you don't seem quite so far away.

All my love,

Kit

P.S. Though I suppose there is room for a leetle news in your correspondence. Why on earth did you spend the night in a tree?! T.C.M.
"Two sugars, Bruce?" Una asked, hand poised over his teacup.

It was awfully good to see him looking so round and prosperous. The little black-haired baby she had doted on was a man with his own family and his own congregation in Cherry Valley, and Una counted herself fortunate if she saw him twice in a season. Perhaps that would change, though. True, Bruce had only come to preach in the Glen St. Mary church these past two Sundays because Father was getting over a bout of bronchitis, but Miranda Milgrave had told Una that Betty Macalister had told Laura Davis that the Ladies' Aid liked Bruce's preaching very much and there were rumblings that perhaps the congregation might call him if Father ever did decide to retire. There were those who were set against it, on account of nepotism, but even Deacon Reese had been heard to praise Bruce's text this morning, and the ayes were openly toasting their inevitable triumph.

"Better make it one," Bruce said apologetically. "I hate to take any at all when I'm visiting in the congregation, with everyone trying to be economical, but it's easier to pretend I prefer one than none at all."

This speech elicited an approving chuckle from Father Daniel and a second spoonful of sugar from Una.

Ordinarily, Rosemary would have presided over the manse tea table, but she and Carl had gone with Agnes to release the starched-and-ironed young Merediths into Rainbow Valley after a whole morning on their very best behavior.

"You'll be alright among the conclave, Una?" Carl had asked, nodding at the gathered clergy as he bounced baby Joan on his hip.

"Of course," she said. "After all, Daniel's my guest; I can hardly abandon him and run off to the forest."

"Who's your guest?" Carl asked, a merry spark in his eye as he turned to gallop down the lawn, Joanie shrieking her delight all the way.

Una might have called a reproach after him, but she was blushing too furiously to manage, a state of affairs that continued vexingly through the initial tea-table pleasantries and discussion of the morning's sermons.

"You did very well, Bruce," Father croaked, a generous helping of honeyed tea allowing him to speak, albeit softly. "An excellent choice of candidate text."

"It wasn't a candidate text, Father," Bruce protested. "You'll be back in your pulpit as soon as your voice recovers."

"I'm quite enjoying the respite," Father smiled. "More time to read."

"What was your text?" Father Daniel asked brightly.

Bruce's dark eyes kindled with an enthusiasm that made Una refill cups all around. "Matthew
25:13," he said. "Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh."

Father Daniel nodded solemnly. "Indeed. It behooves us all to think on preparation in these uncertain times."

Una took a sip of her tea, swallowing her own contribution on the subject of Matthew 25:13. She never heard it without remembering Faith's conversion in the terrible summer of 1918, when she had been so lost she had stopped affixing her name to letters. But that was Faith's story to tell, not Una's, so she took a slice of apple cake and kept her own counsel.

"What was your text today, Father Caldwell?" Bruce asked, all polite earnestness.

Father Daniel grimaced. "Proverbs 12:22, I'm afraid. I hadn't planned on it, but there's been a kerfuffle in the congregation lately. I haven't pinned it down yet, but there's an awful lot of whispering, and I thought it prudent to remind everyone that lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but they that deal truly are his delight."

"Goodness," Bruce blinked. "I do hope it isn't anything serious."

Una concurred most heartily. Something had happened at choir practice on Thursday, she was sure of that much, but she had always skirted the choir's troubles as much as possible and didn't like to meddle. Still, the problem — whatever it was — was quickly metastasizing along unpredictable lines. Why, just this morning, she had found Zoe Maylock crying in the cloakroom after the rest of the choir had gone home, even her sisters.

"That was always one of my standbys as a parent," Father offered. "Not that any of you children were much given to telling fibs. Certainly not the two of you."

He smiled indulgently at Bruce and Una, the latter of whom felt her stomach twist painfully. Certainly, Father had always taught them that it was a very wicked thing even to act a lie. It had been an irreproachable lesson, and yet, Una had found that Father's absolute certainty had made it harder for her to ask him for guidance when she began to encounter its limitations.

"I remember when Mary Vance came to us," Una said quietly, commanding the undivided attention of all. "I told her that it was a dreadful sin to tell a lie, and she said that she would get an awful beating if she didn't lie sometimes."

"Who is Mary Vance?" Father Daniel asked.

"Mary Douglas now," Bruce explained, having heard the story all his life. "She owns the dry goods store with her husband. She was a home child who ran away from a cruel household over-harbour and ended up here. Una and Faith and the boys helped her and fed her until she went to live with Miss Cornelia."

Una blushed under the smile Father Daniel bestowed on her, in which approbation and admiration were blended with pride and not a little affection.

"And you taught her not to lie?" he asked Una gently.

"I did," Una whispered, "but I was wrong, and she was right all along."

The three clerics paused at this, cocking their heads and looking absurdly like a triptych depicting the same expression in three successive stages of life.
Father Daniel was first to find his voice. "Wrong about lying?"

"Yes," Una said simply. "I told her she shouldn't lie, not even to avoid a beating. But I don't believe that anymore."

Bruce blinked his surprise, dark eyes wide and round. "Truly, Una? A lie may spare pain temporarily, but in the end, the Truth shall make you free."

How to explain to Bruce? He was a man now, and a minister, and must have seen enough of the world to know how complicated it was sometimes. But then, Bruce had always had a stark sense of right and wrong, and had once believed — heartbreakingly — that even the Kaiser might be redeemed if only he could be made to see the truth of the suffering he had caused, and feel it for himself.

"If the world were just," she said slowly, "people would have nothing to fear by telling the truth. But it isn't, and I would rather tell a lie that keeps someone safe than a truth that puts them in danger. Mary Vance never wanted to lie, and once she was safe at Miss Cornelia's, there wasn't any need anymore. But I made her cry, telling her she'd go to Hell for lying to Mrs. Wiley, when the only thing the truth would have brought her was a whipping. That was wrong. It was wrong of Mrs. Wiley, but it was wrong of me as well, to make Mary think that she was damned for keeping herself safe."

Bruce looked to Father for reinforcements, but found him staring into his teacup, his shoulders slumped and looking every bit of his age. Father Daniel looked thoughtful, but not away.

"Don't you think, Miss Meredith, that we must be brave enough to tell the truth, even when it might cost us dearly?"

She would have liked very much to agree with him. All summer, in their visits and lessons and gardening, they had found accord in nearly everything, clashing only when it came to the unresolved awkwardness of their farewells. In those moments, Una found it difficult to look Daniel — Father Daniel — in the eye, preferring to scurry away rather than confront that particular incarnation of the Truth. This was different. She met the kind brown eyes without fear, braver speaking of others than of herself.

"I think a lie told out of mercy is not a sin. At this very moment, there are people fleeing danger and persecution and other people sheltering them at very great risk, and I only hope that if I ever found myself in such a situation, that I could be brave enough to lie as they do."

"But Una, be reasonable," Bruce said. "We must teach people facing everyday problems, not hypothetical Nazis."

"Nazis are real."

"But they aren't here. If there were Nazis here, people would rally and stand up to them. But that would be an extraordinary circumstance, not everyday life."

Una chewed her lip. It was not her way to court confrontation, but she had to make Bruce see. At her elbow, Daniel gave a little nod, encouraging her to speak.

"It's easy to imagine what we might do in a time of extremity," she said carefully. "But I suspect that we would all go on doing just what we are doing now, for good or ill. Perhaps heightened by an emergency, but not essentially changed."

Bruce frowned over this, shaking his head slowly. "Canada isn't Occupied France," he said, looking
toward Father for affirmation. "It's a free country."

Father did not look up from his cup. Una felt a pang of compassion for him, but this was not the time to spare someone's feelings with a lie.

"I don't suppose it would be much comfort to a child like Mary Vance to know that she was being beaten and starved in a free country."

"You may have a point," Father Daniel conceded, drawing Una's attention away from Bruce and refilling her cup. "Though I wouldn't recommend making it the topic of your Pastoral Ethics essay."

"No," she smiled. "I've already written an outline."

"What is your subject?"

"Matthew 25:40," she said, crinkling her eyes in Bruce's direction. "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me."

Father cleared his throat, the rasping of his voice worse than it had been earlier. "Perhaps when it's finished, you would make a copy for me? I should very much like to read your thoughts."

Una ducked her head in what might have been a nod.

Carl had not always loved Kingsport, but he had always loved its park. Whenever the streets got too loud or the lecture halls too crowded, he could always breathe here.

Now, Carl leaned back against a gentle slope near the gazebo, letting his tension ebb and not caring if his tweed jacket got mussed in the damp leaves. Lying like this, with the city out of view and grass tickling his ears, Kingsport didn’t seem so bad, really.

Carl’s guest lecture in Prof. Michelson’s ornithology class had gone very well, but it had still taken a lot out of him. In the Q&A, a student had asked a question about longitudinal observation of individual nesting pairs and Carl had very nearly told her about the herring gulls and the graylag geese before he caught himself. It wasn’t even safe to mention that to Prof. Michelson, let alone to an auditorium full of undergraduates.

A shadow fell across Carl’s chest.

"Alas, I’m too late after all," said an amused voice.

Carl blinked, but did not move. “Late?”

“You seem to have expired. I do apologize for keeping you waiting."

“I thought we said six o’clock,” Carl said. “It can’t even be half past five yet.”

Anthony sat down on the grass beside him, never mind what the grass might do to his neat gray suit. “It’s 6:17. I was waylaid by a faction of the parish floral committee.”

Carl shaded his eye to get a better look at his friend. Anthony appeared to be in good health and humor, with silver streaks in his hair that lent some gravitas to his otherwise grinning face. Carl grinned back. “Does the floral committee have factions?”

“Apparently.”
Carl sat up with a twinge that suggested that perhaps he really had lain in the grass a bit longer than he meant to. He stretched with a small groan that made Anthony laugh.

“Getting too old to commune with the ants, are you?”

“Never,” Carl assured him. “Though perhaps we could stretch our legs a bit before dinner?”

They helped one another to their feet and strolled the winding paths down toward the shore, catching up on the news. The Marckworth children were all very well, Anthony reported, and Edith was enjoying a bit of respite now that Gladys had finally started school with the others. Carl rehashed the highs and lows of his lecture, even the bit about the Q&A.

“I gave her an answer,” he explained, “but not the real one. The truth is, I think I’ve observed something rather extraordinary.”

“Have you?”

“Yes.” Carl hesitated for a heartbeat, but this was Anthony. He could tell him anything. “I think some birds mate with members of their own sex. Not just incidentally. Over many years. I’m still collecting data, but I’ve seen them myself, and I’ve heard some bits of corroborating evidence from colleagues.”

“Birds?” Anthony asked thoughtfully.

“Yes. Several different species.”

Anthony did not reply at once. They walked along the pebbled shore together in silence until they startled a gull and paused to watch it take off.

“Have you told anyone about them?” Anthony asked.


“You still write to Nellie?”

“We’re friends. She helped me find some other examples. I’ve mostly seen female-female pairs, but Nellie has a colleague who works with graylag geese and apparently sees the same in males.”

Anthony appeared to chew on that information before storing it away for later. “Will you write an article about it?”

Carl squinted at the gull wheeling over the harbor. “No, I can’t.”

There was no need to explain to Anthony. He understood the difference between knowing the truth and telling it.

“Maybe not,” Anthony conceded. “But you could tell me more about it, couldn’t you?”

Carl could and did. All the way to the restaurant, he chattered away, telling Anthony everything he knew or suspected about nesting birds and superclutches and all the rest. Anthony asked questions in the right places and seemed genuinely interested, though Carl was sure he was just being polite. When they were finally shown to their table, Anthony chuckled over the menu.

“I suppose I won’t be ordering the squab,” he said ruefully.

“I’m sorry,” Carl laughed. “I seem to be developing a habit of putting people off their food.”
“That’s alright. We’re all supposed to be eating less meat these days, aren’t we? You’re just doing your bit for the war effort.”

Carl chuckled, but for the rest of the meal he made an effort to be a better conversationalist. It wasn’t difficult. Between his children and his parish, Anthony had an inexhaustible well of anecdotes that left Carl neglecting his plate in favor of laughter. There were more serious moments, too. Anthony told Carl about a friend of his from seminary who had taken a post at a mission school in Singapore after graduation. Carl hadn’t been paying much attention to Japan and its imperial ambitions, but Anthony had and was obviously worried. Carl made empty assurances, but mostly just listened, having gotten the impression that perhaps Anthony didn’t get to talk about this particular friend very often. It was absurdly easy to slip back into their old camaraderie, censoring themselves only slightly because they were in public. When the bill came, Carl could hardly believe that they’d been there nearly two hours.

Later, as Anthony walked Carl home to Aster House, he spoke more quietly. “Thank you for telling me about the birds.”

“I’m sorry to have gone on and on about them.”

“Don’t be. I wish you could publish something.”

“Me, too.”

“It’s . . .” Anthony paused at the Aster House gate, “. . . it’s wonderful. To think that there’s more to God’s Creation than most people know. I’m only sorry I can’t put it in a sermon.”

“It would certainly be memorable,” Carl agreed.

Aster House was dark. Beyond the gate, the last farewell-summers were colorless shadows bobbing against the grays of the dying garden. For a brief, awkward moment, the conversation lapsed, neither of them knowing quite how to transition to farewells.

“Thank you,” Anthony blurted. “It was good to see you.”

“You, too,” Carl agreed.

“Maybe next time you’re in town we could do it again.”

“I’d like that! I don’t know when that might be, but I’ll write when I do.”

“Or you could call. Here . . .”

Carl accepted the business card Anthony handed him. The telephone for the Second Presbyterian church was printed on the front, but there was another number penciled on the back.

“That goes directly to my office,” Anthony said. “It’s a private line.”

Carl swallowed. “Thanks. I’ll call.”

“Do,” Anthony put out a hand for Carl to shake, which seemed oddly formal after the evening they’d just had.

“Say hello to Edith for me.”

“Right.” Anthony took a step back, looking more solemn than he had all evening. “My regards to Shirley.”
Then he tipped his hat and was gone, leaving Carl feeling breathless and fuddled beneath the full moon.

*Odd Duck* was flying heavy tonight. With two passengers in the back and a full load of tightly-packed supply canisters, the engine was working near capacity. Especially at this altitude. Higher up, the thinner air would offer less resistance, but Shirley couldn't risk being spotted. The engine noise was a concern, but at this height, he was less worried about someone raising the alarm than he was about colliding with hills.

Yes, he was right on target. The lazy Somme glimmered as it snaked through the dull black of fields and forests. All he had to do was follow it past the all-too-familiar switch-back curves between Amiens and Saint-Quentin, and then turn north, looking for the rendezvous point somewhere down there in the impenetrable dark.

Everything was different now, for all it was the same. Shirley wasn't out hunting German planes anymore; in fact he hoped never to see one. He needed to deliver his cargo safely and pick up another.

Shirley never knew exactly who the passengers were. That wasn't his job. This pair had materialized mere minutes before takeoff: a bluff, chinless boy wearing the coarse jacket and trousers of an agricultural laborer, and a tall, square-lipped man in his fifties who looked as if he knew his way around a knife. They did not speak to Shirley and he did not speak to them, only exchanging nods when it was time to saddle up.

Now their fates were all inextricably intertwined, hurtling invisibly under the glow of the luminous moon. Whether the passengers were English-born SOE agents going to collect intelligence or French partisans trained for recruitment and sabotage, Shirley could not have said. But whoever they were, he was flying them into the very cauldron of the volcano, and not intending to bring them back out again.

