The Main Line is Frayed and Thin

by Thassalia

Summary

Many things face the world in 1940, and Tracy and Dexter's marriage is only one amongst them.

Notes

Happy Holidays to everyone, particularly Lesserstorm who gave me the chance to play, however briefly, in one of my favorite stories!! And thank you to the usual suspects for encouragement. All mistakes or missteps or are solely my own. With homage to the great Philip Barry who created the words, and the actors who inhabited them.

January 1942

Dexter straightened his tie, and smoothed a hand down the front of his uniform jacket. Hardly the stuff that dreams were made of, but he felt that he still cut something of a dashing figure.

Tracy wore a blue dress and silk stockings with her hair tied back and he suffered a twinge of regret that he’d be leaving her behind with her contraband thighs and her tight smile. She held a letter in her hand and she brandished it.

“Liz is expecting that baby at any moment, Dexter, really at any moment and there’s no word from Mike except what we all hear on the radio.”
“He’s got a voice for newspapers,” Dexter said, and straightened his tie again. “Radio isn’t really his forte.”

He didn’t need to see her eyes flash to know she was annoyed.

“He should be at home with his wife, writing about life there, not in France risking his life.”

There is double talk and there is double speak, and Dexter honestly doesn’t know if she’s throwing a layered metaphor at him, or if she’s really just concerned with Connor who’d never done much he didn’t want to, and whom Dexter admired all the more for it.

But wives and babies were one fairy tale, and Tracy was Tracy and never the twain shall meet.

“He’s probably not in France. And he’s probably not risking much more than the chance to show some temper to a few foreign correspondents. He’ll be home soon. And so will I.”

He turned and took the letter from her hand. She let the pages go, and curled her fingers into his lapel, rumpling the line. He kissed her hard, doing his own rumpling, knowing the fine line of her dress would suffer more than his mussed collar.

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Margaret looked severe in the black. Even her brightest smile was dimmed these days. Dexter didn’t truly regret Seth’s loss, although he felt deeply for the family. More deeply since Margaret and Dinah had been staying in the house with him and Tracy. Margaret had only opened the family home to fete his leave.

“It feels so strange to be back here,” she said, and sipped her champagne, looking around at her guests.

Dexter laid a hand on her arm, offering comfort.

“You and Tracy are newlyweds in a way. Having us around must be…” she paused for the correct word, “tedious.”

“Never,” Dexter said.

Tracy came up behind them, bearing more champagne as well as her sister, who she had by the ear. Dinah was nearly as tall as Tracy now, but it was clear who was in charge.

“I’ll give you a glass if you’re polite little girl, and well-behaved and you speak to the Morgans and the St. Pierre’s and apologize for the cat.”

Dinah snatched a glass from Tracy’s hand, and glared hard. The tree still stood in the corner, a reminder of the newness of the year, and it’s light shone on Dexter’s wife. The pang of regret he’d felt in the bedroom had turned into a full on sonata of uncertainty.

Silence fell as heavily as the snow outside and the orchestra filled in the blanks. It was Dinah, unsurprisingly who finally said the inevitable.

“It’s absurd that you’re going to war, Dex. What can you be possibly thinking? Only...well only ordinary people go to war.”

Tracy gave out a laugh chillier than the iced sculpture in the hall, and playfully shook her sister’s ear. “Dexter, Mr. Haven, or Captain Haven he most surely hopes, is off to lead the men like a man of the people. A veritable soldier, a man amongst men, and a savage amongst savages.”
“Tracy, dear, he’s going to serve his country.” Margaret was only a little admonishing.

“Oh mother, Dexter’s not that sort of patriot. He’s going to serve himself.”

The orchestra started something that sounded vaguely like a waltz and Dexter took his wife by the arm. “This man of the common savage would like a dance with his General, please,” and he spun her into his arms.

“The dancing’s in there,” Tracy said, putting her hand in his and looking sullen. But she put her cheek to his chest.

“I didn’t marry a hero,” Tracy murmured against him. “I prefer your nobility quiet and sly, understated with a hint of theatricality at the finish.”

“I’m not being noble Red. Just…listening to all of those things that tell me I can do something better for the world. Or at least, I shouldn’t sit by while other people do it.”

She snorted softly.

“You’re the one who makes me better, my darling, my girl.”

“Don’t blame me for this Dexter. It isn’t fair.”

“Will you love me anyway?” He paused mid spin. Looked her in the eye.

They’ve come to each other, over and over, and this question wasn’t a delicate tease between two hearts and minds. It’s something he needed to know.

“Now you’re just teasing me.” She pushed away, ignoring the question, but he won’t let go of her hand. He hasn’t given her a say in this choice, and that might be worse than all the wars in all the worlds and he knew the risks in front of him.

