

Come to the Window,
a novel by Carl Doerner ©2016

ONE

THE BLACK AND WHITE IMAGES in which the history of our war was filmed and shown back home were what we saw that day we passed along roads across France—roads our weary, wary soldiers had walked, that tanks and trucks had rumbled across, where jagged shadows of village houses fell across fragments of wood, glass, bricks, stone and household items shoveled away into windrows, revealing the potholes, the stained and broken pavement. Of one house there remained only wooden splinters at stark and threatening attitudes, of a church only a fragment of ledge with gargoyles staring out. I imagined faces of the dead, those who had waited patiently to be dragged from beneath the debris and reburied by the survivors.

Rarely did residents show themselves. Impaired as my own thought was, I fancied their absence a reminder to us passersby that in addition to being few, they were, by the trauma of war, personally diminished.

And we encountered everywhere pools of trapped water that, like villagers themselves in the years of shelling and street fighting, had no route of escape. Some lagoons were not the dominant black and white or grey but a bright green. The sight hinted to me this devastation sweeping first from east to west, then west to east was not finished invading homes and

lives. It might again break in upon the remaining children and old people in ways that pillage sleep. Wary the people seemed, that harm might come again to them. Or was it residual shock?

Yet, moving onward, we saw men plowing with horses and the gleam of fresh earth—a resilience asserting itself. Even, in the absence of any church bell pealing, this heralded survival.

Gus, driver of the muddied deuce-and-a-half that was to carry us to the coast that morning, strode into our knot of women, eyes darting from one to the other of us. He grasped the sleeve of Paula's fatigue jacket, and glancing at me said, "Why don't you two girls come ride shotgun up front with me?"

Knowing he fancied having one of us under him, I turned on Paula a smirky glance.

"Come on, Lena," she said. "We'll have a better view up there than under canvas in back with the others."

We strode around and climbed in, she nudging me first into the cab tight against Gus. His body odor drifted over.

The truck roared to life. Leaving the unfinished war behind, we fled toward Le Havre for a ship that was to carry us away from all of this.

Paula, who had never seen Paris, bent toward Gus to ask if we'd be stopping there a little while. He assured her he had strict orders. "I'd love to spend some time with you two at one of those little sidewalk cafes and that."

He stared across, teeth gripping lower lip. He had a hand off the wheel and was scratching under his cap.

Then he stared straight ahead. "We'll only see the suburbs."

Where we did get down was at a field kitchen beyond the city. The slope of Paula's mess kit and her glum look spoke disappointment. "We won't ever get there," she muttered, staring at the ground, stirring dirt with the toe of her boot.

"You're forgetting I had my visit there with Stan four months ago."

Mistaking my words, I thought, Paula rushed me, slinging the hand with the mess kit and its remaining beans around my back. She hugged

me, crying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

What remained of her dinner would be sliding down the back of my fatigue jacket, but there was sudden warm pressure in my chest. I'd felt it seldom in my life. Holding her tightly, I knew and welcomed that rare, familiar ballooning energy.

She clung to me and I hung on, as blinded as that afternoon an ocean wave swept over the two of us at Brighton Beach back in England. Then my eyes stayed closed, I don't know how long, as I grappled with this new prospect.

I was thinking, all these months together, coming now to this?

Her arms stayed wrapped around me.

In love, the two of us, my thoughts raced. The way it had been that first time with Birdy, when he kept coming to the house, or would it be as it began to be for me with Beyona, before she wrestled free from such a possibility and fled my life?

This could get us a steel slab to sleep on in the stockade, I considered, forcing her to arms length. I wasn't sure. I was supposing. "We don't choose life. It just happens," I said.

There was a reassuring, radiant look on her face. Her hand tightened on mine.

I said, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

At first tight lipped, then coughing a little laugh, she offered, "I think so."

I was thinking why does it have to be so damned hard for two men or two women to say these things. Damn the world for its narrowness.

Birdy and Beyona, I reflected, both swept away like leaves falling upon a river's flow. Now what to say next? But that could wait. For us, this war was at an end, the last winding-down weeks so intense with so many shocking things happening around me I could hardly wait for the calm and shelter of a loving relationship. So welcome was this prospect.

Then I risked saying, "Paula, I want us to stay together." I laughed at myself. The words had hammered out before my thought fully formed.

She leaned away slowly, a look of absolute wonderment breaking

across her features. Her tongue played along her lips. I was delighted to see her teeth nip at her lips. I felt myself smiling broadly. Then I wanted to slow down, even back up a little. I said, "I think it would be ..." but stopped.

