Rain Symphony

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FOR HOURS Ursula had been out in the winter night, struggling with the wind and the rain and her thoughts. It was now nearing dawn and she leaned heavily against the wet tree, exhausted and sobbing.

Fleeing from the unbearable calmness and placidity of the farm house to the chaotic world without, she had taken a furious delight in the wind and rain as they tore her apart. When the harsh wind had slapped her cold cheeks, she had only flung back her head for more and laughed—laughed; when it had snatched the small cap from her wet head and torn the heavy coat from her numb fingers, she had gasped—and laughed, laughed again as the needles of icy rain struck and pierced her bared breast.

NOW SHE SOUGHT refuge in the nearby grove of oaks and huddled against a wet trunk, cold and beaten. Her cheeks stung with the heavy lashing of her wet hair as it whipped about her face in the bitter wind; her body sagged and shivered uncontrollably from the sodden weight of the water-filled
woolen coat. Above her, the naked branches of the trees rattled as they thrashed about, and the rain, pounding on the matted leaves beneath, echoed through the woods with a muffled roar. She shrank up closer to the tree. She tried to stop shuddering by pressing her trembling body against its hard firmness. She succeeded for a minute.

The wind and rain let up, and shaking the wet hair from her eyes, she peered through the snarled branches of the trees up at the sky. Ragged bits of black clouds hung on a dim, lopsided moon. She shivered. The wind and rain began again.

WHY HADN'T TOD come to see her? Each day, for the two weeks of the Christmas holidays, she had expected him in breathless anticipation—and he hadn't come; he hadn't even phoned. It couldn't have been the weather, for until today, it had been perfect. But even had it been the weather, the Bensinger fields still adjoined theirs, and he easily could have made it as far as her house.

For about a month before the holidays his side of the correspondence had lagged, but at the time she had attributed it to the final examinations for which he must be preparing. He had probably decided that writing was unnecessary when he would be home soon. Now she knew her naive assumption had been wrong. As each day passed with neither word nor sight of him, a growing despair had seized her—he had forgotten her just as he had so passionately sworn he wouldn't that evening before he left for college. They had been standing in her dim parlor at the west window, together watching the sun set. The clouds had looked like pink smoke curling around the red sun, and he had kissed her, for the first time, just before it slipped below the horizon. Then in the darkness they had exchanged vows of love and loyalty—with the round-bellied little stove “as witness” winking at them from the corner “like a fat gnome,” Tod had said.

“Love and loyalty!” she laughed with a mocking sob. The wind wrenched the sob of laughter from her throat and seemed to fling it against the trees, break it into a thousand pieces, and hurl them back at her. Even above the pounding of the rain and the roar of the wind, it deafened her. She bowed her head under the impact and saw the pools of water at her
feet, black and bottomless. They frightened her. They reflected nothing. With a sob, she turned and hid her face against the tree.

II

JANUARY AND FEBRUARY dragged by in weary, meaningless succession. To Ursula now, there was no such thing as time. No such thing as a past, present, and future; only a timeless present. She looked neither forward nor backward but accepted each day in vacant silence and pale seclusion. Then one fitful morning the last of March her grandfather came.

She saw him first. In the vast station with the strong crowds swirling about him he looked little and lost and old, a faltering wisp of a man with gentle bewilderment clouding his watery blue eyes. Then he saw her; his face lighted up like a relieved child's. A quavering smile shirred the wrinkles at the corner of his mouth and swept the questions from his eyes. Before she reached him, she saw a word move his lips. It looked like her name. It moved them again. This time she heard. It was her name, "Ursula!"

She kissed him quickly.

"I'm so glad you came—Ursula." He repeated the name again as if he wanted an excuse to say it.

"I am too." And she suddenly was. She liked the way he said her name. It meant something; she didn't know what.

IT WAS AFTER SUPPER now. Upstairs her grandfather was unpacking, while in the dark parlor, Ursula again stood by the window, this time watching the night creep in like the tide. It stole easily, familiarly, into the old room. She turned slightly and saw the round-bellied little stove in the corner, veiled with shadows and looking for all the world like a fat gnome! "A fat gnome"?—where had she heard that before? She suddenly remembered: Tod had called it that—one evening. She was surprised, almost disappointed, that she felt so little at this memory; it was more a momentary nostalgia for the old order of things than pain at remembrance of him.
She turned back to the window. The sleet had changed to a fine, soft rain. It no longer haunted her. The watery patches of faded, blue sky reminded her of her grandfather's eyes. With a forefinger she began to trace her name slowly, "U-R-S-U-L-A", on the perspiring window pane. As she finished the "A" she heard a sibilant murmur behind her and turned to find her grandfather reading the name, "Ursula—" A wistful smile twitched the corners of his mouth.

"Ursula—"

This time he pronounced it aloud. She didn't reply; he seemed to be questioning himself. Reaching forward, he gently turned her face back to the window so that the ebbing light fell on it.

"Yes, you're like her. Even your name—your grandmother, you know." He nodded his head satisfied, pleased. "I met her in March, the first day of spring." He began to fumble with one of his hands. "I want to give you this. It was hers—" His voice broke and died away. He was tugging at a dull gold band on his gnarled little finger. Ursula watched him, something welling up inside of her. The ring caught on the misshapen knuckle and, while he was struggling with it clumsily, his watery eyes brimmed over, and a tear glistened on his hand. Ursula saw it fall, and the something inside of her went over.

Compassion and a deep wonder pierced and flowed through her; he was old, with nothing left but memories and a ring, and he was giving her the ring and sharing his memories—memories of a love, eternal and proved, and a faith as sublime and sure as the love.

He placed it in her hand. This time the tear was hers.

III

LATE THAT EVENING she slipped out to the oak woods, for the first time since that wild December night. It was still raining a little, but against her face the rain was warm and pleasant. Fingers of wind ran lightly through her hair and through the trees, mewing softly.
She glanced up at the naked branches against the clearing sky. She caught her breath. One gnarled old oak held the dull golden rim of moon in its branches. It was like her grandfather's hand with the ring on it. She sank against a tree and looked down at her hand. In the darkness she could see only its outline, but beyond it, a pool of water, black and bottomless—reflecting the moon. This time she wasn't frightened. She looked quickly back up at the sky. The rim of moon shone dimly, but steadily, immutably, through the trembling branches.

The something was welling up inside of her again. It went over. Excitement and a vital eagerness quivered and trickled through her. Suddenly she flung back her head and laughed. Her laughter ran over her, strong and pure.

"Life is a great adventure", she whispered to herself.

"And love—the greatest of all."

The warm rain touched her upturned face lightly, and the wind gently brushed her tingling cheeks. The laughter changed to a smile, and the smile lingered trembling on her lips.

Splendid, with blare of trumpets,  
the crash of drums;  
Bright, with the gay cockade and the strong, young men;  
Magnificent, when they wade in mud, sick unto death,  
Spattered with blood and blinded in the foul cellar where they crouch.  
Ah, they shall sing of war—splendid and honorable—  
And death—all glorious—when they die like rats in a hole,  
Mercenaries of Mammon, the bodyguards of patriots who own some steel or oil,  
Or want more money for their little pigs.