The French Resistance would send a reception committee to the landing site to pick up the agents and the precious supplies. At the briefing this afternoon, Wing Commander Grayson had shown Shirley the unencrypted version of the wireless message that had been sent from London to communicate operational details to the French:

GROUND RABBIT MICH THREE ZERO ONE PLI THREE BEARING FOUR KMS NORTH EAST BIDARRAY FOX TWELVE SIGNAL LETTER ROSALIE BBC MESSAGE INFLUENZA STOP

A muddle, maybe, but it was all there, all the information that would guide him safely there and back again. The landing site's code name, Rabbit, and its coordinates on the Michelin grid. The partisans would listen to the BBC at noon to hear the code word *influenza*; if they heard it again at 19:00, they would know that the meteorology report was clear and the operation was a go. Landing information was there, too, the bearing and approach, and the signal letter his reception committee would flash from the ground when they heard his engine. All Shirley had to do was reckon his way close enough for them to find one another.

Ahead, the Somme began its frantic looping and turned sharply south at Péronne. That was the landmark. Shirley swung *Odd Duck* into a gentle northward turn and began to tick off other signposts. The Canal du Nord, the Bois d'Havrincourt, all just where they were supposed to be.

Shirley thumped his fist against the canopy, letting his passengers know that it was nearly time. Altitude was still a delicate balance: at 3,000 feet, he could see more of the countryside at once, but
might miss the pinprick light of a torch flashing signal letter Rosalie: *dot, line, dot*; at 1,000 feet, the light would be clearly visible, but the margin for navigation error was much tighter. Shirley trusted his maths and dipped down low.


Out of the stygian shadows, a tiny light that was really a letter that was really a secret sign. Shirley took his own torch in hand and opened the canopy to signal back. *Dot, line, dot.* Yes, it’s me.

The first time he had flown a mission like this, the next part had taken his breath, making him feel for an instant that the Lizzie had dissolved around him and left him suspended over the chasm of space with no support. Now, with a couple of runs under his belt, it still gave him gooseflesh.

Below, the only free lights in France flickered into existence out of the void, marking a vast triangle like a fallen constellation. In the barren field, the reception committee was holding their torches aloft, welcoming Shirley to Ground Rabbit. They had been there all along, unseen, waiting for the signal to reveal themselves to him. In an instant, the featureless ground had become a runway, the solitude of night flight had become a gathering.

Sometimes, the guide-lights were red instead of white, and sometimes they were actual torches — gnarled and sappy branches set alight when there were no batteries to hand. In every case, they pointed toward the signal letter light, indicating the direction of the wind so that Shirley could land into it, shortening the distance he needed to touch down.

This was the moment. So much planning and preparation, so much risk to so many, and now it was up to Shirley to deliver what was promised.

He circled once to find his heading, then brought *Odd Duck* in low and slow. The machine was an extension of himself, under his control as completely as his breathing and the long, brown fingers caressing the controls. He felt its purring pulse in his palms and in his thighs where they pressed against the seat. Slower, slower. It was essential to go gently. Easing the throttle, Shirley sighted along the triangle and positioned himself just so. There was not much altitude left to lose. Closer, closer, until the ground surged up to meet him and he kissed down tenderly, coming home to earth.

This runway was better than most. No large stumps or rocks, the pasture land flat and free of plowed ruts. *Odd Duck* juddered and spat as Shirley reined her in with plenty of room to spare. He did not cut the engine — no time for that — but taxied in a blunt arc, wrestling the recalcitrant Lizzie for every degree of the turn, coming to rest facing back the way he had come.

Many things happened at once. The passengers threw off their harnesses and clambered down the ladder bolted to the fuselage. Shirley released the supply canisters, letting them thud to the ground. A dozen phantasmal figures emerged from the gloom and seized the cylinders, carrying or rolling them away into the night. Two new passengers climbed up into the compartment, so swiftly that Shirley did not notice whether they were men or women, old or young, wounded or well. It didn't matter. Time was short. A successful Lysander operation never spent more than three minutes on the ground.

One of the passengers thumped three times on the back of Shirley's seat. Ready to go. No need to start the propellor, as it had never stopped. Just a deep breath and a shudder in time with *Odd Duck* as she picked up speed and then they were lifting free, France falling away under the unburdened carriage, climbing now, and sailing over the trees, north again, and gladly, for England.
"Handkerchief?" Father Daniel asked, producing a neatly folded square and passing it along the pew to Una.

Una had her own handkerchief tucked away in her pocketbook, but it was the gesture that counted and she accepted with a watery smile.

Up in the pulpit, Mr. Arnold had just finished preaching Mr. Pelham's funeral sermon, and was nodding to the Methodist choir director to start in on "Safe in the Arms of Jesus." Mr. Pelham had outlived most of his own set, but he had been jolly and generous, and his neighbors did not find themselves inconvenienced when it came time to sing him home.

Una blew her nose on Father Daniel's handkerchief and kept it, vowing to launder and return it later in the week. It was awfully strange to have him beside her during a service, steady and solid, rather than presiding over the altar. Strange, but not unpleasant. He had a fine singing voice, clear and unadorned, with a comforting sort of rumble that was not discernible at a distance greater than inches. When he offered her an arm to lead her out after the pallbearers at the end of the service, Una gave both her hand and a firmer smile.

The New Methodist Graveyard was too far to walk, so the mourners piled into their cars and wagons to follow the hearse in procession over the flame-tipped hills. Father Daniel had deemed Jenny insufficiently dignified for a funeral, and had borrowed Shirley's truck, that is to say Carl's truck, or whoever's truck it was, the point being that it was black and available and did not make too loud a noise nor force Una to cling to Father Daniel's back in a way that would surely have stolen the show if anyone had observed it. Instead, they sat side-by-side again, the priest apologizing as his unpracticed driving sent the truck lurching along behind the Newgates' wagon.

"Mr. Arnold preaches very well," Father Daniel said by way of opening conversation. "Do you know him well?"

"He's always been friendly with Father. And I know his son Fred slightly."

"Fred," Father Daniel said thoughtfully. "He's the one with the . . . ah . . ."

Una looked over to see him tapping his nose apologetically.

"Don't try to make me laugh at a funeral," Una pleaded, biting her lower lip to keep from doing just that.

"No one will see as long as we're in the truck," he shrugged. "Besides, I don't think anything to do with Mr. Pelham should be too solemn."

Una tended to agree, but was prevented from saying so by the sudden staggering of the truck as Father Daniel overestimated a turn and jerked the wheel back sharply to compensate.

"Sorry!" he yelped as Una slid across the bench and nearly into his lap.

"It's perfectly alright," Una assured him, though she scrambled to put a decorous distance between them as soon as possible.
Really, it was perfectly alright. Unavoidable. Momentary contact that meant nothing, even though Una could still hear her pulse rushing in her ears long minutes later. They rode in silence the rest of the way, Una bracing herself at every bump in the road and Father Daniel apologizing as a red flush crept up past his collar.

When they reached the graveyard, Una took Father Daniel's proffered hand with determination to demonstrate her perfectly-alright-ness. She did not flinch nor jump away, but held his steady fingers for a moment longer than necessary, just to prove that nothing whatever was amiss. He squeezed back reassuringly and guided her carefully over a gully clogged with sodden leaves.

The New Methodist Graveyard had not yet mellowed like the old. Instead of curious inscriptions and antique names that conjured romantic fancies, the little plot of earth was home to memorials whose edges were still sharp. It did command a lovely view, though, with the slope clothed in autumnal splendor dropping away toward the sparkling blue of the harbour.

The mourners took their places around the open grave, with Mr. Arnold at the head and Dennis and Jane Pelham at his right hand. The pair looked as dour as ever, though Una could hardly fault them for being dismal at a funeral. Indeed, it was a model affair from start to finish, with all the proper obsequies as Mr. Pelham was laid to rest in firm and justified hope of everlasting life.

The scandal came later.

Una had lingered behind the other mourners so that she might say a private prayer for Mr. Pelham without inconveniencing anyone. Most of the others had already departed for the repast when Una's solitary petition was interrupted by voices raised in anger.

"... no such agreement ...

"... what right do you think you have ...

Una and Father Daniel both turned back toward the road, where Dennis Pelham and Archie Newgate were shouting at one another, with Amelia and Jane poised to enter the fray. They hustled over as quickly as possible, Una slipping on the wet leaves as Father Daniel hurried to interpose his person between the combatants.

"What seems to be the trouble?" he puffed, holding up a placating hand.

"The house is ours!" Archie growled. "His father sold it to me and let me pay him back in installments."

"He did no such thing!" Dennis spat. "You're renters and I'm perfectly within my rights to sell the property as I see fit!"

Una reached Amelia just as she was about to sally forth under full sail, catching at her arm to restrain her. There must be some misunderstanding here, and it wouldn't help matters to escalate.

Father Daniel looked from one reddened face to the other. "Am I to understand that Mr. Pelham wishes to sell Mr. Newgate's house?"

"He can't!"

"I can!"

"Gentlemen!" Una jumped a little as Father Daniel deployed his voice at full volume to quell the squabbling. "Please, begin at the beginning, Mr. Newgate."
Dennis Pelham looked things not lawful to be uttered of Archie Newgate, but held his peace as he spoke.

"Amelia and I came to pay our respects, all good and proper, to old Mr. Pelham for all he's been so kind to us these many years. The old man ain't even cold yet and this bloody . . . sorry, Father . . . this ill-mannered fellow comes up to me and says he owns my house and means to sell it! I told him the truth: his father sold the house to me twenty years ago and has let me pay it off a bit at a time ever since. It will be ours free and clear in 1944, and this . . . this . . . person has no right to sell it!"

"I have every right!" Dennis countered. "I have a deed to the property and there's no other paperwork, just a handshake deal. It will never stand in court!"

Una goggled — surely this couldn't be true — but one look at Archie Newgate's face confirmed that it was.

"Now, Mr. Pelham," Father Daniel implored, "this is hardly the time . . ."

"The sooner the better," Dennis interrupted. "I want them out so I have time to find a buyer before planting. The land is poor, but the house is sound, and once we get some competent tenants, it will bring a good, reliable rent. Not always late and dribbling in one penny at a time."

Amelia was shaking with fury, Una's slim hand on her arm doing nothing to placate her rage. Archie looked stricken, initial disbelief solidifying into horrified realization. Neither was in any fit state to negotiate, even if they had had a hand to play.

"I see . . ." Father Daniel stalled. "In that case . . . well . . . I know you'll want to do everything by the book, Mr. Pelham. So the Newgates will . . . ah . . . await the letter from your attorney. With the official notice of eviction. And a notarized copy of the deed, of course."

Dennis Pelham blinked and looked ready to say something snappish, but Jane cut in.

"Indeed. We will send the papers over as soon as they are prepared."

She took her husband's arm and steered him away from the confrontation, walking purposefully toward their Chrysler. Una watched, astonished, as they drove off to receive the community's condolences and agree that yes, it was a terrible shame to lose the old man.

"What will we do?" Amelia whispered. "It's our home."

Una did not know what to say, so she squeezed Amelia's hand and said nothing. But the fact that she was not speaking did not mean that she was not thinking.

7 November 1941

Newmarket

Dear Kit,

Just received your last. Thank you for sending me that clipping about the graduation at Camp Borden. It's the sort of thing that doesn't make it into the papers here, but it's good to see how the boys are getting along. Thank you more for the postscript. Of course I do and no, you shouldn't write such things, as I do not like to burn any of your letters. Though I am still up to the task of memorizing the important bits.
Every day, it gets colder here — too cold to sit out in the gardens and read now. Grayson says I should get down to London or take a trip to the shore when I am not on duty, but I'm content to stay back and practice my French and write letters. And I walk the gardens. The little red squirrel that lives in the walnut tree by the grotto isn’t so little anymore. Do they hibernate? I passed along your regards.

Today, one of the junior pilots played a good prank on us before he went on leave. I've mentioned the stuffed birds that plague us in our billet — they're everywhere. Well, this kid got his hands on some colored paper and rolled little dunce caps for all the owls. They don't look so fearsome now. They remind me of the time you tried to convince Mugsy it was her birthday. I think there is still a speck of ossified frosting on the kitchen ceiling if you look closely (above the dish hutch).

A letter came from Gil this week and one from Sam as well. Gil’s had his fourth victory, another Me 109. He sounded apologetic that it wasn't more, but I told him the truth, which is that it's a damn sight harder to shoot down these new kites than the canvas-and-kindling ones we flew in the last war. That might not be good for Gil's numbers, but it's awfully good for his neck, and mine as well. Rest assured that these machines can take a real beating and still come flying home safe.

I hear from Sam that he is still at the training camp near Basingstoke. It might not be hell, but it sure sounds like purgatory. They've just been sitting around in the mud a whole year. I suppose we should all be glad there isn't more for the infantry to do, but I'd go spare. At least I feel useful. Sam's cheerful enough, though. The Royals put on a lot of sports, evidently. He says he never realized war would involve so much baseball. We don't get up to much by way of sports here. The boys are very daring poker players but imprudent enough that I generally leave the table with more than I brought. They all think they can draw to the inside straight and of course it never works.

May get to see Gil and Sam soon. Sylvia's determined to conjure a Christmas, which certainly would be a feat if she can manage it. I'll be awfully glad to see her, too. I miss Aster House and evenings on the sofa with you reading all your letters and Mugsy trying to steal things off the coffee table. That's what Christmas has meant to me all these years — that it was almost time to go to Kingsport. I counted days like a kid waiting for Santa Claus.

Everything is fine here. I miss you of course, and think of you every time I see a small creature. There aren't so many rats around our billet, which is clean and snug. Perhaps the owls scared them off. Rats or no, you're never far from my thoughts.

Yours Truly,
Shirley

P.S. I strongly suspect that you already know the answer to the question in your last and ask it only to amuse yourself by imagining my answer. I should not give you the satisfaction of knowing how delighted I was to bid Grayson adieu when he went to London for the week and left me some measure of privacy for once. S.J.B.

20 November 1941

Lowbridge, PEI

Dear Shirley,

Allow me to begin by conveying greetings from your dog, who is currently asleep on my feet. This is very good for warmth but not for mobility, so I have no choice but to write you a long, long
Letter. Not even my usual patchwork, but a proper letter from beginning to end. You may read it to the squirrel if you like, though if you do, you should leave out the dog part. They don't hibernate, by the way. She should have enough nuts stored up for the winter, but would probably appreciate a bit of apple or carrot from time to time if you're feeling neighborly.

Last Sunday, I went with Una to her church festival. We missed the Maylock sisters, who have apparently broken up their singing act. It's too bad; they were very good. I said hello to Mrs. Maylock at the cider stall and she glared at me fit to kill. I haven't the foggiest idea why, when we are only on nodding acquaintance anyway, and Una doesn't have any guesses either. I was dragooned into being a judge in the preserves contest (thankfully Mrs. Maylock was not one of the entrants). It was very good for my spirits, but not for my digestion.

Lately, Una has been pulled into another sticky situation. You'll remember the Newgates, our neighbors down by Pelham's Pond. Well, Mr. Pelham died a few weeks ago and now his son is trying to evict the Newgates so he can sell the farm. I can't say why — the land is poor enough, though I suppose it is a fine, sturdy house. Archie and Amelia swear that Mr. Pelham sold the house to them on the installment plan, but he was never really one for official paperwork. Never even left a will, though he was ill for a long time. Mr. Pelham (the younger) has said that the Newgates must vacate the property before the first of February or he'll have the law on them. I don't know what they'll do, but Una is fretting over it. I suppose she and Father Daniel will come up with something. I have no doubt the whole family would end up here if we had the space, but we can hardly host a family of five for dinner, let alone for the winter.

My love to Sylvia if you do see her. I hear from her every once in a while, but gather that Matron's work is quite taxing, even if the Canadian boys have nothing to do but play games and march about. I know she'd be glad to clap eyes on you, and I wouldn't mind a corroborating report, for all you claim to be fat and idle.

You may be interested to hear that I made a last visit out to the Jubinvilles, wanting to see them one last time before the weather turned. They're awfully worried about the situation on St. Pierre and Miquelon. The islands belong to Vichy and the Nazis could be using the radio station there to communicate with U-boats and spy on our shipping. More than that, the islands are crowded with men. France fell so quickly that the fishing fleet was caught out at sea and didn't know where to go. Plenty of them holed up at St. Pierre rather than going home and Canada won't sell food to a Vichy territory so they're short of everything. The Jubinvilles have friends there and are very concerned. Make no mistake — when the Jubinvilles think that a situation is dismal, you can be sure that it is nearly beyond human endurance.

