

Sketch

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Coming Home

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Abstract

FROM that October day when I first saw the campus I had the feeling that at last I was safe. I wanted to fling myself down on the earth, still warm from the summer sun that refused to believe the calendar, and try to press my body into it; to leave an impression that would be a permanent reminder of the first time in my adult life that I had come "Home"...

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FROM that October day when I first saw the campus I had the feeling that at last I was safe. I wanted to fling myself down on the earth, still warm from the summer sun that refused to believe the calendar, and try to press my body into it; to leave an impression that would be a permanent reminder of the first time in my adult life that I had come "Home".

"Home" . . . a funny way to feel about this place when I had never been further west than Chicago and then only on a flying visit from New York. Yet I felt I was home . . . as I used to feel when I was a child and returned from camp after a summer away, to be welcomed by my mother who seemed so big, so comforting, to my childish eyes, which took in every detail of her soft, warm face and unfashionable figure. "It was good to be home," I had thought as I nuzzled my moist lips against her neck that was still flushed from baking my favorite chocolate cookies . . . I would snuggle close to her . . . closer and closer, as if unable to believe I was home, safe from the outside world within the circle of my mother's arms. . . .

I have run a long way since then . . . always running . . . always escaping . . . escaping not just from places but from things . . . things around me . . . things within me . . . nightmares . . . ghosts . . . ghosts of buildings that stretch their jagged towers to the sky . . . sway and come together, closing in on me . . . smothering me . . . trapping me . . . trying to reach out and drag me back. . . .

But I won't go back . . . I'll never go back . . . they can't make me . . . nothing can make me go back . . . for now I am on the path that leads to home and peace and safety . . . and now I feel the road will be short. It must be short because within me I see the last bend of the road. . . .

Still in my dreams I am tortured . . . "The Street" leers at me . . . leers with a dagger between her teeth . . . Chinatown they call it—the Chinatown of the Tong War days when Tong

fought Tong with knives, opium, and oriental trickery. . . But this wasn't Chinatown.

This was just the name they gave to 38th street . . . the heart of the highly civilized Garment District, where they waged a different type of war . . . Boss cheats Boss . . . Buyer cheats Buyer . . . Worker cheats Worker, and they all connive to cheat each other with throat-slitting tactics. . . This was the street of golden opportunity for anyone willing to sell his soul for a chance to use the talent and training he had taken years to acquire. . . .

How well I remember that day a few years back when I so naively thought that *I* could conquer "The Street" on my precocious ability in art school . . . yes, I was one of the youngest and most promising students in the history of the school . . . I would be a designer in no time . . . I was so fresh . . . so full of ideas and ideals . . . it shouldn't be difficult for me, I had everything in my favor . . . youth, talent and the clean good looks of a girl who was bursting with enthusiasm for life.

"And all you have to do, little girl," said Mr. X or Mr. Y or Mr. Z., as they let their fat, clammy hands run up my warm forearm, "is to be nice to the right people."—What a beginning and end for my childish dreams. . . Yet I couldn't believe all people were like that . . . I couldn't give up so quickly . . . I had to go on searching . . . finding out for myself.

Of course I managed to get and hold some jobs that were at least stepping stones to my ultimate goal. And then finally that last wonderful offer of a job as a buyer for a chain of stores, and this job apparently had no strings attached.

That first day I optimistically made the rounds of the showrooms. "Sorry, if you haven't an account here we can't give you any merchandise . . . wartime shortage of materials you know, Miss . . . old customers come first . . . but wait a second." His eyes appraised my figure. "Maybe we can go out to lunch and talk this over. . . No, we're not taking any new customers, but you look like a regular kid . . . If you play ball with me, maybe I can help you out. . . new around here, aintcha?"

Suddenly it dawned on me why I had been given the job . . . the man who had formerly had my job had nothing but cash to offer in exchange for goods . . . but I had a subtler bribe. . . . Run, Sandra, run . . . faster, faster faster faster, faster, faster.

Some people might call it war jitters and maybe it was . . .

that sick cold feeling I'd have each time I went into the grocery store and saw women, formerly imperious in their demands, kowtowing and fawning over the little man behind the counter, all in the hope of getting a pound of butter or a bit of choice steak to fill their already over-stuffed bellies . . . Oh, of course they were patriotic . . . weren't they buying War Bonds with the excess profits from their husbands' war jobs and contracts? . . . Didn't Mrs. Stanton wear the attractive Red Cross worker's uniform as she drove around the countryside? . . . And wasn't Mrs. Gardner devoting an evening a week stolen from her busy schedule of card parties and teas, to sell War Bonds in the theater lobby? . . . Of course this did entitle her to see the picture after an hour or two of this strenuous work . . . And what about Mrs. Reese who was so very active in all the women's war organizations? . . . She had no time to think about her young daughter who gave her time and her youthful body to service men because she thought that was being patriotic.

Run, Sandra, run, faster, faster, faster, faster, faster, faster. . .

But now the tempo has changed, and my footsteps are paced to the majestic calm of the chimes coming from the Campanile. . . Eight o'clock classes in winter time . . . and I slowly walk across campus in the darkness. The steady, silent stream of students making their daily pilgrimage to knowledge, reminding me of another pilgrimage so many winters ago when the wise men came to worship at the first great shrine of Knowledge.

And the stars twinkle . . . each one like a captured snowflake reflected on the white robed ground. Each note of the carillon escapes into the stillness of the air, a frozen dew drop that remains suspended like a halo around my heart. . . It's eight o'clock in winter time, and slowly the darkness lifts . . . a fine band of light shows through . . . blue and violet and rose and gold . . . real gold . . . the gold I have been unwittingly searching for all these years. . . .

I raise my eyes to the sky and I see no more. . . A burning tear makes a path over the cold fire of my face. . . At last I can stop running . . . at last I have come home.