Smiling between each breath, almost whispering, she said, "I've never thought about this."

"Days and nights going right on together." I could barely believe my words pouring out.

She stared at me, beaming. We exchanged silly laughs and smiles, still clutching and digging fingers into the palms of each other's hands. She glanced at the women gathered at some distance, saying brightly, "Well, let's talk about it."

I took one shuddering breath, then another. Everything between us was the same as it had been all the war years, suddenly charged and different.

The way our personal stories interlocked, we'd found good reason for close friendship since our train ride to Iowa for Basic. Army women hadn't the comradeship of the men in the trenches but we'd ceased to be ladies. Given my disreputable history, assuming such would have brought guffaws from old acquaintances. Working as we did near the front and camping out, closeness naturally grew. There'd been our own level of grab ass, intimate slaps and bumps.

Paula stepped around me slashing the food from my jacket with her hand. She swung her hand to free it of beans, laughing with delight. Gus, standing beside his truck, delivered a stare. He held his empty mess kit with one hand, a fork with the other, his mouth gaping open. Just then I saw him drop his arms. He called everyone to get back in the truck.

He hadn't wheeled into the main road before he tipped his head my way to say, "You two girls are real chummy—emotional like."

Testy and disapproving was the way he voiced it, like a fantasy he'd been entertaining fell crimped. What's this shit thinking I wondered? None of your beeswax we used to say. It was bothersome all the same.

It was only a quick affair Stan and I had had going but I felt the need

to knock Gus on his heels. “Look, man, if we appear a little emotional its because we were talking about my sweetheart, the guy I hung out with back where you collected us. He drove his jeep over a mine a few days ago and all that was left of him was a bunch of wet pieces.”

Gus grunted, going silent. But when I leaned back my thoughts grew muddled. Stan was more than a casualty of war. Never peering past that tricky bend in the road, we had been intimate in Paris and in jeeps. I could tear up still when I thought about him. He was a good guy. He deserved to survive the war. Didn't we all.

Between us my hand touched Paula's. Her's squeezed mine. The day before I had allowed to her, “I have no idea what I'm going to do when we're mustered out. I can't go back to what I was doing before the war. That door is slammed shut.” Of course she knew the reason. But now? It was still hard to take in what was happening between us.

Le Havre remained in shambles, at least parts we passed reaching the port. Repeated bombing and shelling had reduced the city's rubble to mud and dust. Only the docks had been restored. We saw a row of freight cars being loaded and a line of fresh troops stepping down the ramp from a ship touting duffle bags. We saw we were to board a hospital ship, no doubt loaded to capacity with walking wounded, perhaps others barely clinging to life.

A proper lodging for me, walking wounded, I felt. Shell shock we were now allowed to call it.

Though we were able to go directly aboard, trepidation rippled through me. The hellish memory of coming out to Britain from Hampton Roads, the redolence from those crowded in and being sick, that terrible dread of what each hour might bring, long nights in that inescapable throbbing ship, the total darkness, then the terror the night we saw another of our convoy torpedoed and burning—until the flames were snuffed by the black sea. We knew the U-boats were now kaput but one doesn't quickly jettison associations.

We'd shipped to England bursting with energy and excitement,

packed on board, as we said, like fish in a can, and keenly alert to perils lurking in the depths. We returned on what seemed a death ship—quiet with its crippled and dying men, crossing a dead sea. The euphoria of frontline advance, of impending victory was absent here.

In my dreams black U-boats still came lurking, among them the drifting bodies of men, and deeper down, the wrecks entombing others.

Sea birds shadowed us, sometimes gliding above the deck, more often trailing behind. They dived at our wake, fishing among the bloodied bandages, perhaps some body parts and general refuse left behind.

In waking hours the intimacy blossoming with Paula silently swept everything else aside. I wanted to touch her close-clipped black hair, to free the buttons of her tunic. I said softly, “I want to kiss the lids of your pale blue eyes.”

And she said, “I’d like to feel the full length of our bodies touching.”

Well, none of that for now. We could stand shoulder touching shoulder at the taffrail but the bumps, nudges and even hugs that had been a part of working at our Signal Corps duty stations were off limits.

We desperately longed to be alone. “This confinement isn’t the universe,” we kept whispering to each other. “We’ll soon be ashore.”

Five days out, the seas began to rise and churn. Soon it was a credible North Atlantic storm with waves crashing over the bow and flushing along the foredecks. Most of our companions were enduring badly. Coming out we’d been advised to keep eating and keep our eyes off the horizon. While we fretted what the wounded guys below would be experiencing we were cheered by the thought the storm might provide us opportunity that afternoon to be alone.