Little has changed in Four Winds. There is much talk of rationing, but nothing has been formalized except some restrictions on gasoline. Sugar is expensive and sometimes hard to find, but Una does marvels anyway. We never needed much meat to begin with (I swear Mugsy whimpered in her sleep just as I wrote that). The garden harvest was good this year and we have a whole pantry jammed with pickles of nearly every variety (except squash — neither of us can stomach them after last year, though Una would never admit it). We are flush with pears this autumn. I did one last harvest today - those little trees have gotten so big that I had to leave a few pears at the very top. At least some of our own squirrels will have a fine feast.

On another note, I was very glad to hear that those machines of yours can "take a real beating" and go on flying. I will not ask how you know that. I don't believe for a minute that you do nothing but chat with squirrels and catch up on your correspondence in between hands of poker. I know you can't tell me anything at all about your work, and perhaps that is for the best at the moment. I can imagine you safe always, with your garden and your book and your dunce-cap owls. I can guarantee that any time you think of me, I am also thinking of you, and not just because there are
so many more planes in the sky now than there used to be. The boys at the Summerside training school keep us company constantly and I would complain of the noise and the disruption to migration patterns except that I always find myself watching them until they fly out of sight.

Very pleased to report that my Kingsport lecture went well. No mention of superclutches, I'm afraid, though my notes are getting to be significant enough to add up to something. I'm not sure what to do about them exactly. I'm still mulling it over. Anthony says that I should publish because people deserve to know about the diversity of God's Creation. I think he is right, and that such an article might do some good, but I'd be out of a job if I ever wrote it. Anthony asked me to send you his regards. We had dinner after the lecture and had a grand time. He says I'll turn him vegetarian if I make him any more sympathetic to the birds, so that's something to aspire to.

Even Mugsy thinks that this letter has gone on quite long enough. She is yawning and stretching and leaving my feet cold where she covered them. I am very glad to have her with me, especially when I have a bad night. She stays by me and I'm grateful. I think I will be alright tonight, though. All this writing has tired me out and I may be able to fall asleep for once. Have I ever told you how much I envy your falling asleep as soon as you close your eyes? Just another facet of your ability to be where you are, I suppose. I don't mind being where you are either, only it is a bit of a strain when it is only in imagination.

Yours truly,
Kit

P.S. Indeed, it does amuse me. Almost as much as it does to imagine you with a roommate/chaperone.
Yesterday, December 7th, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan . . .

Yesterday, the Japanese government also launched an attack against Malaya.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked Guam.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.

Last night, the Japanese attacked Wake Island.

And this morning, the Japanese attacked Midway Island . . .

With confidence in our armed forces, with the unbounding determination of our people, we will gain the inevitable triumph—so help us God.

- Franklin D. Roosevelt, December 8, 1941

Carl clicked off the radio. Beside him on the couch, Muggins lifted her head, nuzzling into his hand for scritches as he sighed.

"It's very bad, isn't it?" Una asked from her armchair. She had kept on with her sewing all through the evening re-broadcast of Roosevelt's speech, silver needle flashing in the firelight as she stitched the blue cotton for one of her habits. Carl knew she still had one semester of courses left to complete, but none of them had given her any trouble yet. She'd be dedicated as a deaconess next summer and wear the veil and habit every day. That would take some getting used to.

"Depends, I guess," Carl said, giving Mugsy's ears some attention. "The Americans are in the war now, with all their manufacturing and manpower. That will be a tremendous help."

Stitch, stitch, stitch.

"Will they fight in Europe?" Una asked, "Or only against Japan?"

"I expect they'll have a finger in every pie. Though I don't know how much they'll be able to do right away."

"Can we hold Hong Kong?"

"I doubt it," Carl said dismally. "There aren't enough troops and it will take a while for the Yanks to mobilize."

The attack on Pearl Harbor was terrible, of course, but it was a naval base. The other places on Roosevelt's list were cities and islands populated by civilians. Carl couldn't honestly say that he had paid much attention to the news of Japanese conquest in China over the past decade, but Anthony had. Carl sent up a brief prayer for Anthony's friend in Singapore, hoping that he would
be safe. Was it too late to call Kingsport? Anthony might need a sympathetic ear tonight.

A knock at the front door interrupted Carl's musings. He lifted Muggins aside and made his way through the kitchen and down the hall, trying not to guess why someone might call so late on such a frigid evening. Father had been in good health since his cold this autumn and Rosemary as well, and if it was anything to do with Faith or Jerry or Bruce, they surely would have rung in advance . . .

Carl might have run through the possibilities for a week without anticipating the scene that greeted him at the front door: Zoe Maylock, looking a sorry sight from unravelling blonde curls to mud-spattered pumps, clutching a caved-in cardboard suitcase. A red mark on one cheek promised to be a nasty bruise by morning.

"Miss Maylock?" Carl gawped before remembering his manners and ushering her into the hall.

"Please," she said bravely, "is Miss Meredith in?"

Una was, at that very moment, bustling through the kitchen, her sewing forgotten.

"Zoe? Whatever is the matter?"

The girl's face crumpled and she was unable to speak for several minutes, sobbing as Una led her through to the living room. Carl hung back in the kitchen, not requiring Una's instruction to assemble the essentials. By the time the kettle was hot and he'd arranged some ginger snaps on a tray, Zoe was pouring out an explanation.

". . . didn't know where else to go. I would have called but Pop only gave me a few minutes to pack and I don't have any money and he said I'd disgraced the family and . . ."

"Slow down, dear," Una said, offering a fresh handkerchief. "Why did he make you leave?"

Zoe gulped, swiping at her nose and flicking a nervous glance toward Carl.

Carl cleared his throat. "Why don't I go upstairs and make up the camp bed in the sewing room?"

He balanced the tea tray on an end table and nodded to Una in solidarity. Truth be told, Carl was very glad to escape the scene and took exquisite care to check and re-check every blanket and pillowcase, devoting half an hour to a ten-minute task. Then he sat a while in Una's sewing chair, looking out past the garden to the row of pear trees standing stark and leafless against a luminous moon.

When the length of his absence became absurd, Carl stomped down the stairs as slipper-clad feet would allow and came through the kitchen coughing theatrically to herald his imminent arrival. He was pleased to find the tea and shortbread diminished, and Zoe much composed.

"I've made up the bed," he announced unnecessarily.

"Thank you," Zoe murmured.

"I won't tell anyone anything you don't want me to tell," Una said gently. "But Carl and I would be happy to go up to Ingleside with you. There's no need for you to go alone."

Ingleside?

"I don't know whether I can go at all," Zoe choked. "I just can't face Dr. and Mrs. Blythe."
She couldn't face Jem and Faith? Why not? What on earth did they have to do with . . .

Oh.

Oh, dear.

Carl gaped at Una, who gave the barest hint of a nod.

"Mum and my sisters guessed a while ago, when I was so sick," Zoe went on, tears streaming down her face. "They were upset, of course, but nothing like Pop. I told him tonight and he raged something awful. I can't . . . I can't go through that again!"

Surely she couldn't think that Jem would hurt her? But the girl was obviously terrified and every shadow looked longer in that mood.

"Would it be easier," Una asked, "if Carl or I went alone and talked to the Blythes first? Mrs. Blythe is our sister and I know she'll listen. One of us could go up tonight and explain, and then we could all go over together tomorrow."

Zoe blinked big brown eyes back and forth between the Merediths, her indecision twisting Carl's heartstrings. She was just a kid — a kid who had been turned out by her family and didn't know who to trust or what to do next.

"You don't have to tell anyone anything, Zoe," Carl said. "You can stay here as long as you like. But if you do want to to tell Wally's parents anything, I think you can trust them. We'll help."

Zoe blinked once more, searching Carl's face for sincerity. Had he ever spoken to her before, beyond a polite pleasantry? But she was in need and Carl spoke with conviction.

"I do want them to know," Zoe sniffed. "It's not exactly a secret. The whole choir knows and I'll bet the neighbors heard Pop shouting. But it would be a lot easier if I didn't have to tell them myself. Would you tell them? Tonight? I'll go tomorrow, I promise, but if they're angry, you could warn me . . ."

Carl said, "I'll go if you like. Or Una, if you prefer. Or both of us."

"Do you want me to stay with you?" Una asked Zoe.

Zoe swallowed, nodding.

Carl gave Una a brisk nod. "Then I'll be off. You'll be alright here, Una?"

"We'll be fine," Una smiled. "Come upstairs, Zoe, and I'll show you where to put your things."

Thus, twenty minutes later, Carl found himself shivering on the Ingleside veranda, still groping for words when Faith answered the door.

"What's happened?" she asked, going whey-faced at sight of him standing unexpected in the winter night.

"Go get Jem," Carl said, stepping inside. "You both need to hear this."

The candlelit dining room of the Hampshire Hotel in Basingstoke was festooned for Christmas: sharp-scented fir woven into garlands punctuated with holly and bayberry tapers gleaming in a softer green. It was not yet late — barely four o'clock by Shirley's Radiolite — but it was one of
the longest nights of the year and a new moon to boot, so the candles were necessary as well as festive.

Shirley scanned the rapidly filling dining room only to find that Sylvia had already spotted him and was halfway across the floor. He smiled genuinely at sight of her, looking awfully official in her crisp blue uniform with its double-row of brass buttons and starched white collar and cuffs. If any of the onlookers were scandalized to see an RAF officer embrace a nurse-matron right there among the bayberry-lit tables, they were outnumbered by their more tender-hearted peers.

"I'm under strict orders to slap you, you know," Sylvia said, pulling back from the hug.

"I get that a lot," Shirley smiled back.

She led him back to a round table set for five, as yet unoccupied. This had all been Syl's doing, a dozen letters or more flying back and forth across three counties, trying to find a day when the Blythe Expeditionary Force could all meet for a proper Christmas dinner. As usual, Shirley's schedule had been the most forgiving. The next full moon wasn't until January 2, and he was quite at liberty to spend December as he pleased, provided he made it back in time for his briefing.

The kids had been harder to pin down. Fighter Command kept on fighting, holiday or no, and it was the thirteenth labor of Hercules to pry both Gil and Rose out of the RAF's clutches at the same time. Eventually, Rose volunteered to cover both the Christmas and New Year's Eve night shifts in exchange for a week's leave in mid-December. She was eager to introduce Gil to her family in Croydon, by which Shirley understood that Gil had passed his exams. The newly promoted Flying Officer Ford was no less enthusiastic about presenting Section Officer Findlay-Stevenson to such members of his family as were convenient.

"This is quite the place," Shirley said, taking a seat by Sylvia's side and appraising the spread of crystal and china.

"I don't suppose fancy dishware goes bad in wartime," she shrugged. "But it does go empty. I had to find a place that would come up with a Christmas dinner worth eating, even if it is mostly made of parsnips and margarine."

Shirley had insisted on covering the bill, which had seemed like a better idea before he got a look at the ranks of glittering silverware. But it was the least he could do after Sylvia had gone to all the trouble of arranging things.

"Thank you for thinking of this," he said, squeezing her hand fondly. "You didn't have to go to all this trouble."

She made a dismissive noise and would have protested more if the kids had not walked in at that very moment.

The Hampshire Hotel was quite used to hosting officers of many nations and ranks. The trio of young officers poised on the threshold were certainly not the most distinguished, nor the most senior, not even on this particular evening, but they were nonetheless striking enough to draw more than a few admiring glances. Gil Ford, all gold and blue with the swagger of the hotshot pilot he really was now; Sam Blythe tall and vivid in the brilliant scarlet dress tunic of the Royal Regiment of Canada; Rose between them, her own crisp WAAF blues as impressive as her Cheshire-cat grin. They looked like a Madison Avenue poster for Life itself.

Shirley and Sylvia rose to greet them with hearty handshakes and back-slapping hugs. Gil introduced Sylvia to Rose as a family friend. This was true, technically speaking, but Shirley still
gave Syl a reassuring nudge of knees under the table when they reclaimed their seats.

The young fry chatted away, telling of their journeys and their duties and the very successful sojourn to Croydon, which had evidently featured something of a comedy of errors regarding the Findlay-Stevenson spare room that ended with Gil sleeping on a camp bed in Rose's younger brother's room.

"We got on like a house on fire," Gil reported. "Though he was awfully disappointed when I told him that if he wanted to grow up to be a pilot, he'd need to buckle down in geometry."

"Not quite what a thirteen-year-old wants to hear when he's dreaming of Spitfires!" Rose giggled.

"No, but it's the truth. I'm sure I'd have flunked trigonometry ten times over if Uncle Shirley hadn't slapped a sextant in my hand one summer and made me navigate the old Flying Boat like bloody Magellan."

Sam threw his head back and laughed. "You always tried to pawn off navigation on Wally until that time we ended up halfway to Labrador. Uncle Shirley just sat there the whole time letting us get more and more lost until we were in real danger of running out of fuel."

They went off on a round of do-you-remembers that was only interrupted by the arrival of a fragrant carrot soup that may have been an economical choice, but was nonetheless a tasty one. Rationing was in force in the outside world, but the hotel had managed to scare up a goose and there were potatoes and winter cabbage and flaky rolls made with convoy-carried Canadian flour, along with a dish of real butter.

Shirley was more than a little flummoxed when the table unanimously assumed that he would carve the goose, never having been the head of any household.

"I'm sure you'll be better with a blade, Sylvia," he protested.

But she smirked and handed him the carving knife and he managed not to disgrace himself.

Sometime after everyone had tucked into seconds, Gil asked, "What news from Ingleside, Sam?"

It was a predictable question, but Sam rapidly turned a shade of crimson that no wool-dyer on earth had yet achieved, though many had tried.

"Ah, it's the famous Meredith poker face!" Gil teased.

"Meredith?" Rose asked. "Isn't he a Blythe as well?"

"Sam's mum, my Aunt Faith, is a Meredith. So's my Uncle Jerry — the one who's a judge. They're quite famous for turning every shade from cheese-green to the fetching shade of magenta you see before you. Sam here is one of 'em, which would make him a terrible bluffer if he weren't already square as a saltine. Isn't that right, Sammy?"

Sam looked imploringly toward Shirley, who was not afflicted with the Meredith malady of wearing one's emotions like a marquee. Yet, he was familiar with the tidings from Ingleside and fancied that he saw the shape of Sam's troubles. Ah, well, if someone had put it in a letter to Sam, it probably wasn't much of a secret. Not that it would stay secret for long in any case.

"News indeed," Shirley said impassively. "I understand that there will be a new baby at Ingleside in the spring."
"A . . . baby?" Gil wrinkled his nose. "Whose?"

"Zoe Maylock's."

Gil may not have been a Meredith, but his face still went as pale as the whites of his bulging eyes.

"Really?" Sylvia, far more composed, had clearly not yet heard the news. "And she's at Ingleside?"

"Who is Zoe Maylock?" Rose asked.

Sam cleared his throat and darted a none-to-subtle glance at Gil. "Uh . . . she's my younger brother Wally's girlfriend."

"Oh," Rose breathed. "Oh, I see,"

"Is she alright?" Gil asked, eyes still round.

"Probably not," Shirley shrugged. "But she's safe at Ingleside now."

"Does Wally know?"

Sam shook his head. "Dad says that they wrote to him. But he's at sea, isn't he? It isn't as if they get regular mail call. And even when a letter reaches him, what can he do about it? He won't be home again for ages."

Gil swore under his breath.

"I have no doubt that Wally will do right by Zoe," Sylvia said comfortably. "My understanding is that they were all but engaged last summer."

"But she's at Ingleside?" Rose asked. "That's the Blythes' house, isn't it?"

Shirley had had enough of the Socratic method and cut directly to the chase. "My understanding is that Miss Maylock has been turned out of her parents' home. She went to Aunt Una for help because she feared that Wally's parents might be of the same mind. I'm sure it's a long story, but the short version is that they weren't, and both Miss Maylock and the baby will be residing at Ingleside for the foreseeable future."

