

"Your mother?"

"Yes," said Nicholas. "She whom you saw each night in the fire—she who betrayed our father, half brother!"

And he started away, laughing, but then he turned and came to me, and his deep eyes were serious. "Half brother," he said, "I have one further thing to give you." He lifted my hand as he spoke, and held it tight between his own. A wild, desperate hope leaped up within me, and I cried, thinking I might yet save myself from death: "Nicholas, help me now! What will you give me?"

"Oh, half brother," Nicholas sighed mockingly, "how eager you are!" And he lifted my helpless hand and slipped my ring, and my father's ring, the signet ring of our house, off my finger. "I give you your freedom, brother of my house," he said, and he gestured at the gallows.

Then, laughing still, he turned again and went through the crowd, as I cried after him, and raged at my bonds to escape and be on him, but the crowd roared me back and the jailers forced me up the steps of the scaffold. And from the height, I saw one thing. I saw Nicholas, on his way home, as he turned and waved at me; and then, as I saw him ride alone, up the long road to the smoldering embers of my house, I buried my head in my hands and knew cruelly that now, indeed, the devil held the hill.

WHAT A THOUGHT



DINNER HAD BEEN GOOD; Margaret sat with her book on her lap and watched her husband digesting, an operation to which he always gave much time and thought. As she watched he put his cigar down without looking and used his free hand to turn the page of his paper. Margaret found herself thinking with some pride that unlike many men she had heard about, her husband did not fall asleep after a particularly good dinner.

She flipped the pages of her book idly; it was not interesting. She knew that if she asked her husband to take her to a movie, or out for a ride, or to play gin rummy, he would smile at her and agree; he was always willing to do things to please her, still, after ten years of marriage. An odd thought crossed her mind: She would pick up the heavy glass ashtray and smash her husband over the head with it.

"Like to go to a movie?" her husband asked.

"I don't think so, thanks," Margaret said. "Why?"

"You look sort of bored," her husband said.

"Were you watching me?" Margaret asked. "I thought you were reading."

"Just looked at you for a minute." He smiled at her, the smile of a man who is still, after ten years of marriage, very fond of his wife.

The idea of smashing the glass ashtray over her husband's head had never before occurred to Margaret, but now it would not leave her mind. She stirred uneasily in her chair, thinking: what a terrible

thought to have, whatever made me think of such a thing? Probably a perverted affectionate gesture, and she laughed.

"Funny?" her husband asked.

"Nothing," Margaret said.

She stood up and crossed the room to the hall door, without purpose. She was very uneasy, and looking at her husband did not help. The cord that held the curtains back made her think: strangle him. She told herself: it's not that I don't love him, I just feel morbid tonight. As though something bad were going to happen. A telegram coming, or the refrigerator breaking down. Drown him, the goldfish bowl suggested.

Look, Margaret told herself severely, standing just outside the hall door so that her husband would not see her if he looked up from his paper, look, this is perfectly ridiculous. The idea of a grown woman troubling herself with silly fears like that—it's like being afraid of ghosts, or something. *Nothing* is going to happen to him, Margaret, she said almost aloud; *nothing* can happen to hurt either you or your husband or anyone you love. You are perfectly safe.

"Margaret?" her husband called.

"Yes?"

"Is something wrong?"

"No, dear," Margaret said. "Just getting a drink of water."

Poison him? Push him in front of a car? A train?

I don't *want* to kill my husband, Margaret said to herself. I never *dreamed* of killing him. I want him to live. Stop it, stop it.

She got her drink of water, a little formality she played out with herself because she had told him she was going to do it, and then wandered back into the living room and sat down. He looked up as she entered.

"You seem very restless tonight," he said.

"It's the weather, I guess," Margaret said. "Heat always bothers me."

"Sure you wouldn't like to go to a movie?" he said. "Or we could go for a ride, cool off."

"No, thanks," she said. "I'll go to bed early."

"Good idea," he said.

What would I do without him? she wondered. How would I live, who would ever marry me, where would I go? What would I do with all the furniture, crying when I saw his picture, burning his old letters. I could give his suits away, but what would I do with the

house? Who would take care of the income tax? I love my husband, Margaret told herself emphatically; I *must* stop thinking like this. It's like an idiot tune running through my head.

She got up again to turn the radio on; the flat voice of the announcer offended her and she turned the radio off again, passing beyond it to the bookcase. She took down a book and then another, leafing through them without seeing the pages, thinking: It isn't as though I had a motive; they'd never catch me. Why would I kill my husband? She could see herself saying tearfully to an imaginary police lieutenant: "But I loved him—I can't *stand* his being dead!"

"Margaret," her husband said. "Are you worried about something?"

"No, dear," she said. "Why?"

"You really seem terribly upset tonight. Are you feverish?"

"No," she said. "A chill, if anything."

"Come over here and let me feel your forehead."

She came obediently, and bent down for him to put his hand on her forehead. At his cool touch she thought, Oh, the dear, good man; and wanted to cry at what she had been thinking.