We couldn’t roam far from our aft quarters but we did now set off in search of some corner where we might be undisturbed. Waves pounded, making booming sounds against the hull. Down a passageway off the deck where all the compartments were tight shut we found a sheltered area of darkness. We sat on the deck curled tightly, our lucky day, and for the first time we kissed.

“Anyone opens this hatch, I’ll say you’ve been sick. You fell and I’ve

been trying my best to comfort you.”

“With kisses—yuck,” Paula quipped.

We stayed for hours. When we finally left for chow, free rein to cling to each other scrambling up the tipping deck, Paula called out to the waves, “Hoorah for storms!”

All that immense way the gulls followed, dipping and flopping like tails of children’s kites and the broad wake trailed toward the horizon like a fluttering white scarf.

We processed at the same New Jersey camp where in ‘42 we’d staged for England. There was a bus to the Pennsylvania Station in New York and we were in civvies for the first time in all those years. The newsstands blared photos of dancing crowds at Times Square. It was the day after war ended in Europe. We’d missed the celebration by hours. Why we didn’t stay in that fantasy city a few days, I don’t know. Later we protested to each other, we were right there!

We couldn’t have afforded celebration. Unlike the men, we WACs drew no overseas pay in that war. As for offers on the streets, forget it.

We were issued train tickets home. Seemed it was government intent to have vets go right back where they came from and fit in. But what a strange scene that was, we two in print dresses dragging our duffle bags and marveling at that great cathedral expanse of that station.

Save for the priority service people had it was difficult to get on a train. And with one war winding down, there’d be the flow west toward the other one. We had seats that evening. Jamming the passageways were soldiers and sailors perched on their bags. There was chatter and laughter. When we’d finished the soda and sandwiches we’d been advised to bring aboard, I said, “I’m weary. I hope we can get some sleep.”

Next to us was a young sailor perched on his sea bag. Right away he struck up conversation with Paula who was on the aisle. At first she said very little, but he persisted and after dark in Pennsylvania, somewhere after Harrisburg, I could hear their laughter and conversation about childhood experiences. Good, I thought. The guy’s lonely. I can get some sleep.

Of course, this was before welded track. Unless you were very tired, the thunk-a-thunk of the wheels on those joints in the rails every so many feet and the coal smoke filtering in interrupted sleep. I drifted in and out. I'd flash the terrible encounter I'd experienced across the Rhine that would wrap like a cloak about me in moments of half sleep. Then I'd see Stan's face and imagine his wrecked body. I was haunted by the scenes of destruction, images of the refugees we'd seen walking, the emerging stories of people crowded like cattle into freight wagons, and the thunk of their own wheels over the rails on journeys to slave labor or death.

We two now shedding all, becoming one. I shifted in the seat covering my head with my jacket, thinking, how like falling asleep falling in love is. Waiting for it, wanting it, never seeing it coming.

At a jerk of the car I stirred. Paula wasn't there. I heard again the trundling of wheels on steel, took in the scent of smoke and glided into deeper sleep.

I'd slept soundly. It wasn't until morning on the platform, back in Columbus again, seeing Paula several times stop and glance back to the windows of the train—as if there was something she'd left behind—that I chanced to wonder. No, wonder isn't the right word. Grew perplexed, may be a better way to put it. I didn't know why.

Through the glass station doors I saw High Street for the first time in three years. Flooding back came memories of place. It was here on the same platform Harry had befriended the lost stranger, Beyona, carried her worn suitcase up these stairs and brought her into our lives. I stood distracted by the thought.

Paula tugged at my sleeve, in her eyes a look I'd never seen. She motioned toward the station restaurant. We wedged our bags through the doorway and I followed her to an empty table in the corner. She glanced left and right. "This will do," she said. "I need to tell you what happened last night and it can't wait."

On the ship we'd spoken of going straight to my farm, settle there for a time, maybe busy ourselves by planting a garden, then decide what

to do next. She'd said she didn't want to see her family right away. She needed time to let them know we planned to live together.

She sat opposite me, her back to the room. When a waitress came to us with menus, Paula said, "Leave them and don't come back for a while. We have something to discuss before we order."

As the woman walked away, Paula's face bloomed in a smile, but it faded back into a look of desperation. She reached and squeezed my hands, studying me soberly. "I don't want hurt you. Understand? I love you. I think it's right for us to be together but I'm confused about what happened last night."

"I love you too. Talk to me."