Sam nodded. "Dad wrote that he nearly had to shut Mum up in the pantry to keep her from storming off to Lowbridge and giving the Maylocks one of her signature explanations."

"It's very good of your parents to take her in," Rose said softly. "Not everybody would."

"Dad would never turn anyone away from Ingleside, especially not family," Sam said with all the confidence of an adoring son. "The Blythes are quite famous for clannishness. You watch — Mum and Dad will treat Zoe just like one of their own."

Shirley felt Sylvia's stiffness beside him and pressed her knee again. She attempted a grateful smile but did not quite manage.

"Are they happy about the baby?" Gil asked.

"Course they are," Sam said. "Surprised, maybe — Dad said he wasn't expecting to be a grandfather before 50 — but I got the impression that Mum and the girls are already fixing up the nursery."
Gil shuddered. "Still. She'll be the talk of both the Glen and Lowbridge. Wally better get his ass back to port and marry her. I wouldn't put it past your Dad to kick him out if he doesn't."

"Nobody gets kicked out of Ingleside," Sam said, buttering another roll. "And I wouldn't worry in any case. Wally's been dead gone on Zoe since . . . well, for a long time, anyway. He'll do the right thing."

"Everyone loves a baby," Sylvia added. "Especially in times like these, it will be good to have a little one in the house."

Gil agreed. "Mum always said that Jims was the silver lining to the Great War."

"Who is Jims?" Rose asked.

The old tale of war babies and soup tureens carried them through pudding, confirming the younger generation in their belief that Ingleside had always held its arms open wide.

***

Later, when the kids had said a dozen thank yous and gone off to catch the eastbound train with promises that they'd look after themselves and one another and write as often as possible, Shirley and Sylvia walked arm-in-arm toward the 1st Canadian General Hospital. It was a dark evening, what with the blackout and and the tiny sliver of moon and snow flurries blowing in from the west. The task of putting one foot securely in front of the other took most of their attention, with little left over for conversation.

When they reached the hospital, Shirley headed toward the door, but Sylvia steered their steps toward a little garden where the first flakes of snow were already melting into the path.

"I know you have a cigarette somewhere on you," she said.

Shirley obliged her, lighting one for each of them as they took shelter in a little gazebo.

"You know, I've never been back to my parents' house," Sylvia said without preamble. "It wasn't as bad as it could have been. I already had Aster House. I was never homeless. But still."

"I'm sorry," Shirley said, and was.

"My sister sent me a letter once," she continued. "Just to tell me her kids' names and that my brothers had both married and had children as well. I wrote her back, but never heard from her again. That was, oh, '33? '34 maybe?"

What Shirley wanted to say was fuck them, but what came out was, "They don't deserve you."

She laughed a single puff of smoke. "I can't say Ingleside was always the most comfortable place either. It got better once your parents moved out, but it's funny to hear the kids talk about it the way they do. Like it was always the best place on earth."

Shirley took a long drag on his cigarette, the glowing tip providing a tiny circle of light.

"It's only because they don't know Aster House," he said.

Sylvia tapped her ash on the railing and chuckled. "You know, I still feel a little leap of excitement this time of year. It's time to air out your room and drag Mugsy's bowl out of the pantry."

Shirley knew just what she meant. Christmas was something to endure, but the mingled scents of
fir and cloves signified the imminent respite of the New Year. Aster House, snug and warm, where he felt like he might understand a little of how Carl felt about fresh Island air.

It was dark enough that Shirley did not scruple to put an arm around Sylvia's shoulder and pull her into the shelter of his overcoat.

"It seems churlish to say I've always been terribly jealous," he said.

"Of who?"

"You, of course. And Di. Of Aster House."

That got a proper laugh that rippled through her chest and into his. "Not of Ingleside?"

"Nah. Jem can keep it."

Sylvia dropped the butt of her cigarette and ground it under her shoe. "You know, when we get home, you're welcome to stay as long as you like, up to and including forever."

"Don't think I haven't thought about it."

Sylvia pulled back far enough that she could reach up and caress Shirley's cheek with a non-slapping hand. It was too dark to see her expression in any detail, but Shirley knew her well enough to fill in the gaps with mingled affection and concern.

"You've got to actually make it home first, though," she said quietly.

"I will."

"You'd better. You're a damn fool for coming here in the first place."

"You came here, didn't you?"

Sylvia sighed. "It's not the same. I spend my days drawing up shift schedules and making sure the men don't get too fresh with the Sisters. God only knows how you spend your time."

Shirley couldn't tell her anything, so he opted for a technical truth. "Reading, mostly."

"I'll bet."

"I do. I've read nearly all of *Aesop's Fables* in French."

"Ah, well, in that case, you'll have the war won by Christmas."

They looked out at the swirling snow, only dimly visible beyond the gazebo, falling faster now. Somewhere out there, Hong Kong and Leningrad were under siege. Great armies faced off at Moscow and Tobruk. The sleeping giant of American industry had been shocked awake and was just now blundering to its feet. Somehow — after more than two years of work and worry — somehow it seemed like it was just beginning.
Una had never mended a satin evening glove before, but this was an emergency. Ceci had brought it to her moments ago, tears gathering as she showed the rip, and Una had reassured her first and figured out a plan of attack later.

Ceci was calmer now, helping Portia shimmy into peach silk on the other side of the Ingleside living room. With five girls preparing for the New Year's dance at Lowbridge High School, none of the bedrooms was half big enough, and the living room had been converted into a makeshift salon and dressing room. The chairs and sofa were draped with crinolines and sashes, tables strewn with powder puffs and combs. Faith had gone off to find more safety pins; Nan was trying to do something with Jemmy's hair; Jem and Jerry had shut themselves in the library at the first rustle of petticoats and hadn't been heard from since.

Over by the window, Dellie Meredith frowned, shaking her glossy, dark head as she surveyed her handiwork. "No," she said decidedly, "that isn't right at all. I'm going to take the pompadour down and try Victory rolls, Zoe. You've got the face for them."

"You really think so?" Zoe asked, examining her blonde updo in a silver-backed hand mirror.

"How will you get them to stay up?" asked skeptical Jemmy, wincing as Nan shoved another bobby pin in tight against her scalp.

"Magic," Dellie answered comfortably. "And a fistful of pomade."

There had been some talk of staying in. Zoe had not left the house socially since she had come to Ingleside, and the family had kept a quiet Christmas. It had been a much-diminished holiday table, with the Fords staying in Toronto and the Andersons trying to maintain a routine for their nieces and nephews. But the Charlottetown Merediths had come for the holiday and stayed the week, doing all they could to boost everyone's spirits. Dellie and Portia had exclaimed over the Lowbridge High New Year's dance quite as if it had been the hottest ticket in Town, and set about preparing for it like generals planning an invasion. Zoe had been adamant that she didn't want to spoil the fun for the others, urging them to go on without her while they counter-urged her to come along.

"Why shouldn't you go?" Jemmy had asked indignantly. "If anyone's cross about it, that's their look-out, not yours."

In the end, Zoe had admitted that she really did want to go, but appealed to Faith to give the final word.

"Of course you should go if you want to," Faith said stoutly. "You certainly won't be alone."

Indeed not. The Blythe girls and the Merediths formed a butterfly phalanx fearsome enough to shield Zoe from any direct insult. She was one of the family now and anyone who forgot it would see what it meant to be on the outs with the Blythes and their glamorous cousins from Town.

Una had spent much of the morning helping Nan make over an evening gown with a generous skirt.
"We'll just move the waistline up a smidge," Nan explained over blue chiffon. "And if that doesn't work, we can put on a front-peplum like Ginger Rogers. Very chic."

Una nodded and stitched, glad to follow Nan's lead in sartorial matters.

"There!" Dellie said, stepping back to admire the high twin rolls atop Zoe's head. "Shake your head side-to-side, lovie, and see if they stay."

Zoe obeyed, finding that the elaborate hairstyle did indeed stay, and dazzling the room with her smile. "Thanks a heap, Dellie," she said, hugging the girl who would spend the night introducing herself as a cousin of Jemmy, Cecilia, and Zoe.

There was perfume to spritz and lipstick to blot and last checks all round to make sure that everyone had matching shoes and all imaginable accessories. Faith swooped in to rescue Portia from a near-disastrous encounter with a teetering bottle of lotion; Nan inspected Dellie with as much attention to detail as any sergeant preparing for dress parade. Una handed Ceci her mended glove and was rewarded with a soft embrace of pink satin and nervous delight.

"Have a good time, dearest," Una urged her niece. "Promise you'll dance a little?"

"If someone asks me," Ceci said quietly.

Una smiled. "If they don't, they're awfully foolish."

Jemmy leaned over the back of Una's chair and grinned at her sister. "If they don't, you go ahead and ask them yourself!"

A theatrical knock and shout from the hallway interrupted any reply Ceci might make. "Is everybody decent in there?"

When the girls chorused their yeses, Jem and Jerry came in with broad smiles and extravagant compliments all around.

"We'd better be off," Jerry said, checking his watch. "Didn't it start at eight o'clock?"

"You can't make an entrance if you're on time, Daddy," Dellie protested with a long-suffering sigh.

"I'm sure you ladies would make a splash whenever you chose to appear," Jem grinned. "But I do believe sometime before midnight is traditional."

There was a last fluttering round of goodbyes as the girls pulled on coats and only such hats as would not ruin the last hour's efforts and piled into the waiting Cadillac. They waved to Una and Nan and Faith as they rolled down the drive, their smiling faces illuminated by the full moon.

"Do you really think they'll be alright?" Una asked as the merry party disappeared down the hill.

"Jem and Jerry are going to stay," Faith said. "My girls know they'll be right outside in case there's any trouble."

Una nodded, though she worried that the sort of trouble the girls were likely to encounter wouldn't be the sort that could be solved by fathers riding to the rescue.

"Don't worry, Una," Nan said, taking her arm as they turned back toward the debris-littered living room. "The girls will take care of one another."

Una gathered up a pile of hair ribbons from the sofa and began to pack them into a hatbox. "No
"No," her sister sighed. "Or, rather, we've had two letters, but they're both from before ours could have reached him. But it hasn't been a month yet. Letters often take that long to get to him and back again."

That was true, but not particularly comforting. Wally was far away and the baby would certainly arrive at Ingleside long before he did.

No one had any doubt that Wally and Zoe would be married at the first possible opportunity. But Zoe's pregnancy had still been the talk of two towns all month. None of the Maylocks had even dared show their faces at church since it had become common knowledge. The Blythe pride was rather more audacious than fragile, and Jem and Faith had welcomed Zoe into their pew the last three Sundays just as they had last July. The baby would arrive in the spring and Una was already fretting over its christening. Surely Father would have no qualms over baptizing his own great-grandchild, would he? Perhaps quietly? That might be best, especially if the Maylocks refused to attend.

"How are your neighbors?" Nan asked Una, changing the subject as she folded a stack of unchosen undergarments. "Have they received the paperwork they were waiting for?"

"They have an eviction notice," Una said sorrowfully. "They have to be out by February first. But Mr. Pelham still hasn't sent over the deed or any of the other paperwork we requested."

"What will you do?" Faith asked.

What indeed. They were running out of time and options were thin on the ground.

Una sighed. "If it comes to it, I'll take the girls and Amelia and Archie will go to the rectory with Georgie until we can find something more permanent."

"Oh, Una, no!" Faith protested. "You don't have the room to take in two teenagers! Don't even dream of it!"

"What else can I do? We can't let them freeze to death."

Nan put down the crinoline she was folding and took Una by the hand. "As soon as you get that paperwork, you bring it straight to Jerry," she said. "If there's one thing I've learned about the law from hearing so much of it over the years, it's that you can spin any technicality into a delay. And if time is what you need, trust Jerry to find it."

It was a slim hope, but Una grasped at it gratefully. With a delay, they might be able to find a house the Newgates could afford. Or at least keep them housed snugly until warmer weather arrived. In truth, she would hate to see them split apart at a time like this. Their strength was in one another and as long as no one was left on their own, hope was not utterly lost.

"Thank you, Nan," Una said, squeezing her fingers. "I'll do that."

Everything about the mission felt wrong right from the start.

First, Shirley discovered that he had foolishly left the snapshot of Carl in the front of his wallet. He never forgot to shuffle it to the back; what had gotten into him? Grayson was not much interested in Shirley's ritual cleansing of his pockets and had gone off to find coffee, but he might return at any moment. Shirley doubted Grayson pawed through his wallet while he was out on missions, but
better safe than sorry. He tugged at the photo too fast and felt it tear. Cursing under his breath, he pulled more slowly, drawing the crease-softened paper out of the frame and trying to re-insert it behind the photo of the boys and Muggins. It flopped and resisted, but he managed to shove it out of sight just in time. The wallet went into the box of his effects, along with his identity disks and lighter. He'd reclaim them when he returned, as he always did.

Then there were the agents, who were late arriving and took longer than usual to ready themselves for the flight. When they finally shuffled out onto the runway, the taller one gave Shirley an apologetic shrug, which went unreturned. The welcoming committee was out there in the cold and snow, surrounded by Nazis, and Shirley didn't like to make them wait.

"Sorry, Blythe," Grayson apologized as the two agents climbed aboard. "I know how you like to do things by the book."

*Odd Duck* didn't like the cold either, taking a long time to start, and then being uncommonly recalcitrant even for a Lizzie, as if she were begging to stay home under the blankets rather than going to school. Shirley wrestled her onto the runway anyway, coaxing and manhandling in equal measure. The ground crew had attempted to keep the racecourse clear of ice, but there were still slick patches of hard-packed snow glistening in the frigid moonlight. No elegant takeoff this time, but Shirley got them flying just the same.

One of the passengers attempted to chat as they flew, using the intercom to ask about the flight time and weather conditions and all manner of things that were immaterial to someone whose job was to sit quietly and wait. What did it matter if the flight time were two hours or two hours and fifteen minutes? They'd get there when they got there. Somewhere over the Channel, Shirley clicked off his headset so that he could concentrate.

The landing zone was a hayfield southeast of Amiens. Shirley hated Amiens. It always reminded him of that long-ago letter: *one eye is enough to watch bugs with*. Fucking Amiens. He avoided it whenever possible. But it was his guidepost tonight, which meant seeking it out. Fine.

In the countryside southeast of the city, Shirley dropped down lower, checking his speed and compass as he ticked off landmarks. They were close now, and he thumped the canopy to alert his passengers. Nearly time.

When they reached the coordinates, Shirley checked and double-checked his notes. He was certain of the spot, but saw only blackness. He peered again, but there was no signal letter flashing from the ground. Mission rules stated that he should abort after a second pass, but he gave it a third just in case. After all, the torches might be on the blink after waiting so long in the freezing January night. His patience was rewarded by the *Dash Dot Dash* of signal letter K.

The triangle of lights sprung up and Shirley sighted along it, bringing *Odd Duck* in nice and easy. She touched down and for a single moment it seemed like everything might be alright after all.

Then he heard the first shot.

One of the passengers shouted, and more shots rattled outside. They came from at least two directions. Was this an ambush? A firefight? There was no time to ponder. Shirley needed to get up and out of here as quickly as possible.

He swung the Lizzy around, jolting her across a deep rut that nearly sent her toppling over her propellor. A rattle of bullets hit the tail and Shirley was thrown violently against his harness. Now the Lizzy was sliding sideways and Shirley cursed as he fought for control.
The next gully sent the plane bouncing and Shirley leaned in, pushing for more speed. There were trees ahead, though. Too close. Damn. Odd Duck would never make it over the tops. But if Shirley couldn’t pick up enough speed to take off, at least he could put some distance between himself and whoever was shooting. He aimed directly for the trees, bumping along the uneven ground at a spine-jangling speed until he was only yards from the wood, but a good long way from the original landing site.

*Odd Duck* shuddered to a stop. There was no time to gather thoughts, only fling off the harness and reach for the canopy release.

