One O’Clock Deadline

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Abstract

JANICE! There’s the best-looking lieutenant waiting for you out in the parlor,” Annabelle said as she pushed open my door. I paused in applying my lipstick to say, “Oh, dear! I’ll be ready in a minute. Brush me off, will you?” She took the whisk broom with a sigh. ”Umm—I could go for a man like him...
"JANICE! There's the best-looking lieutenant waiting for you out in the parlor," Annabelle said as she pushed open my door.

I paused in applying my lipstick to say, "Oh, dear! I'll be ready in a minute. Brush me off, will you?"

She took the whisk broom with a sigh. "Umm—I could go for a man like him. And you should see Mrs. Mac. For once she isn't doing all the talking. He's got her wrapped around his little finger."

"Yes—he does have a way with women." I tried to laugh. Annabelle looked up at me sharply. It must have been the unsteadiness in my voice.

"What kind of a way?" she demanded, soberly, with that elder-sister inflection.

"Oh—he's just—well, the only word for Walter is fascinating—" The words stumbled over each other as I found my coat and purse and gloves.

"Yes," I was thinking—"'fascinating'—Nice at a distance, but don't get too near or you might get burned. But—oh—I could always handle him," I reassured myself.

The clicks of my highest black pumps echoed in the long hallway, like the ticks of a clock. "Getting closer—getting closer—around the corner—" they seemed to say. "Around the corner, what?" I murmured to myself.

"Am I glad to see him again, or not?" I wondered. Just luck that I was home at five when the telegram came. "Will be at your dorm at six tonight. All my love, Walter."

"All my love, Walter"—that was the tone of his recent letters, only they had been more specific. What'll I do if he—? Oh well, no use crossing that bridge yet. We'll probably have a wonder-
ful evening—if he's the same as he was back home last year when I was in Junior College.

I paused in front of the mirror at the end of the hall. Yes—I look just right in that black wool dress with the silver clip at the neck—just young enough to suit him, and yet, just sophisticated enough.

I hadn't realized how fast my heart was beating, until I turned the corner into the parlor, and heard his voice. It was just as I remembered it, vibrant and exciting and inscrutable.

—"two weeks' furlough from Camp Cooke—so I got here as fast as I could." A year hadn't changed his laugh, either.

"Hello, Lieutenant Wagner," I said, softly—but my voice didn't sound the way I wanted it to sound.

He jumped up from the love seat where he and Mrs. Mac had been sitting, took a couple of long steps, and was holding my hands in his long thin brown ones, looking down at me with dark, devilish eyes.

"Janice . . ." he said it as if he were dreaming. But his eyes were taking an inventory. I must have added up to the right amount, for his eyes were laughing when he said, after a moment, "It's been an awfully long time, darling."

I must have winced a little at his last word—and I know Mrs. Mac craned her head around—for he dropped my hands and took my coat from my arm.

"We're going to Des Moines for dinner," he told me masterfully, as he slipped my coat on. His hands lingered just a second around my shoulders. "And your lovely housemother has been so kind as to give you permission to stay out till one." He made a courtly little bow in her direction, and Mrs. Mac's face grew into one single grin.

"I'll leave the door open for you, Janice," she gurgled as she went back to the office, walking as lightly as if she were seventeen again.

"How do you propose to get us down to Des Moines and back, Lieutenant?" I laughed, as he opened the door to the snow-world outside.

"Now don't you worry your pretty head over minor details," he told me as he put my arm through his. "You just let the Lieutenant take care of things." His voice became a little sober, and as he looked down at me with a possessive smile that showed his
straight white teeth and the small cleft in his chin, he said, “Gosh, Janice! It’s swell to be called Lieutenant, and get saluted and all. I hated being a non-com. It’s a hell of a life, somebody always telling you to ‘do this,’ ‘do that’—”

“Yes, I know,” I sympathized, thinking that he was the hand­somest man I knew. His old fascination was creeping over me again. I could feel it forging the link between us.

I was still looking at him when we stopped on the walk be­side a blue Chrysler coupe.

“Where in the world did you get this?” I asked as he put me in one side.

We shot off down the street with all one hundred horses be­hind us and he explained. “Friend of mine in Des Moines loaned it to me for a couple of days. So I could court a beautiful girl,” he added with a smile in my direction.

“Oh?” I said, a little relieved. I couldn’t help remembering his irresponsible actions, like the time he was in the guardhouse for a month, because he got tired of army life and took a week’s vacation to relieve the monotony. But he had gotten through Officer Candidate School, I told myself. And that was something to his credit.

His pleasant baritone voice was giving me a rapid resume of his trip. “So, to make a short story even shorter, I bussed it into Frisco, streamlined it to Denver, and flew from there. —I think I’d rather go by car, though; see the country and drink it at the same time!”

