Henceforward in Thy Shadow

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Abstract

As Mavis came out of the grey stone passage from the subway she was thinking, “Darn this night air! It makes everything to clear for comfort.”...
As MAVIS came out of the grey stone passage from the subway she was thinking, "Darn this night air! It makes everything too clear for comfort." Passing one of the newer brick buildings, she felt the glance of a uniformed doorman—awed at the perfection of her costume, she knew—not attracted by a pretty schoolgirl.

"Wouldn't Tony tease if he knew I left the store without my final check on all the girls—and four minutes early, too," she reflected. "He'd no more think of leaving the hospital a minute early to be on time to meet me...."

Startled by the intensity of her thoughts, she knew she was clenching and unclenching her fingers together, almost digging through the gloved palms. "Well, after all, why should he?" she asked herself. It was an unspoken code between them. The pressure of work to be done immediately was, after all, about equal for an interne and an assistant buyer. So if either was kept late on the job, that came first. No apologies for being late for a date. No excuses. No obligations. It was taking an infection, carelessly picked up in one of Tony's wards, to keep him away from work for a few days.

Mavis looked out from around her reflections with a start. "Good grief, I'm almost there!" She forced herself to walk more slowly. "Oh, Tony," she said inside herself, "if this were only
like going to exchange polite phrases with a sick friend! . . . .”

The house was the fourth on the block and the apartment the first one to the right on the second floor, she remembered. She crossed the street to the house and opened the door, slowly, jamming down the desire to revert to a childish habit of flying up the stairs, two at a time. She felt as if the steps should creak, but they didn’t. The staircase had seemed too narrow to get through as she reached the top last night, too, but she knew that it was just because it was so dark.

“I shouldn’t be going back,” she pondered, “but he did seem pleased when I came last night. Hadn’t Tony said, ‘Lord, but I’m glad to see you—no wonder some of those patients almost go berserk lying in bed week after week. I’ve had about all I can take with just two days!’ And then he’d realized, ‘Say, if I’m keeping you from a previous engagement . . .’”

Mavis had smiled in answer, wondering what would have happened if she had answered, “There is no engagement previous to this one.”

The steps were getting fewer as she reflected how she happened to be here. He had taken her hand unconsciously while they were talking, and was just aware of it when he noticed the tension seeping through her. She decided it was late and had started to leave, pulling her hand away from him. Tony had held on—then remembered—and let her go, smiling in the way that was a part of so many of her dreams, pulling his thick, dark brows together, and seeming to see straight through her. That half-wistful, half-absent-minded way of his, reaching out to her—then remembering—and letting her go—had happened before. The times at the end of a dance, when the music had stopped, and he’d forget to stop holding her. Or when he helped her on with her coat and he’d reach over and set her lapels straight, with the teasing look of a little boy clutching the pigtails of the girl in the desk in front of him.

It had been while she was putting on her coat last night that he’d said, “What time will you be here tomorrow?” Just that. Not “Are you coming?” or “Will you come and see me again sometime?”

So here she was, just outside his door for the second time. She stopped for a last look in the mirror down the hall. Yes, it was obvious that she had recognized the quality of ugliness in her, and had expressed it truthfully in a conscious chic. After all,
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wasn’t that part of her job? Slim, timelessly beautiful black suit, neat hair rolled under a fashionably extravagant hat, perfect make-up, simplicity, but not quite the simplicity preferred by the man inside the second apartment to the right. She moved nervously, searching for what had to be changed—what part of her individuality she must concede to him. She took off her hat and loosened her hair a little, letting out its tightly concealed length. Then she unbuttoned her jacket, losing still more of the tailored look she was known for.

She knocked at the door, and then turned the doorknob which had been left open for her. “Don’t get out of bed,” she called down the hall.

Quietly she walked to his room. Strange that this should be the familiar scene when there had been so much of good music together and small parties in living rooms with fireplaces. And the first Christmas when they had walked along the city streets after a very late show, eating ice cream cones!! Her new fur coat, no hat, and ice cream cones! They had both been dead tired from work, but what a foolish, wonderful time it had been.