A row of bullets slapped across the thick glass of the canopy, leaving starry pockmarks. Shirley ducked. The passengers were shouting, but it was impossible to make sense of their voices. More gunfire, but it wasn’t hitting the Lizzie, or at least not all of it. Someone must be fighting back. More than one someone by the sound of it. Shirley was supposed to burn the plane, but there was no time to fiddle with matches or gasoline or any of it. Another burst of fire brought a cry of pain from one of the agents.

*Out.*

*Get out.*

Shirley looped the strap of the escape kit across his chest and reached up again to open the canopy. The passengers already had their hatch open and were scrambling out, one of them urging the other.

Something pinged very close.

For a moment, Shirley thought he had let the canopy close on his hand. But no, the hand was swinging free, not caught. It seemed oddly distant, as if it were floating away from his body.

Underwater, everything is slower. Movement, sound, the way light sways in undulating waves, rather than darting about. Even the sun is muted, murky and indistinct as it filters down from the surface. Shirley sat in the cockpit, bullets darting around him like silver minnows, the thick glass canopy above his head rippling with spreading cracks. He thought perhaps that it was the sun glimmering blue off the dark stream cascading down his arm. He held what was left of the hand up to the circle of light, slowly, wondering at the unfamiliar silhouette as blood pumped and pumped down over his wrist, bathing the radium dial in glowing red.

It took another wound to wake him. A ricochet sliced through the shoulder of his flight jacket, singeing along the flesh, not a punch but a burn.

Shirley shook himself. He was still alive and that meant he still had a chance to get out of this mess.

Another machine gun burst shattered the weakened canopy, raining down razor droplets of glass. Shirley held his breath, eyes closed protectively against the shards. When they subsided, he reached up, slid back the canopy frame, and hauled himself out on the side that seemed to be taking less fire. He climbed down the struts, unholstering his service revolver as soon as his boots hit the snow.

One of the agents was sprawled on his back at the bottom of the ladder, his face a caved-in pulp glistening in the moonlight. The other was limping away toward the forest, hunched and certainly wounded, since he wasn’t running full-out. Shirley caught up with him in three strides and pulled the man's arm over his shoulder, half-dragging him to the tree line.
There were shouts all around and fire from every direction and Shirley had no choice but to just put his head down and go. Go toward what, God only knew, but away from here was good enough.

Shots rang out at close range, rifle fire, not machine guns. Shirley fired back, emptying his revolver into the night, always moving, urging the SOE agent to move his feet a little. The man groaned, churning his legs imprecisely through the frosted leaf-litter.

"Come on," Shirley muttered through clenched teeth. "Gotta keep going."

They did, somehow, crashing through the underbrush until they came to a moonlit stretch of road. It seemed deserted, so they hobbled across, skirting a ditch and following the outside border of a stubbled field to a copse of trees.

"Stop," the agent gasped.

Shirley paused, sides heaving, gauging the sound of the gunfire. They had left it behind, but there was no telling who might be following them. He let the man down, propping him against a trunk.

"Where are you hit?"


"Can you keep going?"

"No. Leave me."

Shirley gritted his teeth, labored breaths hissing in and out. "Sorry, pal. Can't let you be captured."

"Won't be," he said. "It's either the Frogs or the cyanide tablet for me."

Shirley wondered grimly whether the man meant it. If he did, it might be safe to leave him. That seemed an awful risk to take, besides being inhumane. The agent was dressed in civilian clothes. If he survived long enough for the Germans to find him, he'd be turned over to the Gestapo as a spy and have a very rough go of it.

Seized by a burst of inspiration, Shirley shrugged out of his flight jacket. The grazed shoulder protested at the movement, but it seemed to be working well enough. Worse was his hand, which left a bloody smear along the sleeve.

"Here," Shirley said, draping the jacket around the man's shoulders despite feeble protests. "The name's Blythe, just like it says on the jacket. It might be enough uniform to send you to a POW camp."

"Not bloody likely," the man said, dark foam trailing from the corner of his mouth.

Shirley looked down in surprise and saw the stain spreading across the man's abdomen. Not the hip, then.

There was an exchange of gunfire close — too close — maybe just on the other side of the road. Shirley tensed.

"Go," the man said.

He might have saved his last breath; Shirley was already gone.
At the edge of the next field, Shirley crouched down long enough to pull the beret from his escape kit and wrap it around his shattered hand. No sense running if you just left a trail of blood behind. He didn’t look at it closely, just shoved the mess into the black wool pouch and then tucked it into his armpit, gritting his teeth against the flash of white-hot pain of scraping bones as he applied pressure.

Then he was off again, shambling through a meadow and another patch of woods with no thought other than away. He scrambled through underbrush and around trees. He slipped once, boot sliding in the soft leaf mould, but he gained his feet again and lurched onward.

Suddenly, there was a cry and something shorter and softer than a tree knocked Shirley to the ground. He rolled onto his wounded hand and was sure he would black out from the pain. The dark shape of another person scrabbled upright and stood over him, pointing a blunt-barreled Sten gun at his chest.

"Arrête!" Shirley groaned.

The figure stilled. Shirley blinked hard, willing himself to focus. Above him, a round, youthful face loomed silver beneath a nimbus of dark curly hair. A girl.

Shirley put up his hands . . . hand? . . . hand and a half? . . . and swallowed a mouthful of bile.

The girl said something low and fluid that Shirley did not catch. When he did not reply, she kicked him in the side, never taking her eyes from him. She was not very tall, nor very imposing, being somewhat younger even than Shirley had thought at first, but her voice did not waver.

"Pour qui est-ce que tu travailles?" she demanded.

Shirley grimaced, wondering for one wild moment whether he could ask her to write that down for him to puzzle out. It seemed impolite to ask, particularly given the gun.

"Je suis le pilote," he said carefully. "Le pilote de l'avion. Je suis Canadien."

The girl wrinkled her nose at this halting introduction. She leaned lower and said something else very quickly. Shirley did not catch a single word. By the time he realized that she had spoken German, the girl had already relaxed a fraction, seemingly reassured to have seen no comprehension register in his face.

"You. Anglais." The syllables sounded as laborious to Shirley's ear as his French must sound to her, but he understood the command.

"Yes, I speak English," he said quickly, demonstrating his fluency. "I'm a pilot in the Royal Air Force. My name is Squadron Leader Shirley J. Blythe."

The girl may or may not have understood any of that, but she gave a nod of satisfaction, apparently convinced that it was more likely that Shirley's native tongue was English than German. She lowered her weapon.

A pair of motorcycles roared down the road on the other side of the meadow. Hard to say whether they were coming or going.

The girl licked her lips, then jerked her head away from the road. "Allons-y."

The dark shape of another person scrabbled upright and stood over him, pointing a blunt-barreled Sten gun at his chest.
Retour en France

January 1942

The little root cellar was tiny, its roof too low for Shirley to stand up straight. They had run at first, then walked, for what must have been several miles before the curly-haired girl had prodded him through a barn and down a short ladder into the little storage space, hissing for him to go faster. No moonlight down here — a lighter would have been very useful indeed — but the girl produced matches and lit an old lamp. There was a bin half-full of potatoes and another of what might have been turnips. The place smelled of earth, cut by the sharper scents of kerosene, blood, and cordite from the recently-fired gun.

The girl motioned to Shirley to sit on a crate, which he did, offering no resistance that might get her thinking that he was a threat. She remained standing, feet planted wide, the Sten gun held across her chest. She looked Shirley over, her gaze lingering on the beret-wrapped hand, the bloody shoulder, the aviator boots.

"C'est toi, le pilot anglais?" she asked sharply.

"Oui. Le pilot anglais."

She frowned, then asked a question that contained the words lettre de l'alphabet.

The signal letter. It had been . . .

"K!" Shirley flashed the Morse with his uninjured hand for good measure. Dash Dot Dash.

She chewed her lip, the whirring of her mind nearly audible as she tried to decide whether this was good enough. If the Nazis had known the site, they would have known the signal letter as well.

Shirley tried desperately to think of something else that might convince her that he was who he said he was. More English? God, he wished he had his tags. The girl seemed to be looking at the boots . . . did she recognize them as a flyer's gear? Had this been her first welcome party, or had she been part of others?

Others!

"Soissons!" he blurted.

This startled her, which, Shirley reflected, was not exactly advisable, given the very nasty firearm still in her hands.

"Soissons," he said more calmly. "La pleine lune de decembre. Vous . . . étiez?"

He winced at his own halting French. Was that the correct past tense for were you there? The December drop hadn't been far from here. If she had been part of that mission, would she still remember the details?

"Dans la région," she said warily. "Où ça?"

Shirley brought the old map to the front of his mind. West of Soissons, four kilometers northwest of a village, a village called . . .
"Saconin!"

She nodded slowly. “Le pilot anglais.”

“Oui.”

Shirley knew she was taking a chance trusting him, and tried his best not to seem nervous. He breathed in relief when she set the gun down in the corner and shrugged off her coat. Underneath, she was dressed for duty: drab canvas trousers, simple shoes, a thick sweater with the neck rolled up to her ears. She must have been tired after such an ordeal, but she did not show it.

"Moi, c'est Mireille."

Shirley caught the shape of the name, but not its specifics. The girl repeated herself and he tried to reproduce the sounds.

"Mee-RAY?"

She smiled, startlingly sunny for someone who was threatening to shoot him not a minute ago. She said her name again, slowly, though Shirley did no better on his second attempt at pronouncing it. It was too soft, nothing to grab hold of after the initial M.

"Je m'appelle Shirley."

She crinkled her nose in disbelief. "Cher lis?"

"No," he corrected her. "Shirley. SHIR-lee."

She smiled wide enough to dimple. "Ah. Shirley! Comme Shirley Temple!"


Introductions thus accomplished, Mireille pulled the kerosene lamp close and motioned for Shirley to let her examine his injured hand. He unwound it carefully, sucking his breath in through his teeth as he pulled the soaked beret away. The wool clung where the blood was already congealing, but at least the flow had slowed.

It was at least as bad as his first impression of it. A bullet had passed through his left palm, just below his ring finger, which dangled shredded and useless from a macerated stump of raw muscle and glinting bone. The little finger was entirely gone, leaving the impression that some sharp-toothed creature had bitten off half his hand.

Though he was sitting, Shirley swayed. Mireille clucked over the hand, not touching it, but leaning in to get a closer look.

Well, at least she isn't squeamish, Shirley thought as a wave of dizziness rolled him like the deck of a ship.

"Attendez un peu ici," she said softly before slipping through the hatch and disappearing.

Shirley let his head loll against the earthen wall and took a long, shuddering breath. He had trained for this. Trust your training. Alright, what did he need to do?

Burn the Lysander. There hadn’t been time.

Evade capture. In progress.
Ditch the flight jacket and boots. Half-done, though he might need help with the second part.

Make contact with the Resistance. Check. Sort of. Mireille was clearly a Résistante, but she was also alone. Would she be able to connect him with others? Had anyone else survived that fight?

Return to England, either by Lysander extraction or via Spain. That was the next step.

Another bout of nausea hit and Shirley realized that no, the next step was finding some sort of medical care. He'd never get anywhere if the hand got infected. He tested his right shoulder, but seemed to have full range of motion, and it hadn't hindered him earlier. Just a graze, though there was enough blood to soak through his shirt and sweater. It would be fine once it was clean.

When Mireille returned, she had hot water, bandages, and a woolen blanket. She reached for the hand, but Shirley shook her off. This he would do himself. He unhooked his watch and placed it carefully on the dirt floor.

Supposed to get rid of that, too. Later.

Grunting in pain, Shirley dribbled water over the ragged edge of his hand, bathing and blotting, staying upright long enough to wrap it securely with clean white linen. When he finished, he leaned against the dirt wall, clammy with sweat, and concentrated on breathing.

Mireille touched the injured shoulder gently, asking permission that Shirley gave with a faint nod. She produced a pair of wire scissors from her pocket and cut open his sweater so that she could sponge and dress the angry red furrow, working methodically, the tip of her tongue poking out as she passed the bandage over and under the injured arm. When the bandage was secure, she wiped blood and dirt and sweat from Shirley's face, the warm cloth a very small comfort, but a comfort nonetheless.

Mireille spoke quietly and Shirley picked through her words, recognizing dormir. He doubted he could ignore the hand enough to actually sleep, but it was probably a good idea to rest while he could. He let Mireille help him with his boots and spread the blanket over him.

"T'es en sécurité ici," she soothed. "En sécurité."

***

He must have slept because he woke to absolute darkness.

No, not absolute. The faint glimmer of the Radiolite cast a dim, greenish glow like a petrified firefly. Shirley reached for it, retched, tried the uninjured hand instead. He scraped a thumbnail over the dial to remove some of the crusted blood.

1:27

In the morning? Afternoon? Impossible to say. But it must have been after midnight when they'd arrived here — wherever here was — and Shirley felt like he'd slept for several hours at least.

One thing was sure: he was alone. No quiet breathing, no small form huddled in the little room beside him. Wherever Mireille had gone, he'd just have to hope she planned on coming back.

No chance of getting back to sleep, not with the hand throbbing as if it might burst its wrappings. Shirley felt the familiar urge to reach for his wallet, but it wasn't there, and even if it had been, it was too dark to see anything.
Instead, he stared into blankness. Would he be reported missing? Probably not right away. The RAF would know he hadn't returned, of course, but they would try to find out what had happened. The SOE agents were both dead, but there were two more on the ground he was supposed to have picked up. Perhaps they'd send news by wireless.

Unless they're dead as well.

And even if they weren't, what would they report? No one knew where he was except Mireille.

**Will the RAF send a telegram to my parents?**

No. Probably not. Not for a while, at least. They'd want confirmation. When someone went missing, it could take weeks to notify the family. Months, even. At least, he hoped so.

The only thing to do was to get back to base before anyone at home knew that anything was amiss. Spain was a long way away, especially in the winter, across unfriendly, unfamiliar country. But if he got picked up by a Lysander during the February moon, he could send his own telegram from England before Carl got too anxious. The letter he had posted yesterday wouldn't arrive in Canada for a week or two, and then then would only be a gap of two or three weeks before he sent his telegram. That would be alright. Shirley would apologize for the lapse and say he was busy but fine, letter to follow.

**Hard to explain the hand, though.**

Thinking of the hand undid all the work of distracting himself. It pulsed, hot and aching, the pain sharpening into a flash any time he moved. Even perfectly still, it was agony, and Shirley began to think that if Mireille did not return soon, he might need to go in search of help himself.

The thought seemed to conjure her. The hatch opened, revealing a patch of dim daylight with Mireille at its center. She beckoning for Shirley to follow her up into the barn.

The barn was not exactly cozy, but the water in the troughs was only frozen around the edges and the warm breath of half a dozen milk cows fogged the air with the scent of last summer's hay. Shirley noted that fewer than half the stalls were occupied, surmising that the rest of the herd had been requisitioned or sold or eaten. No horses either, though chickens roosted here and there.

Mireille led Shirley to the last stall, where pearl-gray light from the open door fell across a white-haired man wearing a black coat. The man smiled and bobbed his head as Mireille made introductions. Shirley did not need words to understand the ancient black bag balanced on a hay bale, nor the gesture by which the man invited him to sit on another.

Shirley did as he was bid, steeling himself not to groan as the doctor unwrapped his hand. The man made gentle sounds as he examined, soothing in the wordless language of caregivers the world over. Shirley concentrated on his breathing and took stock of his surroundings to see if there was a soft place to land if he fainted.

After an excruciating interval, the doctor let go of Shirley's hand and began to unpack his bag. Shirley swallowed when a hinged leather case emerged, fancying he knew what it contained, though he didn't have a French name for it. There was a vocabulary lesson for you. He'd rather not know the word for bone saw in any language, let alone multiple.

The white-haired doctor spoke softly as he displayed his tools, too quickly for Shirley to understand more than the odd word or phrase. **Hand. Do not worry. Good light.** The doctor traced along the back of Shirley's hand, encompassing the base of the dead ring finger, dangling and
purple. Of course it would have to go. Was the bone saw even necessary? Taking an objective look at it, Shirley wondered whether it couldn't be dispatched with a simple knife.