Yes, I still liked the crazy, quick way he spoke, his vivid expres­sions, his sophisticated manner. As I leaned back in the blue leather corner and listened to him, I felt that my emotions had laid a trap for me—but the meshes were exciting and passionate and I was alive again.

As alive as I’d felt back home, the few times I was with Walter. As alive as I’d felt every time I heard him play Debussy with his magic touch, or boogie-woogie in the Harlem style. He had been a successful musician before he met the draft.

But I had tried to forget all that, for I never thought I’d see him again. Of course, he had written for a year or so, and his last letters had been the kind that scorch the fingers, but— Oh! he couldn’t be serious. —Still, I reminded myself, he didn’t stop off here on his furlough, for nothing. But I forgot my worries in
his old charm that wound around me, making me feel warm, desirable.

Outside the cold snow-and-ice fields of Iowa sped by and soon we were splashing through grey slushy streets.

"We're going to Lobello's," he said. "They tell me you can dine and dance there, and my feet are itching to get you on a smooth floor." He gave me one of those inclusive glances that made me blush and smile, all at once. Lobello's, I remembered, was the newest nightclub in Des Moines. How did Walter know about it, I wondered? —Oh, well, might as well try to unravel the Einstein theory as to understand Walter.

The head waiter led us over to a small oval booth in one corner, with a decisive black-and-white "Reserved" sign on the table. As I sat down on the maroon leather I had the uncomfortable feeling that we had taken someone else's table, but as Walter scooted around on my left, the waiter asked in an attentive voice, "Is this satisfactory, Lieutenant Wagner?"

"Yes—Toby—this is swell. Thanks a million," and Walter gave him a grandiose smile.

When he had gone, Walter moved around closer and said, "Good old Toby. He was the head waiter at the Roosevelt once four or five years ago when I had a five weeks stand there. He'd do almost anything for me. —So I looked him up this afternoon before I came to Ames." He looked into my eyes, and I realized that neither of us was thinking of what he was saying. Brown met brown and melted into a smile.

Another waiter appeared just then, standing respectfully to one side, pencil and pad in hand.

"We'll have Italian Vermouth to begin with—just bring us a bottle; then a couple of sirloins, medium rare, uh—then lime sherbet—and—oh—sherry with dessert." He turned back to me with his persuasive grin. "That is what you wanted, isn't it, Janice?"

"Why, of course," I laughed. "How in the world did you guess it?"

"Oh—I know lots of things about you," he boasted, mysteriously.

The Vermouth came, cold in the glass, but warm in the throat. "Here's to you and me! May we live happily ever after!" he
said as we clinked glasses. But the sober expression in his eyes made me look at him again as I sipped the wine.

He must have felt the question in my glance, for he set his glass down and twisted around to look squarely at me. His lips were straight, not smiling, as he took my hands in his strong thin fingers, and stroked them gently. I noticed that on his left hand he still wore the large flat gold ring with the two W's in diagonal corners, and the two diamonds in the other corners. For a long time he just looked at me—and his eyes seemed more black than brown.

"Janice—I—well, it's hard to say—"

Walter Wagner, stumbling for words—was something new to me. He took a deep breath and began again.

"Look," he said earnestly, "before I was drafted, I just romped around, seeing the country, throwing my money away, but good, at casinos, doing more than my share of the drinking, having a high time in general. Nothing but sheer fun. After I was drafted, life was mud and sawdust till I ran into you—thanks to your aunt. You are by far the nicest thing that has happened to me in years. —So while I'm not an old roue, I'm not an exact picture of misogyny, either. And I've been around enough to know what I want: It all adds up to you."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. So he went on, gripping my fingers tighter, drawing me a little nearer.

"I want you, Janice, like I've never wanted anything or anybody before. I want you so much that I want you to marry me—tonight, tomorrow, the next day—as soon as you can. But I want you, and I mean to have you."

Something in my face must have been shocked, for he said, quickly, "Now don't come out with 'This is so sudden!' I've been writing you for weeks telling you I'm in love with you."

"Yes—I know—but I didn't think—" I couldn't stand his gaze any longer.

He let go of my hands and reached inside his blouse. When I looked up he was holding a narrow band of platinum crowned with an enormous solitaire that flashed enticingly in the dim light. He put it gently on my left hand.

"You see, Janice darling, I really am serious about you," Walter said, his voice as soft as a whisper.
Suddenly I felt very young and unromantic and afraid. For a while I just sat there, staring dumbly at the ring. Words rushed through my mind, but I couldn’t say any of them. This was either a wonderful dream or a fantastic nightmare. The gay joking atmosphere of the evening had dissolved into an air of cold consequence.

Finally I said, “I can’t wear this, Walter.”

“No—don’t take it off till you decide.” He put his hands over mine and laughed softly, triumphantly. “I can see you haven’t decided to say yes, yet, but go ahead and wear it so that I won’t have to put it back on again when you do!” Seeing my hesitation, he added, “I want you to wear it—so won’t you, Janice?”