His grip tightened and she looked at him, solemn and brave, determined if a little false.

“I’ll always love you. Even now when I hate you.”

They swayed in each other’s arms for a moment, until a sharp clearing of the throat startled them.

“It’s revolting to see you to be so nice to each other,” Dinah said. “I prefer it when you fight.”

“And I prefer it when you don’t sneak up on decent people, but we can’t all have our way now can we.”

Dinah stuck out her tongue again. “Mother said that the guests will want a speech from Dexter.”

Tracy waved her sister away. “Tell Mother we haven’t yet finished with the waltz.”

“Tracy that’s not a waltz…”

Dexter gestured her away with good humor and let Tracy hold on tight.

March 1944

The shoes were boxed up in the front hallway. Dinah sat cross-legged in front of the box. Her hair was cropped short and she wore a pair of men’s trousers. She was going through the shoes, trying them on and admiring her feet in them when Tracy came down the stairs.

“There’s letters on the table. No telegrams though.” Dinah said it in a rush, anxious to let her sister
know the good news. “And a book. I think.”

Tracy wore a kerchief covering her bright hair and a pair of pants with a fitted blouse. “Did you read the letters?”

“No. Truly, no. Oh all right. Yes. Of course. You knew I would.”

“Put the shoes back.”

“It’s a real shame,” Dinah said, holding up a pair of silver heels. “I was hoping to steal these someday.”

Tracy flipped through the letters. “One from Junius, another from Liz, my she’s good about correspondence. Oh, it’s about Mike’s book. And one from the war department.”

There’s a silence taught and thin as spiderwebs.

“Oh Tracy…” Dinah’s breath goes out hard.

“It doesn’t say he’s dead.” Tracy’s fine voice was wooden. “It just says missing. And missing is just another way for him to keep me waiting.”

“Tracy,” Dinah said again, getting up, stumbling a little as the shoe tangles on her foot. Her sister allowed her a brief hug then pushes her away.

“We’ve got meetings all day and shoes to collect,” she said, and if there are traces of salt along her angled cheeks, Dinah will make no mention of it.

The land along their estate has become a Victory garden as perfect and precise as any of Tracy’s undertakings and most days Dinah felt true empathy for the soldiers under command of a dogged leader.

Tracy is determined. Moments like this, when all her fears stand out in relief as sharp as her freckles made Dinah love her sister all the more. It made her willing to follow orders, and even give up the sacred silver heels.

August 1941

They can still sail along the Delaware, and the boat is as fine and yar as the True Love. Tracy trims the sails, and acts as first mate. She’s sailed with Dexter for much of her life, and the interplay is a harmony of bodies and moments. Orders are given, tasks carried out as if they were one person. The same is true at night, with Dexter’s warm touch on her slim body. They both sleep well with the loll of the boat, and the slap of the waves.

It’s the moments in between, awake and purposeless, that still leave them both a little wanting. There are no tasks in the house that call for their joined efforts and Tracy finds herself restless without a wedding to plan or a plan to muster.

Dexter pours her coffee, hands her a newspaper. She fishes him out a sweet roll, cuts slices in his grapefruit. They breakfast in silence. It’s companionable, yet a little cold.

“I should look for work,” Tracy says. “Something honest. Earnest.”

“You’re plenty earnest,” Dexter says with a laugh. “And honest to a fault.”

She flicks her spoon at him.
“There’s work to be done,” she says. “Perhaps hospital work.”

“Are you planning on playing nursemaid,” he asks, and puts down the paper, pats his lap. “You could mop my brow, bring me tea and bandages.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Dexter. Hospitals have boards. They always need funds. I could sit on a board, raise money. Or why not? I could train as a nurse.”

“Tracy,” he says, and there’s love in his voice that makes up for the stillnesses of the moments when they both still find each other wanting. “You could do anything you choose. If you need to choose something, so be it.”

“You work.”

“I like it.”

“Yes, you do. And I need more to do than cook you supper. Darn your socks.”

He laughs. She does neither. Her schedule is full of committees and departments, chairs and tables and honorary teas. She works harder than he ever has. It makes him feel ashamed at times, the force she puts into everything.

“Tracy Nightingale. Has a certain ring to it.”

“Don’t laugh Dexter. This is important. I need… dirty hands. New things.”

“Waiting for me at home isn’t enough?” He says it to tease, but they both know the truth of it. This was another impetuous marriage, but it’s got to stay a stable union. They’ve spoiled each other for anyone else by now. This was a summit.

May 1943

His men are celebrating. It’s a small victory, but then it’s a small bar.

Watkins, a private from a small mining town not far from Philadelphia, presses a drink into his hand. Dexter holds it in thanks, but doesn’t partake. It’s too easy, so far away from home and hearth, to forget who he is.