"You're right," he said. "Your head feels cold. Better go on off to bed."

"In a little while," she said. "I'm not tired yet."

"Shall I make you a drink?" he asked. "Or something like lemonade?"

"Thank you very much, dear," she said. "But no thanks."

They say if you soak a cigarette in water overnight the water will be almost pure nicotine by morning, and deadly poisonous. You can put it in coffee and it won't taste.

"Shall I make *you* some coffee?" she asked, surprising herself.

He looked up again, frowning. "I just had two cups for dinner," he said. "But thanks just the same."

I'm brave enough to go through with it, Margaret thought; what will it all matter a hundred years from now? I'll be dead, too, by then, and who cares about the furniture?

She began to think concretely. A burglar. First call a doctor, then the police, then her brother-in-law and her own sister. Tell them all the same thing, her voice broken with tears. It would not be necessary to worry about preparations; the more elaborately these things were planned, the better chance of making a mistake. She could get out of it without being caught if she thought of it in a broad perspective.

tive and not as a matter of small details. Once she started worrying about things like fingerprints she was lost. Whatever you worry about catches you, every time.

"Have you any enemies?" she asked her husband, not meaning to. "Enemies," he said. For a moment he took her seriously, and then he smiled and said, "I suppose I have hundreds. Secret ones."

"I didn't mean to ask you that," she said, surprising herself again.

"Why would I have enemies?" he asked, suddenly serious again, and setting down his paper. "What makes you think I have enemies, Margaret?"

"It was silly of me," she said. "A silly thought." She smiled and after a minute he smiled again.

"I suppose the milkman hates me," he said. "I always forget to leave the bottles out."

The milkman would hardly do; he knew it, and he would not help her. Her glance rested on the glass ashtray, glittering and colored in the light from the reading lamp; she had washed the ashtray that morning and nothing had occurred to her about it then. Now she thought: It ought to be the ashtray; the first idea is always the best. She rose for the third time and came around to lean on the back of his chair; the ashtray was on the table to her right, now, and she bent down and kissed the top of his head.

"I never loved you more," she said, and he reached up without looking to touch her hair affectionately.

Carefully she took his cigar out of the ashtray and set it on the table. For a minute he did not notice and then, as he reached for his cigar, he saw that it was on the table and picked it up quickly, touching the table underneath to see if it had burned. "Set fire to the house," he said casually. When he was looking at the paper again she picked up the ashtray silently.

"I don't want to," she said as she struck him.

WHEN BARRY WAS SEVEN



BARRY: Eight hundred and nine pages. That's the biggest book I ever owned.

SHIRLEY: You ought to take a while reading that.

BARRY: But I'm not going to start it until I go to bed. Because I don't want to finish too soon.

SHIRLEY: Look, Mr. Untermeyer has autographed it to you.

BARRY: Yes, I saw that already. Now (*complacently*) I have two books with the writer's name written on.

SHIRLEY: Two?

BARRY: Yes. This book, and *Louis Pasteur*. Because on the outside of my *Louis Pasteur* book it has "Louis Pasteur" in gold handwriting, and it would be senseless to use his name in handwriting unless he really wrote it. It's senseless. Because why would somebody else write his name? So now I have two books. Mr. Untermeyer and Louis Pasteur.

SALLY: I have books from Jay Williams with his signature.

BARRY: (*reasonably*) Well, you are older than I am.

(*later, Barry still carrying his book with him everywhere*)

BARRY: This is the heaviest book I ever owned.

SHIRLEY: You have done everything with that book except read it. Stop carrying it around and look inside, for heaven's sake.

BARRY: I have already read the story about Louis Pasteur.

WHISTLER'S GRANDMOTHER



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The New Yorker, May 5, 1945

THE LITTLE OLD LADY on the train obviously wanted to talk. She had got on at Albany and she was sitting in the seat next to the aisle. She looked rather charming, in a neat black coat and an old lady's hat, and she watched the woman next to her, who was reading a mystery, smiled at the children who constantly hurried up and down the aisle of the crowded car, and looked affectionately at the two sailors in the seat across the aisle.

At last she turned to the woman beside her and said, "I'm sorry to interrupt you, but how soon do we get to New York?"

The younger woman smiled politely. "At six o'clock, I think."

"Thank you," the old lady said. "I can hardly wait. I haven't been to New York in nearly fifteen years."

"It must be exciting."

"I'm going to see my grandson," the old lady said. "He's home on leave."

The younger woman hesitated, then closed her book and leaned back. "Really?" she said. "Where has he been?"

The old lady waved her hand vaguely. "In the Pacific."

"How wonderful," the younger woman said. "You'll certainly be glad to see him."

"I'm all the family he has left."

"I guess he'll be glad to see you, too," the younger woman said. "Let me show you his picture." The old lady opened her pocket-book and took out a folding cardboard picture frame, with spaces for

two pictures facing one another. One side had the picture of a soldier standing in front of a barracks; he looked very young. On the other side was the same soldier in front of the same barracks, but he had his arm around a pretty girl in a flowered dress. "He's very handsome," the younger woman said. "Is this his wife?"