She sat back to gather words. I knew her, you see. We'd worked side by side now for years. It was childlike the way she spoke. "I need you to help me with this."

I pulled with my hand, urging her to go on, but she was in a different place than our days on the ship. What was going on? The intimate way she'd parted with the sailor hurtled into thought. In spite of her declaration of love, something lurked between us. She looked down, slowly nodding her head. "It's totally new to me, you see."

"Make sense, girl. Tell Lena what she needs to hear. She can handle whatever it is."

She glanced over her shoulder. No one sat near.

"Last night when you were asleep." She stopped. "That sailor who sat by me ..." Again she did not go on.

Thoughts tore at me. I felt I could barely breathe. As we entered the station the sailor had lifted our duffle bags from the overhead, slung one on each shoulder and led us to the end of the car. He spun them down on the platform. When I stepped down I shook his hand and thanked him. Paula followed him back up the steps. She'd hugged, kissed him even, before coming out of the train. I'd thought little of it. Now she'd roused fear.

I blurted, "What the hell's going on?"

She clung to my hands. "Lena, I love you." Tears flowed down her cheeks.

Lifting my hands from hers, I caught a big breath and leaned back in my chair. “What’s the mystery?”

Her head was tilted back, her gaze fixed on the wall beyond me.

“This may be our first quarrel,” she said.

“That’s all?”

She smiled and seemed more composed.

She started, “It was midnight maybe. He and I, that sailor, we’d been talking, friendly like, for hours. He had a pint of whiskey and we’d been passing it back and forth. You know me. I can’t handle that stuff. I remember glancing over at you. You were really out. Time came I told him I had to go up and use the latrine, then try to get some sleep. He said, ‘Yeh, I could use a trip to the head too,’ and we started to crawl around and over the guys sleeping on their duffle bags in the aisle so we could get to the end of the car. The bathroom door was standing open. He bowed slightly and gestured for me to go first. But then he stepped right in behind me and shut the door. Funny, I wasn’t alarmed, just surprised. I laughed. His face came very close and his hands pressed in on my shoulders. He came closer and he began kissing me. We were both breathing rather hard from the struggle to get to the end of the car. I didn’t mind what he was doing. Maybe I was too drunk to think clearly. I felt weak, swaying with the motion of the car. I remember thinking it was my own sailor Pete come back from the dead standing in front of me and we were doing the things we always did with each other late at night in his car.”

She stopped and stared at me before saying, “But as I’ve told you, Pete and I never went all the way.”

She was crying now and I grabbed her hand.

Take up with this guy will you? I thought, Lena left dangling the way it was before we met. Out on that broken farm alone, save for the ponderous weight of its memories, and in this godforsaken city.

She said, “Pete and I never did it you know. My mother gave such warnings. We only danced and kissed, then hugged and touched in his car. Touched a lot, just doing things with our hands you know. As I’ve told you we never did it. O, my God!” she sobbed, looked down, stayed silent.

Then I thought, just let her be. She told me all that over and over in Iowa and England and France. How Pete, a stoker, had likely drowned in the battleship's engine room. Seeing this raw place made me sad. When we first met and shared our stories I had no idea she was in such a state over losing her intended. With a person you just meet it's hard to know the difference between personality and trauma. Three years, all those men around, she socialized but never had what we call dates, even in England. There were all those rules. Break the damn rules! Maybe she saw I took little interest. Not until Stan stepped in.

My being near fourteen years older, a firm shoulder for her. She read, meditated on things, dwelt deep inside her shell. Great companion all the same.

Paula started again. "After you fell asleep he and I talked for hours in a very personal way. He started touching my fingers. Pete used to do that. I don't know, he reminded me some of Pete. He was a sailor! Pete and I had done the same things that were happening in that bathroom, playing around a lot in his car, but then going up on my porch only touching hands, hugging, kissing goodnight at my door where the bright light was always left on."

I nodded, eager to hear.

"The lights in the train were dimmed. Seemed like everyone but us was asleep. At one point while he was telling me a story about going someplace he was walking his fingers up my bare arm. I thought nothing of it. He was illustrating his story. When we got into that bathroom and his arms were around me everything still seemed okay. I couldn't think."

She glanced over her shoulder. It was mid-morning, the restaurant nearly empty. The one waitress busied herself behind a counter and stayed put.

Paula pulled a napkin and dried her cheeks. "Maybe it was because he was a sailor."

Her black hair was full, already growing longer. She slowly turned to face me. Her pale blue eyes were wet, her lips quivering. She gave me a slight smile.

“It’s what Mom always worried about. He could have gotten me pregnant.”