Indeed, the doctor selected a smaller saw from his case, cleaning it carefully in a steaming basin Mireille brought down from the house. There was a stout board for an operating table and a pile of clean bandages at the ready, and nothing left to do but get on with it.

"Attendez!" Mireille gasped when Shirley placed his hand on the board. "Vous lui donnerez bien de la morphine, non?"

The doctor shrugged apologetically, but of course he had none. Not after two years of occupation and rationing and the sort of prices people would pay on the black market for anything that took away pain.

Shirley made a mental note to advise Grayson that a few morphine syrettes would be a most welcome addition to the escape kit in future.

The doctor did uncork a bottle of red wine, which Shirley accepted. It might not do much for the pain, but he was thirsty. Besides, drinking it gave him something to do other than watch the doctor arrange his tools. Mireille and the doctor were speaking in low, urgent tones, but they needn’t have bothered. It was too much effort to try to decipher what they were saying and, frankly, Shirley didn’t want to know.

When the bottle was empty, he placed it beside his hay bale and took a deep breath.

"S'il vous plaît," he said to Mireille, then pointed up toward a hook on the wall holding the tack of some long-gone horse.

She did not understand, blinking at Shirley with dark lashes until he mimed biting down. The girl gulped, but took down the harness, finding the end of a thick leather strap and holding it out to him.

He wasn’t sure if grateful was exactly the right word, but Shirley was satisfied. He put the strap between his teeth and arranged his hand on the board, where Mireille held it steady. Shirley looked out through the barn door, over the snow-spotted fields toward the low winter sun and shut his eyes.

Jerry Meredith sat behind the vast mahogany desk, rolling a little bronze medal between his thumb and first finger, back and forth, back and forth. He paused occasionally to turn to the next page of the document lying before him on the blotter or to adjust his spectacles. He was taking his time, Jerry-like, which was probably a good thing. Una hoped he might find something useful, though sooner would be better than later. Jerry might have all the time in the world, but Una did not.

Una had never been to Jerry’s office at the Charlottetown courthouse before, never having been in much need of legal advice. He was so proud to show her around the building, and she smiled and praised, not stating the truth, which was that the columns and portraits and echoing halls made her feel like a child too small to see over a countertop. That was the point, of course. Jerry was not a very imposing personage and relied on the material trappings of his office to convey its power: the voluminous black robes billowing from their stand by the door like the hovering specter of the law itself, the framed degrees on the wall, the heavy gavel gleaming on the corner of the desk. The desk itself was a majestic bulwark between The Honorable Gerald Meredith and his interlocutors. Una supposed this was a good idea in principle, but it was unsettling.

There were a few relieving touches here and there if you looked for them. The cushions propped in
each of the two wingback chairs by the fireplace were unmistakably Nan's, though they departed from her usual designs of fruit and flowers to incorporate various patriotic motifs, from clusters of red maple leaves to the heraldic lion of PEI. There were family photographs, too. One photo of the girls when they were small, all frilly pinafores and pearly little teeth, another more recent, poised and pretty in maiden finery at Bea's graduation party. In a place of honor on the desk was a photo of Jerry and Nan standing on the deck of a luxury liner beside Jem and Faith, all of them off on the Vimy Pilgrimage in 1936. They wore official berets and smiled for the camera.

The little souvenir medal in Jerry's fingers was a souvenir, too. He kept it in his pocket and was fond of running it back and forth through his fingers when he wanted to concentrate, just as he was doing now. Una wondered whether he used it during trials and guessed that he probably did.

Jerry muttered something, turning to the last page of the document, then back again, shaking his head.

"You're sure this is an exact copy of the deed?" he asked.

"It's notarized," Una said, pointing to the stamp. "And Mr. Pelham's lawyer sent it over by registered mail."

"Well it's a real mess."

"What do you mean?"

Jerry rose from his seat and ambled around the substantial perimeter of the desk, coming to sit beside Una, which was much better, both for seeing the document and for her nerves.

"See here?" he said, pointing. "Usually, a deed of this sort will include a list of all the major parts of the property. So it will say something like, this property, comprising all lands, houses, barns, outbuildings, crops, orchards, woodlots, pastures, fields, streams, wells, springs, fences, etc. Some will even include mineral rights for whatever may be under the ground. But read this. Just here."

Una took the deed from Jerry's hand and read the paragraph he had indicated.

"It doesn't say any of that," she said. "It just says the nine acres, bounded by the Lowbridge Road, Pelham's Pond, and the stone wall bounding the property of Mr. William Cheever. But no list."

"I'd very much like to know who drafted this," Jerry said, chortling.

"Why?"

"So I can make sure I don't hire him as a clerk! I've never seen such a shoddy deed. There's a reason why lawyers write out that whole list, you know. It's so that if there's ever a dispute, it's clear as clear can be what is included and what isn't. Who's to say what this deed means? The description of the land boundaries is alright — not perfect, but useable. But what else is included? What about the crops? What about the water rights? What about the barn?"

"The barn isn't included?"

"Not explicitly."

Una’s heart fluttered. "What about the house?"

"A good question," Jerry agreed. "We used to do a bit of property law at the firm, and I'd say that this is certainly a land deed, but it isn't explicitly a deed to the house. At least, that’s what I’d argue
if it were in my client’s interest.”

Una clasped her hands to keep her hope in check.

"Jerry, this is very important. Are you saying that Mr. Pelham does not own the Newgate family’s house?"

Jerry frowned, considering. "He'll argue that he does. Or his lawyer will, if the fellow can figure out how to put on his own trousers. They'll argue that anything located within the boundaries described in the deed is part of the property. But if he owns the house, I'd like to know why it isn't explicitly included in the deed, as it should be."

"Is there any other way to prove ownership?"

Jerry shuffled the papers in the pile, drawing out a single sheet. "There's the aunt's will. Old Mr. Pelham inherited the property, you see. It says right here, I bequeath to my nephew, Angus Pelham, my land adjoining Pelham's Pond. Drawn up by the same chucklehead as the deed, no doubt. There’s no specific mention of the house. And you say that the father didn't have a will? And never drew up a formal agreement with the Newgates for the house payments? What sort of lawyers do they have over in Lowbridge, anyway?"

Una's knuckles flashed white.

"So Mr. Pelham could argue that he owns whatever is located on the property," she clarified. "Would he be successful?"

"Perhaps," Jerry said judiciously. "But it would mean a lawsuit and court fees and lawyers’ fees, though personally I think the fellow responsible for this mess should be paid in acorns for all the good he's doing his clients . . ."  

"And what about something that wasn't on the property?" Una interrupted.

"Sorry?"

"If something was removed from the land before the first of February, would Mr. Pelham be able to sue to get it back?"

"He can sue all he likes, much good may it do him. He has a deed for the land. Nothing else. Besides, there's a difference between land and moveable property."

"What is moveable property?"

“Moveable property is anything can be carried off. Traditionally, under English inheritance laws, sons would usually to inherit land — at least the eldest son would — while daughters got moveables: furniture, silver plate, clothing, livestock, that sort of thing. They were expected to move with their husbands, so they inherited moveable property."

"Is a house considered moveable property?"

Jerry narrowed his eyes. “What are you planning, Una?"

Una hopped out of her seat. She was not so very much taller standing than she was sitting, but tall enough to kiss Jerry warmly on the forehead.

"Thank you, Jerry."

"You're not going to explain?"

Una was already taking her coat and scarf from the rack. "I'm afraid I haven't time. There are only a few days until February first."

"Won't you stay for supper? Nan and the girls will be sorry to have missed you."

Una shook her head, grinning behind her scarf and feeling that she might actually clap her hands for joy.

"I'll come back for a visit after this is all over. But I must run and catch the afternoon train back."

Jerry rose from his own seat. "Don't go looking for trouble," he warned with mock severity.

"It finds me on its own."

The flashing eyes softened a bit and Jerry reached for his sister's hand. "How are things at Ingleside? Is Zoe alright?"

"Yes," Una smiled. "She's been doing so much better ever since Wally's letter came. He's over the moon about the baby and Zoe's been letting the girls talk to her about wedding plans."

Jerry grinned. "Don't let Dellie hear you say that. She's forever clipping things out of magazines. If she gets involved, poor Wally will come home to a wedding that would make Princess Elizabeth green with envy."

"That would be lovely."

"I seem to remember some rather nice weddings at Ingleside," Jerry twinkled, taking Una's arm to walk her down the hall. "We'll have another next time Wally's on leave."

"I'll see what can be done about a cake," Una said, wondering whether Shirley knew the recipe and whether he could ever be persuaded to commit it to paper.

"It's won't hold a candle to old Susan Baker's cake, but between my girls and the Ingleside lot, we'll have a wedding to remember and that you may tie to."

Una smiled at the quotation, wondering if Jerry realized how apt it was to invoke Susan as the patron saint of hospitality. She squeezed his arm as he escorted her to the front door of the courthouse and kissed her farewell. As she hurried toward the train, Una patted the papers folded in her handbag, praying quietly for the blessing of St. Elizabeth, Susan, or any other saint who had ever found a way around the rules in the name of mercy.

Notes:

*Rainbow Valley*, chapter 16: "Tit for Tat"
"Atta girl," Carl murmured, stroking the silky black nose of one of Bertie Shakespeare Drew's gorgeous Percherons. All four of the massive horses stood on the bank of Pelham's Pond, stamping their ice cleats, their glossy coats blending with the shifting shadows of the winter night. The swirling mist of their breath caught flickers of light from the bobbing lanterns of the gathered crowd, appearing and disappearing as the beams danced over the icy pond. Overhead, the luminous round of the full moon glowed cool and bright, edging the scene in silver.

"Her name's Violet," offered one of Bertie's daughters, her voice muffled by a thick green scarf. "And these are Daisy and Myrtle. The gelding is Hawthorn."

"Which is your favorite?" Carl asked kindly.

He couldn't see the girl's mouth, but her eyes crinkled in a smile. "Aspen. We left him home, though. He's still young and Papa thought he mightn't like the ice."

"Good thinking," Carl said. He wasn't quite sure he liked the ice either.

Pelham's Pond stretched out before them, flat and frozen, the icy surface obscured by spiraling eddies of white powder that that swirled like riptides. Carl knew the pond ice was good and solid after six weeks of deep freeze. Hadn't the Newgate children been skating every day since Christmas? But kids playing hockey was one thing; hauling a house was quite another.

"Steady there," Bertie Shakespeare called to the men pumping the jacks. "Together, lads!"

With each pump, the Newgate house lifted another quarter-inch off its foundation. They had been at it in shifts since nightfall, several dozen able-bodied men and more than a few women, working a quarter of an hour on, a quarter of an hour off, pulling the house free from its foundation. Youngsters held lanterns beside each of the jacks, while a team of the strongest men positioned thick logs under the structure to act as rollers. Another half-dozen were hard at work on the opposite shore, building a temporary wooden foundation. The plan was to take the shortest path, straight across Pelham's Pond at its narrowest point, rather than going all the way out to the road, then around the pond and back up to the hayfield. As it was, the move would still take all night.

The Newgate family stood near the wagons heaped with their furniture and other possessions. Their new home would be their old home, relocated to the bare hayfield Archie Newgate had been renting from St. Elizabeth's all these years. Father Daniel had given his permission, and no prizes for guessing whose influence had secured it. Now all they had to do was move the house, and the first of February could come as it pleased.

Despite the cold and the dark, the gathering had a festive air. Half of Lowbridge must be here, or at least the better part of the parish, plus the cannery workers and a sizable contingent from Glen St. Mary. Faith and old Dr. Blythe had set up a medical station to see to people's slivers and burns while Jem worked a jack and kept an ear out for emergencies. Mrs. Blythe and Zoe Maylock had several kettles going over a fire pit in the garden, supplying hot water for Miller and Mary Douglas, who were handing out coffee, tea, and biscuits from the bed of their delivery truck. The grunts of workers mingled with the sharp laughter of those on break.
It was all Una's doing. All this. Carl continued to pat Violet's nose, but he looked past her massive chest toward the gathered throng, knowing that these were Una's people, every last one of them. Had she ever called in a favor before? Now she'd lifted a finger and every person here had come running, eager to do her any service she might ask, no matter how perplexing.

Carl scanned the crowd for Una. He was not sure he would be able to pick her out among the bundled multitude, but he need not have worried. There she was, standing on the ice a few yards from shore, conferring with Father Daniel, his head bent to hear what she was saying. She wore her long blue coat with the hood up, hiding her face. It hung loosely from her slight shoulders, but the gestures of the mittened hand were unmistakably his sister's.

"One more should do it!" Bertie Shakespeare bellowed.

The jacks groaned with one last effort and the last log slid into place.

"Well done, lads, well done!"

As soon as the last roller was in position, the workers began securing heavy hauling ropes to the beams and joists. The Drew children connected traces for the Percherons, while others set thick hawsers, each long enough for a dozen men to pull together.

"Are you going to pull, Uncle Carl?"

A lantern at Carl's elbow illuminated Ceci Blythe's pink nose peeking out from her scarf.

"Sure am. How about you?"

Ceci shook her head. "Zoe and I are going the long way 'round with the wagons. Jemmy's pulling, though. And Dad, too."

"I'll be sure to get a spot on their rope," Carl smiled. "That way I can take it easy."

There was a giggle from somewhere deep in the wooly recesses and Ceci traipsed away with her lantern.

One of the Drews came to collect Violet, and Carl saw her off with one last pat. Now he had no excuse for standing off to the side, and would have to join in the general commotion, uninviting as the prospect might be. There were an awful lot of people, joking and bellowing and bumping into one another.

On another night, Carl might have been happy to join in, reveling in the boisterous mood, but tonight, everything seemed too loud, somehow, or too close, or too all-at-once. Violet had been an oasis of calm, but she was gone now, being hitched into her traces by Bertie and his children. It was silly, really, to feel anxious around people he'd known all his life, and Carl was frustrated by his inability to shake the feeling that his shirt was too rough against his skin. He took a slow breath and pressed a hand to his breast pocket for reassurance, wishing there were a more recent letter along with the wings. But two weeks between letters wasn't all that unusual. Sometimes two or three came together on the same ship. Tomorrow was Sunday, so there wouldn't be any mail, but surely he'd have a new letter on Monday.

"Gather round! Gather round!" a cheerful voice carried above the din.

The crowd responded, arranging itself into an untidy oval at the pond-side, with Father Daniel at the vertex, a small, hooded figure standing steadfast at his side with a lantern. Carl shimmied in between a man he recognized as a veteran from Lowbridge and Jemmy Blythe, who flashed him
the easy grin that was her birthright.

"Thank you all!" Father Daniel was saying in his most resonant voice. "Your hard work and generosity will see the Newgate family's home safely to its new location. It is absolutely essential that we all work together as one. Therefore, we will rely on signals from Miss Meredith to coordinate our hauling."

At this, he paused a moment, nodding to Una beside him. "When Miss Meredith's lantern goes UP, we will pull. When it goes DOWN, we will rest. Understood?"

There were murmurs of assent as Una demonstrated the simple maneuver.

"Is there an emergency signal?" asked Mary Douglas. "In case the ice cracks?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Douglas," Father Daniel said patiently. "If there is an emergency, Miss Meredith will swing the lantern from side to side. If that happens, please drop your rope and proceed carefully to the nearest bank. However, we have tested the ice, and it is very thick, so we are confident that it will hold."

It wasn't the first house to be moved like this, Carl knew. It happened from time to time, when a shoreline altered or a new road cut through a property. People at Harbour Head still told the story of moving Captain Malachi Russell's house over the harbour ice the winter after the Saxby Gale scoured the shore, and that was the same year Father was born. But Carl had been in the Russell house often enough, and it was half the size of the Newgates'. It would take a little kindness from Providence to see them through this safely.

As if he had heard Carl's thoughts, Father Daniel said, "Before we begin, let us join hands and pray."