And now, there was Tony, sitting upright in bed, a book in front of him, as usual—so that he had even forgotten to take off his glasses when she came in. The ends of a Debussy strain came from the radio.

She stopped at the foot of the bed, saying, “Remember me?”

The dark head moved a trifle of an inch, and he answered, “Ummmm—vaguely.” He leaned over and switched off the radio.

“Oh, don’t, if you like it,” she said immediately.

“No, I’ve had about enough Debussy for one evening.” As he talked she sat down in the chair at the foot of the bed.

“What, no letters?” he joked. She grinned, remembering how she had brought letters to write while he read last night. He had taken it as a matter of course that they both had business requiring prompt attention before they “visited.” Finally, irritated at his lack of interest, she had pretended she was through and started questioning him about his illness.

“Nope—all caught up,” she lied. “And besides, I thought I’d shocked enough of my friends by mentioning that I was writing to them from Tony’s bedroom!”

“Hope I didn’t keep you from anything this evening,” he apologized.

She was annoyed that he should mention it again; better to
leave it unsaid, she thought. "Don't be silly—you know if I wanted to do anything else, I would," she answered quickly.

She reached for her purse, which she had placed on the foot of his bed. "Go on reading," she commanded. "I have some things to straighten out, and I won't bother you." That was the trick, keep it as businesslike and natural as ever.

He picked up his book again without a word, while she pulled out a small folder with the title, "Accounts". She was taking little bites in her pencil as she worked, when she looked over at him, the first time in five minutes. He held his glasses in one hand, rubbing his chin with the other. The fine, thin mouth was drawn tightly together.

"Hey, no fair, you're not concentrating," she exclaimed.

He said only, "Yes I am."

The girl looked out the window, stopping her pencil, and in her best "side-of-the-mouth" manner, added, "I mean—on your book." And then, because it had to be settled right away, "Don't look at me. Please."

Her thoughts were stretching out to him like invisible arrows that could never really penetrate their mark. The feeling of desperation she sometimes had when there were too many things to do and she didn't know which to do first, overcame her. That look of his, searching, yet being afraid to search—she had to shake this off! Soundlessly, she thought, "Don't force me to look at you," but she knew already that it was too late.

"Go on with what you were doing," he ordered.

"Sorry, but I can't," she shook her head, helplessly.

What she had feared happened, and he continued, "Then come over and sit by me." She opened her mouth to argue, then stopped, realizing that they had been through this before, last night. So she walked around, and sat down stiffly in the chair near him.

"No, I mean on the edge of the bed," he added, calmly.

"Tony, I can't!" she said with a little cry. What nerve he had, ordering her around. She was responsible to no one, ever, and he had always admired her independence more than anything else about her. Yet now, he did not even consider that she would refuse to do as he said.

"I said, sit-on-the-edge-of-the-bed," he answered, unwaveringly.

She got up, and sat down grimly on the bed. She was struck, in the midst of her anger, by the absence of any feeling of wrong-
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doing. It wasn't the room, or the hour, or the fact that he was not his usual vigorous self. This sensation could have started anywhere. They might have been in a group at opposite ends of a room. He could have mentioned her name to someone and she would have turned immediately and gone to him, asking, "What is it?" Yes, he might have known as casually as that, too.

"Let me go back, Tony," she asked, nodding toward where she had been sitting.

"No, you better stay right where you are." The thin face, always intense, was grim now. His vivid black brows gave a final confirmation to eyes that seemed always to be shadowed by an impenetrable sadness.

The girl spoke, and the words were low and hurt and confused, "I can't think clearly when I'm so close to you." She closed her eyes and reached up to put a hand over her face. He took it down and put it on the other side of him, so that he held both of them.

"Look at me—and not out of the window, from now on," he told her.

"Mavis?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Could you, I mean—will you—trust me if I say that what I'm doing is only to help you?"