“All right,” but my smile was weak.

Fortunately, our steaks arrived just then, and Walter began to talk about the armored division, the tanks and peeps and jeeps and how well they took the California hills.

“What did you do on your week-end passes?” I asked.

“Oh, usually I’d go into Lampoc—that’s a little town ten miles from camp—and get drunk on Brandy Collins, or have dinner and go to a show, or take in the cuties at a U.S.O. dance. —Nothing much to do around the damn place. God! am I glad to be here, with you especially. I can forget the stinking army when I look at you. I’ve just been living for this furlough.”

I didn’t reply.

“Oh, yes,” he laughed, a little raucously. “Something funny did happen in Lampoc once. I was in one of the local dives, filling up on Brandy Collins— By the way, we’ll have to have some after a while; I brought my own brandy along, imported stuff— Anyway, as I was saying: After I’d drunk about a lake of Collinses, I floated over to the piano and began to play—just snatches of anything I could remember through the fog and things people requested. When I stopped, it was about two a.m., and the joint was pretty well clear of everyone except a few girls. One of them sauntered over and propositioned me. Ha! Ha! first time that had happened in ages— But I ended up pure, as usual. When I asked her, she didn’t have her Wasserman test! Humh! She didn’t like my sense of humor—but I didn’t mean it as a joke—”

He poured the last of the Vermouth, while I laughed at his story. I don’t know why I laughed. Perhaps at the moment it
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seemed funny, or maybe it was just the wine in my brain, heady, intoxicating.

When I listened again, he was saying, “Outside of wines, Brandy Collins’s are about the only drink I like. Haven’t been able to stand whiskey since I was eighteen. Had a nervous breakdown then, from too much of the stuff.”

“Nervous breakdown at eighteen? Isn’t that pretty young, Walter?” My voice was teasing, but it had an acid edge to it.

“Well—you see—I’d been playing the piano in speakeasies since I was sixteen, and everybody drank, so I did too.”

“But how did you learn music?”

“I went to night school for a year or so—till I got all the fundamentals. Picked up a few courses in philosophy, too. —Say, did you ever read Schopenhauer? Now there is a man who really knew women—” And he was off again on his favorite topic.

After the sherbet and the sweet amber sherry—we danced for an hour or so. Walter can lead a girl through steps she’d never be able to do with anyone else. But somehow, I didn’t enjoy dancing with him as much as I used to. Maybe it was the way he held me.

The diamond bothered me, too. It kept flashing at me, catching every stray glimmer of light, winking its eye at me—reminding me that soon I’d have to tell him. And my brain kept jumping back and forth, like a scared, confused rabbit.

I put my hand further around his back so that I couldn’t see the diamond. The music was soft and his arms were warm and I was comfortable in them—and his cheek was next to mine and his lips were brushing my ear, saying, “I love you, Janice”—but I wasn’t happy.

The coupe seat was chilly, but Walter’s arm was around me, to keep me warm, he said. As we fled through the ice and snow, it seemed as if we were driving to destruction—or bliss—I didn’t know which. In the cold moonlight I watched his face. And as I watched I began to see how hard and sensual the lines were. He looked old and spent and wasted. Why, he must be almost thirty, I thought, with a shock. As I saw clearly the dissipation in his face, it was as if the meshes had parted and I was free.

“I’ll be around to get you about ten in the morning, sweet,” he whispered as we went up the steps to the dorm. “We’ll hunt up
a minister. Be sure to wear your prettiest dress—preferably something that'll look good with olive drab.” And he chuckled to himself.

He hadn't noticed how desperately I was yanking off my glove, and pulling off the ring.

“Here—I can’t keep it—I can’t marry you—I don't want to—ever—Life with you would be one hell after another. Now go away and leave me alone!” —My words were almost sobs.

His devilish grin snapped into a hard line. “Okay, if that’s the way you want it.” For a minute he looked like a little boy; then the hard look settled over his face again.

“Damn you, anyway!” he exploded, and without warning he was kissing me, with hot moist lips. His greedy, lustful movements sent shudders through me. I pushed him away and unlatched the door.

His bitter angry voice crackled across the snow as he skipped down the steps. “That is so you'll know you've been kissed—you infant,” and his voice was derisive, hurt, defiant.

The coupe roared away into the quiet night. I still stood there, rubbing my lips. They felt bruised. But I was free. When I finally stepped inside, the chimes were striking one o'clock, in a clean, fresh new day.

Waste
Vera Cook

He lifts my heart deftly from its deep snug bed
And holds it
Pulsating
In his firm fingers.

A tiny slit.
The rich red blood gushes forth.
Striping his hand
Filling the deep cracks in his palm
Circling the tiny black hairs at his wrist.

He does not see his deed.
The blood flows
And flows
And slowly drips from his hands
Into cold gray emptiness.