All around the circle, people placed lanterns and tools on the ground at their feet and joined hands with their neighbors. Jemmy squeezed a reassurance into Carl's hand on one side, which he instinctively passed along to his comrade on the other.

"Merciful Father," Father Daniel prayed, "watch over this community as we work together to bless the Newgate family with a secure home. Strengthen our arms and our hearts and bring us all safe to the other shore. Let us remember the words of Psalm 127, Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. Lord, use our hands to build your house. This we pray."

_Amen._

Jemmy kept Carl's hand in hers as the circle broke apart, chattering about foundations and jacks and how Dad had let her have a go. They found places on one of the lines, falling in with the others and taking up the heavy rope.

"May I join you, Mr. Meredith?"

Carl looked up, surprised to see Father Daniel smiling at him.

"No," he said. "I mean, yes, of course, but . . . hadn't you better keep everyone in line?"

Daniel took up a position beside Carl and adjusted his gloves. "Think I'm too old to pull, do you? I don't mind pitching in with the rest. Besides, I'm not really the one in charge of all this, am I?"

Carl followed Daniel's gaze out toward the center of the pond. He had expected to see his sister,
and perhaps he did, though the sight of her sent a chill galloping up and down his spine as nothing had since Henry Warren's ghost went creeping over the Bailey dyke in Rainbow Valley days.

Una stood in the center of the frozen pond, a lone figure outlined in silver by the glowing moon. Whorls of snow swirled around her skirt, obscuring her feet so that she seemed to be hovering above the ice, gliding as smoothly and silently as any phantasm. Carl shivered. Was that truly Una, his sweet, gentle sister, rising from the deeps like some silent spirit, ready to command a legion with a movement of her hand?

One look Daniel-ward confirmed that Carl was not the only one overawed at sight of Una in the mist. The priest's round, friendly face was arranged in an expression of reverence that had gone past wistful and well on toward open longing.

_Oh. He loves her._

Carl had been teasing Una about Daniel for ages, but there was no joke here. Daniel loved her, plain as anything under the moon, and whether it was the sort of love that inspired devotional cults or wedding vows, Carl could not say. But anyone who looked at anyone like that was far, far gone, and no mistake.

Why on earth hadn't he spoken? If Una didn't love him back, Carl would eat his hat. But she spent her evenings stitching habits, not bridal linens, and still meant to be consecrated as a deaconess after the spring term. What was the problem?

No time to ponder that now. The haulers were in place and attentive, the horses blowing with impatience. Carl held his breath as the hooded form moved, the snow eddying around and over her as she did. In one fluid motion, she raised her lantern high, and everyone began to pull.

The first hesitant sun of February was still peeking shyly over the horizon when Dennis Pelham's red-paneled Chrysler slammed to a halt in the middle of the Lowbridge Road. Una saw it from the Newgates' kitchen, a view that Amelia had requested specially so that she could always keep one eye on the stove and the other on passersby. Dennis Pelham seemed in no hurry to pass by, however, springing from his car in purple-faced fury.

Una dropped the dishtowels she had been unpacking and raced to the front door. There should have been a veranda there, but it had disintegrated in transit. Thankfully, this had been the only major casualty of the move and the workers had left its crumbling fragments in a pile to one side of the house. Archie would build some temporary stairs tomorrow and start work on a new veranda in the spring.

The move had gone as well as Una could have hoped, leaving nothing on the Pelhams' land but an empty foundation and a few flimsy outbuildings on the worn-out soil. Most of the workers had gone home to their beds, but Una and Carl and a few others had stayed behind to help put things back in some semblance of order.

"Newgate!" Dennis Pelham bellowed.

There were clatters and thundering feet from deep within the house, but Una was first to the doorway and meant to hold it against all comers.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Pelham?" she asked evenly.

"You can step aside, woman, and let me get my hands on that yellow-bellied snake hiding behind
your skirts!"

Dennis Pelham's threatening tone was somewhat undercut by the absence of the veranda, which left him addressing Una's knees. She looked down placidly, not deigning to step aside, though she could hear the entry hall filling up behind her and Archie Newgate trying to push his way toward the front. By the sound of it, someone was holding him back with considerable effort.

"Mr. Newgate and his family have vacated your property, as ordered. You have no further business with them."

"They stole a house!" Mr. Pelham shouted, on the verge of apoplexy.

"No one stole anything," Una replied. "If you consult your deed, you will find that the land it describes is right where it should be."

"I'll see you in court, Newgate!" Mr. Pelham shouted past Una's skirt.

"You may sue if you like," Una said, still unruffled. "But I have already presented your deed to a judge in Charlottetown. He assures me that the deed proves ownership of the land, but says nothing about the house."

"You!" Mr. Pelham snarled, jabbing a finger up at Una. "You... you... woman! You've cheated me! I'll call the Mounties and have you arrested for grand larceny!"

At this juncture, Una felt the warm, steady pressure of a padded hand on her shoulder. Even if he hadn't touched her, she would have known Daniel by scent — candle wax and garden clippings and something indefinably individual that could never be mistaken for anyone else.

"Mr. Pelham," the priest said, his voice rumbling reassuringly along Una's spine, "this land is St. Elizabeth's property. I must ask you to leave and not return."

"She STOLE a HOUSE," Mr. Pelham repeated incredulously.

"And you are trespassing."

"You'll hear from my lawyer!"

"I'm sure we will. Go in peace, Mr. Pelham."

Mr. Pelham went, though it may be doubted whether his departure was notably peaceful. When the Chrysler disappeared over the rise in the road, the crowded hall behind Una erupted into hoarse huzzahs and laughter. Una turned to join in, finding as she did so that she was briefly encircled by Daniel's arm.

***

When the furniture had been set back in place and enough linens unpacked that the Newgates could sleep in their own beds, Una and Daniel followed Carl down the road toward the little gray house. Daniel had left Jenny there overnight, not wanting to keep an eye on her during the move. He had a sermon to give in an hour, though, Una reflected, attendance at today's service was likely to be sparse given the night's activities.

"No matter," Daniel smiled. "Everyone's done their practical lesson tonight, and passed with flying colors."
"Thank you for everything," Una said, covering a yawn with her mitten.

"You must mean my superior hauling," Daniel grinned. "They might have left the horses home once I entered the lists."

Perhaps he was tired as well, but it didn't show, neither in the merry crinkle around his eyes nor in the schoolboyish bounce of his gait. Una couldn't help but reflect his smile.

"You did quite a bit more than that. You sent Mr. Pelham away peacefully this morning. You kept everyone working together. You gave permission for the Newgates to use the land."

"We'll have to put that in writing," Daniel mused. "I don't know if I have the authority to sell it to them outright, but I can convince the Bishop to agree to a long-term lease. A formal one."

"Thank you."

"You're the only one who deserves thanks, Miss Meredith. I couldn't have come up with this plan in a thousand years, let alone raised my hand and had the whole community come running. It's all down to you."

"Everyone helped," Una murmured.

"You were magnificent," Daniel said, all teasing gone.

Suddenly, Carl stopped dead in the middle of the road ahead of them and slapped himself on the forehead with an audible clap.

"Goodness, I've left my jacket at the Newgates'! I must have been lost in thought. I'll just run back and get it now."

"Not now," Una frowned. "We're nearly home and you can go back for it after you've had some sleep."

"It's no trouble," Carl said brightly. "There are some important notes in the pocket. Wouldn't want to lose track of them."

"But . . ."

It was too late; Carl was already jogging back the way they had come.

They really were very close to the house. Una and Daniel rounded the bend in silence, their easy banter stiffened in the absence of their chaperone. No birds sang in the winter morning, no leaves rustled, no winds blew. They were utterly alone and unobserved.

When they reached the porch, Una mounted one step before Daniel caught her hand.

"Una, wait. I . . ."

She turned, waiting while he stammered.

"I . . . I have to cancel our lesson tomorrow."

"Oh." They had not been speaking of anything these past few minutes, but somehow this seemed a change of subject. "Tuesday, then?"

"No." Daniel's shoulders slumped. "I mean . . . I can't be your sponsor anymore."
"Oh?" Una felt wrongfooted, as if a crack had appeared in the ice beneath her feet. "Why not?"

"Because . . . your sponsor must want you to be a deaconess. Wholeheartedly. More than anything in the world."

Something was giving way with a groan deep in the frozen foundations.

"You don't think I'll be a good deaconess?" Una asked, bewildered.

"You'll be the best deaconess," he whispered. "But . . . I don't want you to be."

"You don't?"

"No. I don't."

This close, Una saw that Daniel's eyes were a deep, soft brown like coffee with only the smallest splash of milk. Closer, she noticed little flecks of gold around the widening pupils. Closer still, she shut her eyes and saw nothing as she crossed the last little distance.

When Una had tried to imagine what a real kiss might be like, she thought perhaps that it might be warm or soft or gentle. This one was all those things and she was not disappointed.

However, she had not imagined the searching give-and-take, nor the way her mittened hands flew to caress Daniel's face, nor the leaping thrill as if her body were jumping up through itself and toward him. She had thought that her first kiss would be a kiss and not half a dozen of them, the half-hesitant inquiry of the first followed by the shuddering sigh of the second and a flurry of just-one-lasts after.

When they did pull apart, they did not go far. Una's hands fell to rest on Daniel's shoulders; his fingers were firm on the small of her back, even through the wool coat.

"I've wanted to do that for a while," he breathed.

Una searched for her voice, finding enough of it to whisper, "Me too."

Daniel tightened his hold, pulling her into him, but not so close that she couldn't look up into his open, round face, chapped from cold, lips parted. He tested his own voice once, failed, and tried again.

"I love you, Una."

There was no doubting his sincerity; it was merely reality that Una was beginning to question. Perhaps it was the lack of sleep or the excitement of the move or the breathless aftermath of the kiss, but she felt that she was floating away from herself, untethered.

"I . . . need time," she said with a quaver.

"Of course," he blurted. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. It's been a long night. You're tired and I'm tired and I shouldn't have done that or said . . ."

"Daniel," she stilled his babbling with a mitten against his cheek. "Please don't apologize. I only need a little time. Can I come see you tomorrow? Not for a lesson. Just to talk?"

He nodded, seemingly not trusting himself with words any longer.

Perhaps the Una Meredith of other days might have retreated as noiselessly as a little gray mouse.
But this day's Una had stolen a house.

She kissed Daniel lightly on the lips before floating up the stairs and into her own snug little home, leaving him staring after her.

Notes:

Thanks to Alinyaaalethia.
Keep a Space for Me

1 February 1942

I danced two waltzes  
One foxtrot  
And the polka  
With no partner that they could see  
And hope I did not tire you.

I glided round  
The other ballroom  
The one called Life  
Just as alone  
And have to thank you  
For giving me  
The sprinkling of moments  
Which are my place at table  
In a winner’s world.

Keep a space for me  
On your card  
If you are dancing still.

- Leo Marks (1920-2001), untitled code poem for SOE agent Peter Churchill, used to encode wireless messages from occupied France*

Shirley woke in a garret, gray dawnlight glowing through the layer of ice on a tiny window set in the far end. The floorboards were unforgiving and the threadbare quilt did not provide much protection from the first of February freeze, even though Shirley wore every stitch of clothing he had.

He had given Mireille the bed, of course. She had protested vigorously, insisting that they flip a franc for it, but he would not hear of it and lay down resolutely on the floor, showing the girl in no uncertain terms that she could sleep where she liked, but he would not have the bed under any circumstances. She had relented, though she insisted that he take the only pillow. Now, her black curls were the only part of her visible over the top of a woolen blanket, burrowed as she was into the luxury of a real mattress.

Truthfully, they should have shared it. It was freezing and they both would have slept better with two blankets and two bodies pressed together. But Shirley had been extremely conscious from the first that Mireille was a young girl — dix-neuf, she said, though the childlike roundness of her face made him skeptical. He had gone out of his way to signal that he was no threat to her, putting on elaborate displays of modesty any time they had to sleep in close proximity or stop in the woods to relieve themselves. Mireille had taken to laughing at him when he inevitably chose the farthest corner of whatever hayloft, cellar, or shed they were occupying, but she also seemed to trust him.

Shirley had stayed in the first root cellar for nearly a month. The farm belonged to a sweet-faced woman whose husband had marched off to defend France two years ago and had never been heard from since. Shirley never learned the woman's name — it was safer that way — but she fed them
cheese from the dairy and abominable ersatz coffee, and laundered and repaired Shirley's clothes. She even gave him a pair of her husband's old gloves and a barn coat that was too small in the shoulders, but welcome anyway, on account of the cold. Shirley had pressed an outlandish sum of money into her hand and thanked her in what he hoped was intelligible French.

The old doctor had come back twice to check Shirley's wound, pleased that it was healing well. At first, Shirley had worried that it might be infected because he felt sweaty and nauseous, but soon realized it was only the lack of cigarettes making him feel jumpy. The doctor had shown him how to clean the wound, a task he performed methodically, flexing the remaining fingers as often as possible to keep them limber. The middle finger was stiff and weak, but the thumb and index finger still worked, even if using them sent jolts of pain flashing through the hand. It was an ordeal to maneuver them into the gloves.

Toward the end of the month, Shirley and Mireille had departed for a rendezvous with Mireille's network. Mireille had explained the plan as best she could, and Shirley was fairly certain that he understood the basics. After an ambush like the one they had suffered, the local members of the Resistance were supposed to lie low until the next full moon. That usually meant returning to their homes and jobs as if nothing had happened, but Shirley had thrown a wrench into Mireille's plans, for which he was sincerely sorry.

Back in England, Shirley had attended an SOE lecture explaining that the Resistance in Northern France was a loose network of small groups. They worked together on some operations, like when an agent was assembling a welcoming committee to meet a Lysander, but they weren't an army. The miners in the North were pretty well organized, thanks to the Parti Communiste Français, which had orchestrated a massive strike last spring. There were Résistants among the factory workers in Lille as well, but they hadn't done anything like the strike. Not yet, anyway. Someone up that way had started a newspaper, though — La Voix Du Nord — with news of the Allies and words of encouragement. It was death to deliver it, but worth the risk. There were smaller groups scattered everywhere, even in the tiny villages on the Somme.

Mireille’s group seemed to be fairly well organized. In the event of an attack like the one they had suffered, they had agreed to lie low and reassemble on the Sunday after the next full moon. Mireille was supposed to meet her comrades at a church during the Sunday service, which seemed risky to Shirley, though perhaps it was easier to gather in a place that was already crowded. He would have preferred to stay in the woods, but if the church was the place to meet someone more senior, there was no choice but to risk it. The moon had been full last night, and if any of Mireille's friends were still alive, they should be at church this morning.

Mireille slept on, the quiet snuffling of her breath reminding Shirley absurdly of Muggins. The dog would be warm at least, snuggled up with Carl at this time of year. Knowing Carl, he was probably letting her sleep under the covers, protesting that she was old and arthritic and needed the warmth. It helped, on the coldest nights, when Shirley could barely sleep for shivering, to imagine them cuddled up together.

Was Carl sleeping alright? He'd have noticed the lack of letters by now. Hopefully there hadn't been any telegrams. Shirley had missed the opportunity of returning with the February moon — it couldn't be helped — but today, he would link up with someone who could put him in touch with an SOE agent. They could get a wireless message through just saying that he was alive — perhaps Grayson would write to Mother and Dad so they wouldn't worry. They'd tell Carl, wouldn't they? Then he'd get out of here under the March moon and send his own telegram right away. SAFE. SORRY TO WORRY YOU. LETTER TO FOLLOW.

Mireille was stirring, groaning softly.
"Bonjour, Cher Lis," she yawned.

"Bonjour, Mee-ray," he replied, their little game drawing the smallest of smiles.

She sat up on the bed, wool coat rumpled, black curls a riotous cloud. Shivering, she folded her legs underneath her and tucked the quilt snugly around her knees.

Shirley peeled back his own blanket and rolled up onto his knees. He couldn't stand under the eaves, but he shuffled the few feet to the bed and wrapped his blanket around Mireille's shoulders.

"Mmmm," she said, wriggling into the warmth and closing her eyes again.