She sighed, and nodded, but her face reflected the doubt and brooding which was upon her. A cloud of foreboding passed over her as she remembered a gang of Tony's fellow internes kidding about how he was always given the most difficult patients to handle, because he was the only one who could get their confidence. Did he use the same "bedside manner" on his friends, too, she wondered. If she could only keep from talking too much—just sit and listen. She looked up at his hair, clipped so that only the beginning of the black waves showed. One by one the fingers of her hand felt drained of blood and limp from a slow and separate longing to reach up and touch his hair. Knowing it would be so easy sent a stream of weakness through her.

"What is the matter, Mavis?" he said, looking straight at her so that she could not turn her eyes away.

"It didn't startle her; she was ready with her reply, "Nothing at all."

Tony went on, not giving her time to plan her play-acting. "No, that isn't what I mean—that isn't how I can help you." He
was diagnosing her, dissecting her in front of her eyes; she had to concede, "It's not for human ears, Tony."

"But you will tell me. Don't you think I know you long enough and well enough to understand how your mind works? Is it that you don't believe in me enough to think I could help you?"

"Not this, oh please just not this time—don't make an issue of it. If you do understand me, there's no need to say it, is there?"

The awful criminal feeling was around her again—the shock of blinding flashlights tearing off all the coatings of civilization from her thoughts. "Can't you hear me?" her mind droned, "I'm begging you not to make me lose that little claim I have to you now."

Then, to him, "All right—you win... you're what's the matter with me!" And she thought, "You were what was the matter on New Year's Eve when I went to the boss' celebration with Ryan from the Advertising Office, and came home alone so I wouldn't have to be around at the stroke of twelve. Of course that had to be the one time you took over the night shift for 'one of the boys.'"

"Yes," he said slowly, "I know that. I didn't realize it till last night." She closed her eyes and turned her face away. A line from a play flashed before her—something about there being a certain satisfaction in seeing how much another person could take.

He reached over and turned her face toward him. She stifled her tears before he could detect them.

"Mavis—go on—there's more, isn't there?"

"Tony, why are you doing this—don't you know—I'm sick from wanting you to kiss me."

He nodded, stifling down the electrifying effect this woman had on his senses, crowding out the reality of her nearness.

"It's so little—to last a lifetime..." She finished hopelessly, speaking the thoughts he was fighting against. He was quite still, not knowing that he had put his hand on her hair and was running his fingers along it.

"What are you doing?"

He caught himself at her question. "I'm—pulling—your—hair," he said between invisibly clenched teeth, and then released his grip.

He started speaking again, pushing his voice forward, slowly and directly, refusing interruptions by the girl opposite him.
"You'll get over it, of course. Recovery from an illness is not possible without a certain crisis—but it is much faster if the patient works for it, believes in it. There is no other way . . . ."

"The life a doctor leads—I don't have to tell you about that—and medical research. Each of us must hammer at his own particular field even if only once in many lifetimes a Koch or an Ehrlich starts a current of progress. You know how long I've moved toward my goal, and now—I'm so close to getting the 'go' signal. This research—this is the only thing that could ever matter to me."

She continued at his level with, "I'm on the way up, too, Tony; there's a promotion due next month. If I get it—it means my own department, and a move down to Philadelphia. It's what I've been working for for almost three years; just a matter of the boss' signature on a new contract. . . . Believe me, I didn't mean for anything to interfere, ever—the pattern is the same for me, too—but, oh darling . . . ."

"Look, none of this about being sorry, see," he finished for her. Without meaning to, he let his hand touch her throat, rest there for only the space of her drawn-in-breath.

He went on. "Too bad you had to slip up in that perfect judgment of yours. God-only-knows how it could be me!"—he smiled at her, the first in a long time, and shook his head. "Such a little girl under all that poise and perfection!"

He laughed, "I knew that would make you mad," and was serious again. "Go ahead, start getting good and mad right now."

That was that, she knew. It was all over and she was on her own again. She stood up and went over to get her things. In front of the mirror she smoothed her hair into neatness, and buttoned her jacket.

Mavis turned to him then, saying, "Well, speedy recovery and all that sort of thing."

"Same to you," he answered her flippancy.

"And drop me a line, anyway—after you've won the Nobel Prize, will you—darling?"