Summer, 1942

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THE smoke wove its way back to drift conewise up through the lampshade. It made her think of sitting on the studio couch at home with the smoke going up toward the little wall lamp above, only the light was blue there. He liked blue lights. He sat in the deep chair in the corner and didn’t seem to notice, but later his letter told of the picture he kept of the couch and the smoke and the blue light. No girl to complete the picture where he was now—God knows where—England or Ireland most likely. Mail returned unclaimed from the base. Trust the government to hold it a month before they’d bother sending it back. So he didn’t get it. It was meant to be his last letter before he left. Maybe his last letter ever.

“Where I’m going they play for keeps,” he had said. Maybe when the United States had all the marbles he’d come back. Not that she expected that. Each good-bye was a good-bye. No hopes—no disappointments. Might as well add no love, no fun, no anything.

She could convince herself and be quite happy about the whole thing if only other people didn’t take it upon themselves to look knowing and smile out the side of their teeth every time the guy’s name was mentioned. Plato was a wonderful fellow and more people should accept his type of friendship. Drippiness was a wonderful thing, too, but it should be confined to cream pitchers and tea pots and studio couches with only the blue light looking on.

Nails and snails and puppy-dogs’ tails, that’s what little boys are made of, and the purpose of war is to break them down into their original components. Stand them in a ditch, or put them in a tank. Measure them for a new blue suit, tailor, by name, one David Jones. Lead them into a plane, the glass nose of a plane, so that they can see the earth coming up to meet them, while behind the four flaming motors bathe the fuselage in a sheath of red fire and smoke. Blue smoke.