There was a small lump of hard cheese in Shirley's bag, along with a heel of stale bread. They had long ago eaten the rations from the escape kit, parceling them out so that they were never quite satisfied, but never quite starving either. The farmer had spared what she could, though it was mid-winter and her larder was already bare. Mireille joked that the aunt she had been living with would be fat and happy when she got home, having spent a month collecting Mireille’s rations as well as her own. Shirley thought of Christmas and the hotel dinner, and knew he'd pay ten times as much just to get Mireille a hearty breakfast.

He sliced both cheese and bread and offered Mireille the larger portions, which she took with a dimpled smile and a _merci_.

"Quelle heure?" Shirley asked slowly. "L'église?"

"À neuf heures," she said, dropping her breakfast to hold up nine fingers, lest he be confused.

The gesture made him contract his own hand inside the half-empty glove. The hand hurt less than it had at the beginning, but it still sent lightning up his arm if he jarred it. Shirley made an effort to use it, though, knowing that the muscles would atrophy if he shied away from the pain. He used it now, holding the cheese gingerly as he sliced it with his pocket knife.

Mireille spoke, but Shirley did not catch her meaning.

"Lentement," he said. "Slowly."

"Pré-sen-ta-ble," she said. "Faudrait que tu rendes présentable."

Shirley surveyed his stained and muddy trousers, the sweater with the mended patch in the shoulder. He would be conspicuous enough walking around the city, unshaven and rumpled in a too-tight barn coat covered in the stains of a month's rough sleeping. That wasn't good. He needed to blend in, not stand out.

Mireille frowned. It was not a natural expression for her and tended toward self-parody, her rosebud lips pursed more than downturned.

"Passe-moi des sous," she said.

"Sous? Money?"

She held out a hand and Shirley obliged, pulling a slightly depleted roll out of his shirt pocket. He'd meant to leave her whatever cash was left when he got out of here anyway. The girl peeled off several bills, seeming satisfied as she disappeared down the staircase and into the darkened house.

Shirley took the opportunity to tidy the space, making the bed, repacking his escape kit. There was...
a basin of wash water in the stand — frozen — but he broke the surface and scraped his cheeks clean as best he could with an ancient razor and no mirror. He cut himself three times, but nicks were better than walking around looking like a castaway. He unfastened his watch, struggling a bit with the blood-stiffened band, and slipped it into his pocket where it would not give him away. Really, he ought to have buried it in the woods long ago, but he could never quite bring himself to do it.

Would he see Mireille again after today? Or would he be handed off to others? He'd have to wait for the March moon for his pickup, but perhaps there was another safe house somewhere where he could hole up and wait. Release Mireille so she could get back to her aunt.

When Mireille reappeared, she was carrying an old gray duster that smelled strongly of mothballs. It was clean enough, though, and Shirley slipped it on gratefully, covering up the worst of his clothes.

Mireille nodded her approval and motioned for him to sit, pulling a comb from her pocket and applying it to his hair. A black beret produced from thin air finished the look, making Shirley devoutly thankful that he did not have a mirror. The unruly black curls required rather more attention, but Mireille put them in order, tying them away from her face with a pretty pink ribbon.

Shirley took his watch from his pocket and tapped it.

“Allez.”

***

At two minutes to nine o'clock, Shirley followed Mireille through the doors of a modest church that was long on sandbags and short on stained glass. Even so, there were enough statues, sconces, and candles to give Shirley a fleeting idea of what Susan might have said about Romish fiddle-faddle. He nearly smiled.

The mass was well attended. Mireille walked unhurriedly, sliding into a pew beside a middle-aged woman in green. The woman looked sideways at Mireille, startling when she caught sight of Shirley beside her. Shirley pretended interest in the mass. Mireille whispered something to her neighbor, who inched sideways to confer with a thin man in his fifties when they stood to sing a hymn. The man blinked several times in rapid succession, but remained otherwise unruffled.

Shirley followed along with the service, moving his lips when it seemed appropriate and mimicking the movements and attention of those around him. After what seemed like all day, the organ groaned a recessional and the congregants spilled into the weak sunshine of a reluctant winter sun. Shirley stuck close to Mireille, falling into step beside her as she followed the woman in green and the thin man. Down one winding street, around a corner, and into a shuttered shop.

When the door was shut behind them, the thin man turned to Mireille and growled. He spat a string of invective low enough that it couldn't truly be called shouting, but fluent enough that he must have spent the better part of the church service composing it.

The exact meaning of the tirade was unimportant. Shirley caught a few words here and there — étranger, stupide, espion — and figured he could guess the rest.


The thin man glared, even after the woman in green spoke a soothing word to him.
"You are no," he said in unexpected English. "Le pilote est mort."

Mireille spoke up, arguing Shirley's case. Her voice and the man's rose over one another until the older woman shushed them vehemently. Whatever Mireille had said, it hadn't worked. The only bit Shirley had caught was the man's name: Gustave.


*The Germans took the dead pilot? How?*

"You have the papers?" he demanded of Shirley.

"The papers?"

"The papers!" Gustave pulled a little yellow booklet out of his pocket and shook it in Shirley's face.

Shirley winced. He had false French papers, but they proved nothing. He handed them over anyway, only to see them dropped on the floor in disgust. Was there any way to prove that he was who he said he was? Certainly the man was right to be suspicious, especially in the wake of an ambush. But why was he so certain that the dead man was the pilot? Unless . . .


That must be it. Someone must have seen the Germans recovering the dead agent's body and thought he was the pilot because he was wearing a flight jacket.


Mireille spoke up, speaking faster than Shirley could follow, arguing a point to Gustave. He growled in warning, but she did not stop, speaking faster and faster. Shirley saw Gustave's arm tense but didn't quite believe that he would actually slap the girl until the crack of contact.

"Stop!" Shirley said, stepping between Gustave and a hunched Mireille who clutched her reddening cheek.

Gustave glared murderously upward, not cowed in the slightest by Shirley's height. He spluttered, trying to summon words harsh enough in any language.

"*Vous nous mènerez à notre mort, tous les deux!*

The woman in green raised her own hand.

"Du calme, Gustave," she said, proceeding to explain something in an undertone. It took some doing, but eventually Gustave's expression settled from fury into grim determination. By the end, he was nodding along.

"You," he said, pointing unnecessarily at Shirley. "You go. At the house of Adèle."

"Moi aussi, je viens!" Mireille interjected.

The older woman — Adèle, evidently — thought a moment, but agreed with a curt nod. Wasting no time, she turned toward the exit, beckoning Shirley and Mireille to follow her.

Gustave cut him off. "Partez avec Adèle. Je demanderai aux autres comment on va faire. Foutez l'camp! Toi aussi, Mireille!"

Shirley was not ready to give up. "Un message . . ."

Gustave had reached the end of his rope. He fumbled under his coat and came up with a knife. Shirley got a very good look at it, shoved up close to his face.

Shirley stepped back, hands raised in surrender. He'd go with Adèle and cause no trouble. He thought he had understood that Gustave intended to take his case to someone who could do something about it. Either that or they'd decide he was an infiltrator after all and shoot him for the sake of simplicity. But if they believed him, would they help him? How long would that take? A day? A week? Shirley did not want to wait a moment longer, but it seemed that he had no choice.

Carl woke slowly, gray afternoon light glowing through the layer of ice on the bedroom window. The mattress was soft, the familiar comfort of the old tobacco-stripe quilt still a bulwark against the early February freeze, even though Carl did not like to hold the fort alone.

To that end, he had started letting Muggins sleep under the covers. Oh, he might explain that she was old and that her arthritic hips should be kept as warm as possible, but that wasn't the real reason for her special privileges. Muggins snuggled against him now, her wire-furred sides rising and falling with her gentle snores. Such a solid, faithful companion; even Cricket's memory could not hold a candle to her in the pantheon of Carl's four-legged companions, for all she wasn't really his dog.

Carl scratched around her neck, eliciting a little whine and wiggle as she pressed up against his hand. The fur here was still thick and tweedy, though her muzzle had faded toward gray these last couple of years. Muggins would be thirteen later this year, Carl reflected. A good, long life for any dog. Still, the prospect of ever losing her chilled more than any winter wind and sent him securing the quilt tighter around them both.

Tomorrow. There would be a letter tomorrow.

Muggins yawned and stretched and licked Carl's face, but she was done with snuggling. Scrabbling out from the confines of their cocoon, she wriggled off the bed and pawed at the door to be let out.

No wonder, Carl thought, looking at the alarm clock on the bedside table. After three; they'd slept the day away. Una must still be asleep as well, or at least he hoped that she was.

Carl pulled on slippers and his winter dressing gown and slipped his eyepatch into place. Stepping into the frigid living room, he let Muggins out onto the back porch, turning toward the kitchen with blossoming plans of fixing Una a surprise dinner. Something warm and filling. Risotto, perhaps? He could use up the little end of the good cheese Rosemary had given him for Christmas. He’d let Una sleep till it was all ready.

Good intentions firmly in place, Carl was halfway to the kitchen when a tiny movement in his peripheral vision made him yelp loudly enough to do Mugsy proud.

"Sorry," Una whispered from the sofa. "I didn't mean to startle you."

She wore the same clothes as this morning, though her hair was down, falling in a glossy black sheet that betrayed no lawless kinks. She sat with her feet up on the cushions, tucked in under her skirt, her pale hands clasped over a closed book in her lap. Evidently, she had not been reading, but only cradling the volume as she stared out the frosted window.
Carl pressed a hand over his heart, willing it to slow.

"Goodness, Una. Didn't you ever go to bed?"

She shook her head, dark blue eyes sparkling, and sat up straighter to offer him a cushion. Carl took it, but only after fetching one of Mother's afghans from the back of an armchair and spreading it over them both.

"What's wrong?" he asked, pulling her in with a quilted arm. Una rested her head on his shoulder and smiled.

"Nothing. I think maybe things are right for once."

"Oh?"

"Last night . . . this morning . . . I kissed Daniel."

Carl couldn't stop himself grinning. "Did he kiss you back?"

"Yes." Then, in a smaller voice, "He said that he loves me."

"No news there," Carl said with a comfortable squeeze. "The way he looked at you last night . . . he's a goner for sure."

Una's laughter was as fragile and fleeting as the puff of visible breath that carried it.

"I don't know what to do," she said. "I've been sitting here all day, trying to puzzle it out, but I can't."

"I wouldn't think it was much of a stumper. Unless you don't love him back?"

"I . . . I do."

"Then what's the problem?"

Una did not answer, but retrieved her book from under the afghan. Carl recognized the red cover as one that had always had a place on the shelf in Una's own bedroom, never among the dog-eared field guides and back issues of ecology journals crammed into the living room bookcase. The cover named it The Faerie Queene.

There was a letter inside — an old one, the paper thinned with age and re-reading, with fraying edges for all it was kept so carefully. Una held it gingerly and turned it so that Carl could see the signature. All his delight crumbled at sight of it.

"Walter?" he croaked. "Oh, Una, no. You can't mean . . . you wouldn't deny yourself happiness now because of . . ."

She smiled again, the old, wistful, moonbeam smile. "No. Not like that. I said my goodbyes long ago. It's only what he wrote. That there was so much work left to do. That we must never break faith. He died believing that his sacrifice would make the world safe for beauty, even though he knew it would never be beautiful to him again. He said that if he couldn't have beauty for himself, at least he could lay down his life so that other people could."

Una paused, tracing the faded words with a pale fingertip. "I always thought," she whispered, "that I could keep faith that way. If I couldn't have love or a home for myself, at least I could make it possible for other people."
Carl knew he must speak — must tell her that she was wrong, that she could have love for herself, that she did have it, and always had, from all the people she had loved so well, and now she only had a little more — but he was afraid he might cry. He tightened his arm around her shoulder, steeling himself.

"You have," he choked.

"And now I'm so close to my consecration," she continued. "I was called to be a deaconess. God put it into my heart and I've never been happier than I've been these past two years, preparing and studying."

"With Daniel?"

Could this be his sister's face? Of course it was, all milk-pale skin and dark blue eyes, but it wasn't Una's smile at all. It was older than that, an expression that lit up a long-darkened recess of Carl's memory, jolting him with the realization that if he had inherited Cecilia Meredith's eyes, Una had inherited her smile. It had only been packed away in cedar all this time.

"Yes. That is, he's part of it. But there's more. I can't be a real minister, but I can still do pastoral work. Studying to be a deaconess feels so very right, as if I'm just where I'm supposed to be. I can't give up my work, not for anyone, not even for Daniel."

"Would you really have to?" Carl mused. "Couldn't you do the same work as a priest's wife?"

It was the first time either of them had put a name to this possible future, and a spot of color rose in Una's cheek, though she did not shrink.

"I suppose I could," she conceded. "But I didn't go into all this lightly. I prayed and prayed and I'm very certain that God wanted me to be a deaconess."

Carl chewed his lip. "Maybe God only wanted you to study to be a deaconess."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you really think it's just a coincidence that God started you on that path and then plopped Daniel in the middle of it?"

This was evidently a new thought.

"N-no . . ." Una said cautiously. "Though I don't think God is in the business of match-making."

"No?" Carl smiled. "I always thought He knew what He was about when He brought us here from Maywater."

Was it truly coincidence that had brought them all together? Or only proximity and lack of imagination? No, Carl didn't believe that. Providence had had a finger on the scale where Merediths and Blythes were concerned. Perhaps that was bad theology, but Carl didn't have a better way of explaining what had always seemed a miracle to him, or, at the very least, a wonderful gift.

"You think that God meant me to study, but not to be consecrated in the end?" Una asked, brows drawn together. "He's not a puppeteer, Carl."

"Well, I'm sure that you and Daniel can puzzle over the theology of that over the breakfast table," Carl smiled, hugging her closer. "All I can say is that you look so happy right now! I'll believe any
doctrines that let you stay that way."

"I haven't decided. He hasn't even asked . . ."

"Oh, he will. And you'll be so happy together."

"But what about you? I can't leave you . . ."

"No, Una," Carl said, pulling away and meeting her eye straight on. "Don't consider me at all! I'll be perfectly fine no matter what, and the only thing that could hurt me is knowing that I'd held you back. Don't you remember the story of Rosemary and Aunt Ellen? I'm never your Ellen, not in a million years."****

Una smiled that bright, open smile again. "I suppose this analogy makes Shirley into Norman Douglas? I'm not sure how he'll feel about that."

"We'll write him and find out," Carl said calmly, though the thought of letters sent gooseflesh up his arm. *Tomorrow. There will be a letter tomorrow.*

In the kitchen, the telephone rang. Una began to move, but Carl hopped up and tucked the afghan around her.

"You stay. I'll be back in a minute and build you a fire. And tea! How did you go all day without it?"

But there would be no fire that day, and no tea, at least not the cozy sort.

"Hello, Carl Meredith speaking."

"Carl? Oh, Carl. We've . . . we've had a telegram."

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Notes:

*In WWII, SOE agents used poems as keys for sending coded wireless transmissions (early in the war, they used famous poems, but moved to original compositions for security reasons). Many of the original poems were written by Leo Marks, a young Jewish Londoner who worked for SOE as a cryptographer. His most famous poem is the one used by agent Violet Szabo (1921-1945), "The Life That I Have." The untitled poem included here was used by agent Peter Churchill (1909-1972), who completed several missions in occupied France, was captured, and sent to Dachau (he survived). For more, see Leo Marks, *Between Silk and Cyanide: A Code-Maker's War, 1941-5* (1998).

**In May-June 1941, 100,000 coal miners in the Nord and Pas-de-Calais regions of France (and 70,000 in Belgium) went on strike. This disrupted the fuel supply to Paris and surrounding industrial regions and proved to be an important moment in organizing the Resistance in this region. see Ronald Tiersky, *French Communism, 1920-1972* (1974) and Michael Seidman, *Transatlantic Antifascisms* (2007).

***Rilla of Ingleside* chapter 23, "And So, Goodnight"

****Rainbow Valley* chapter 22, "St. George Knows All About It"

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