The man in the seat in front of them, who looked as if he might be a prosperous businessman, was half listening. He had on a light gray suit. The paper he had been reading sagged in his hands. The old lady leaned forward and touched his shoulder. The man turned around. "Let me show you a picture of my grandson," she said. "He's coming home on furlough."

The man took the picture and nodded solemnly. "Fine-looking young man."

"It's the first time he's been near home in two years," the old lady said. "He couldn't come upstate to me, so I'm going to New York to him."

"I've got two sons in the army," the man said. "Sure glad to see those rascals when they come home."

"Are they in the Pacific?" the old lady asked.

"In Mississippi. Both together, so far. They enlisted together."

"How proud you must have been," she said.

The old lady turned to the two sailors across the aisle. "I haven't been to New York in fifteen years," she said, leaning forward and raising her voice. "And now I'm going to meet my grandson. He's on a furlough."

When she held out the picture the two sailors rose and came across the aisle to look at it. "Are you on *your* way home?" the old lady asked them.

"No, ma'am," one of the sailors said, "we're on our way back."

"Pretty lively time the last few days?" the man in the gray suit asked.

The sailors laughed, and the old lady said quickly, "I hope my grandson is cheerful like you boys. It's been pretty hard for him."

There was a silence, and then the man said reverently, "Guess they've all had a tough time, those boys."

"This your grandson's wife?" one of the sailors asked, passing the picture back to the old lady. "Mighty pretty girl."

"Depend on a sailor to notice a thing like that," the man said, and he and the sailors laughed again.

"That's his wife, all right," the old lady said with a trace of bitterness in her voice.

"She looks like a very nice girl," the younger woman said.

"Very nice girl," the old lady repeated scornfully. She leaned over and tapped the younger woman's arm. "The way that girl's been acting!" Her voice trembled slightly. "She hasn't been fair to my grandson when he was fighting overseas."

"That's not very nice of her," one of the sailors said.

"Coming up to visit me," the old lady said, "with her fur coat and her indecent shoes. Talking all the time about how dead it was up where I live."

"Where does she live?" the man in the gray suit asked.

"She lives in New York. My grandson, now, he has to stay in New York when he comes back."

"Maybe you're mistaken about her," the younger woman said.

"It's so easy to make a mistake about people."

"True is true," the old lady said. "My grandson's wife, she stayed with me awhile upstairs. She used to get letters from men."

The younger woman started to say something and then stopped, and the man said, "How do you know?"

"Don't you think I can tell a man's handwriting when I see it?" the old lady asked. "I know when a woman like that, with her clothes and the way she talked, when she gets letters every day they're from men. It's time my grandson heard."

"You mean you're going to tell him?" the man said. The sailors looked at the old lady, and the younger woman stared at her book. "You wouldn't want to do a thing like that," one of the sailors said.

The old lady nodded emphatically. "All the way to New York," she said, "to see she gets what's coming to her."

"Maybe you're being too hard on her," the man said. "Maybe she can explain everything."

"True is true," the old lady repeated. "I don't have to listen to anything *she* has to say."

"Is your grandson's wife meeting you at the train?" the younger woman asked.

"She didn't even ask me down to see my grandson," the old lady replied. "She doesn't know I'm coming, anyway."

"Listen," the younger woman said, "why don't you sit down with her and have a long talk about the whole thing? Maybe you could clear it all up without saying anything to your grandson."

"I'm not making a long trip like this to listen to her stories," the old woman said.

"You ought to give that girl a chance to speak up for herself," the man said.

"It's not that we don't think you're doing right," one of the sailors said. "It's just that it seems sort of hard on everybody, him coming home after so long."

"I'll thank none of you to interfere," the old lady said. "I can take care of my own affairs."

After a minute the sailors slipped quietly back to their seat and the man returned to his paper. The younger woman said softly to the old lady, "You know, you're not being very charitable."

"I asked her to stay on and live with me in my own house," the old lady said, "and she told me no, right to my face."

The younger woman waited for a minute and then went back to her book.

When the train plunged into the tunnel to Grand Central, the old lady gathered her packages together, ready to get off. The younger woman stepped out into the aisle to put on her coat and found herself standing between the sailors and the man in the gray suit. When the old lady rose, she dropped one of her bundles and the man picked it up and handed it to her. She took it carefully and slipped her hand through the string around it. "It's homemade doughnuts," she said, smiling at them amiably, "for my grandson."

"I hope you have a pleasant visit," the younger woman said when the train came to a stop.

"Thank you," the old lady said. "Will you excuse me, please?"

As the younger woman stepped back, she realized that for a moment she and the sailors and the man had been standing in front of the old lady, as though trying to block her way.

She followed the old lady out of the car, and had a brief picture of the sweet, grandmotherly old face as it turned to look at the people on the platform. Then the fragile black figure disappeared into the crowd.