Daniels pushes through the crowd, rests against the paneling with him.

“If you’re not going to drink that Haven, hand it over.”

He gives the drink to Daniels, who fires it back with an ease that makes Dexter a little jealous. The bite of bourbon, the warmth of whisky, they’d all make this war go down more smoothly.

“Think she’s waiting for you at home,” Daniels says, a little slurry. “Any she?”

Dexter scans his men. They’re all so young. It makes him feel ancient, foolish. He’d walked into this war with false hopes and bright dreams and a fire of feeling to make her proud. Now he’s simply tired of trying to measure up.

“Yes,” he says, imagining Tracy Lord, Main Line debutante, and the joy she’d be getting from rationing wool and running drills. “She’ll be waiting. Fuming at me, but waiting. She’s that kind of girl.”

Daniels laughed, “The kind who won’t leave you because then she couldn’t yell?”
Dexter nodded, not bothering to correct him. “A little like that yes. She’s a redhead.” He added, as if that explained it all, as if anything could explain Tracy.

“You’re a lucky man,” Daniels said, slapping him on the back and heading back in amongst the men.

August 1945

There’s a man in a wheelchair whose head bears the same shape as her husband. And then she has his hand in hers and the fingers grip hers the way that C.K Dexter Haven grasped the jib of their boat, long since sunk with neglect.

During a war, no one sails for joy.

He holds her hand and reaches into her red hair, longer now, and styled like the girls in the pictures because Dinah spent endless hours at the cinema trying to escape the quiet of the house, came home wanting to turn Tracy into a starlet so that she herself could stay a queen of the air.

She wanted to say, “Dexter.” To say, “I love you” and “How could you?” and “Darling, you’re home.” And “Everything has changed.”

Instead she says, “Dinah’s learned to fly planes and she wants to shepherd soldiers about the country. Except now that the war is over I suppose she’ll have to come back to the ground.”

There is grey in this man’s hair, and lines around his eyes, and the good sisters of mercy have said that he’s capable of walking, he’s just still ill, still recovering.

Dexter was a man who strode, not one who sat, and she wonders what she’s doing there with a stranger holding her hand.

“Red,” he says, and she thought maybe he’d sigh her name like he had the nights he’d come home on leave before he was shipped overseas and lost in conflict.

This is more intimate and the tears have splashed on to his hand before she can stop herself.

“I need to bring you home,” she says.

The sisters are right. He doesn’t need the chair, but he no longer strides. It is hot at the end of summer and she finds him sitting at a small table in the back of the garden. His face is tacky with sweat, and he’s just looking at what she’s made of their home.

He’s barely slept in the nights he’s been back, restless and silent. There’s little of the man with the quick mouth and the idle hands about him. He fetches his own coffee and toast, and doesn’t start talking unless prompted.

He’s no longer skipper to her first mate, and she fears there’s no longer any harmony between them. But he still holds his mouth the way he used to, and there have been moments when she swears he wants nothing more than to hold her hand.

“Tea,” she says, and sets it down. He takes it, and holds the sweltering glass in his hand. She’s changed to a light cotton dress and her legs are bare, and impulsively, desperately she leans into him as if she were going to sit in his lap. She stops herself, rigid. She feels weak and breathless, unable to make the right choice.

Her hesitation catches his attention and he puts his hands on her waist, draws her between his thighs so that she can rest on the one that didn’t sustain injury. Something hitches in her heart with
“You’ve been so busy,” he says.

Unspoken between them, of course, is his absence. The reasons for her own work.

“There’s so much to do during a war,” she slips her arms around his neck. “I’m surprisingly suited for all this…”

Suited for waiting and waiting, nights of fear, and days of distraction.

Dexter smiles and she sees a glimmer of him in the quirk of his chin, the dimpled cheek. “Organizing? Rationing? Running a unit?”

She knows he’s teasing, knows he’s true. “Yes,” she says. “I was good at it.”

“I never thought otherwise, Red. You’ve been good at everything you’ve done.”

“Oh, Dexter.” It’s foolish that his words are making her cry, and she leans into his neck as he tightens his arms about her. She hasn’t yet asked him how he is, doesn’t know where to start. But for the moment, in the heat and the silence, she can lean against him and wait for what comes.

“Welcome home,” she says into his ear, and he murmurs her name against her throat. “Tracy.”

This is the third time they’ve both changed and come back together. Once in the passion of youth, again in a sudden rush of longing and surprise at how well they still managed to suit, and now it’s time for the joining to stick. Neither is a child, neither is who they began life as. But with his breath against her neck, Tracy feels the depths of steel in her soul and his and knows that this time, it’s for good.

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