Then I got mad. “Shit!” I leaned very close. “Get on with it.”

“He was tall. Somehow he wrapped close around me and was kissing the side and the back of my neck. It sent a shiver all through me and I squeezed his hand. He kept kissing the back of my neck and running his lips up my neck, burying his face in my hair, kissing my ear. I’d never had such a feeling as that before. My body felt swelling up and the feeling seemed to radiate out to my arms and legs. I felt like I was floating through clouds on a balloon. To keep from falling, I was clutching his tunic. Through this thin dress I could feel him all swollen hard against my thighs. When he leaned back a little I saw my lipstick smudges, pinkness all around his lips and he was opening these buttons. His hands plunged in, pushed a little and had my breasts in them. He bent forward and I could feel the warmth of his breath on them, his tongue touching. My face was in his hair, my hands over his ears. I’ve never known anything so sweet and good. His hands came down around me and he had me off my feet swaying way over him with the movement of the train. He put me down on the sink counter and I could feel the wetness soaking up through my dress. He spread my legs, came right ahead, right around my undies, lifting and pushing, and I felt, oh, God. When he slid inside me, I thought the swelling in my body might never stop and I could hardly breathe and I was gasping, holding on to him, arms tight around him, my head hard back against the mirror, seeing once all of the back of him blurry in the opposite glass, his tunic, his bell-bottoms down and his bare butt rolling and rippling as he pushed into me. My eyes were barely open with the joy of it, but I did at one point see in one of the mirrors the door swing open. An older woman’s face showed, and I heard her voice saying softly, ‘I’m sorry. I’ll come back later when the room is free,’ and the door snapped shut, and just then he had his and mine started. O, God! It was like the train jumped the tracks and was rumbling down some hillside. He slowed down but I kept going up, up, until he started moving again, driving way up into me and I was going straight up trying somehow to breathe before going down again, still going even after he was quiet and

softer and heavy, leaning against me, slower now, slowing down. O, I didn't want any of it to ever stop."

I had to look away. I didn't know what to think.

Paula leaned very close to me, squeezing my hand, a very anxious look on her face. "I betrayed you," she said. She squeezed my hand harder. "I do love you, you know, and I know I want to be with you." Her head dropped down near our hands.

What could I say to her? I felt less threatened, somehow pleased at the pleasure she'd found with the guy, that she'd had that experience, and I told her so. She looked at me in a defiant way and then, staring down at the table, she said, "I'm glad I did it." Then she smiled.

"Girl, you've got spirit!" I said. I leaned forward and kissed her hard. "We'll be okay."

This was just hours before the great intimacy between us began.

We were quiet that long drive to the farm. I paid the driver and we were carrying our duffle bags toward the steps, to the very place where Harry died. I feared I'd see the bloodstains but the planks revealed only an irregular patch darker than the rest of the wood, all of it more weathered than I remembered. I bent, drawing my hand along the stain and Paula brought her arm around my shoulder.

The cab backed, had turned and was moving away.

I found the loose board where we'd always hidden the big key. Paula was blocking my way to the door. "That sailor," she said, laughing and gently poking me. "I never got his name."

Anyway, she had the sailor's child, a boy she named Everett, after a mentoring teacher she and Pete liked at high school. All that was history. I was awake, alone in our bed, more now than forty years away from those wonder-filled early days with Paula I'd so fixed upon before drifting off to sleep.

A moment ago I'd been dreaming about a field littered with white stones. Raindrops glistened on large blades of green grass.

I rolled to see the clock. Only two.

An earlier dream surfaced. Paula was explaining why in summer days we now see few fireflies. She was saying, “As children we put too many in Mason jars.”

Her absence was not like when one’s partner is away on a trip. Nor the way it was with Paula in hospital, or even when she went to hospice care. Such aloneness I’ve known only once before, the night Harry died. Totally alone I felt then, even with Beyona and the other girls tightly clinging to me beside the dining room table.

Paula was gone, physically shorn from me and carried yesterday by four strangers to be hidden beneath the earth. Her scent, I knew, had long vanished from her pillow. Her trifling possessions lay scattered about our rooms. How little she cared about things.

Wind drove minute drops against the window above the headboard, a whispering upon the glass as if someone were tossing grains of sand or a drummer stroked with brushes. Soothing it was—but something other than rain had stirred me, and it came again, a sharper rasping, like some animal after food in the alley behind our building—or like the long ago sounds the porcupine made in its nocturnal gnawing at our barn door—until the night I heard Father muttering and swearing in German downstairs in the kitchen, then going out—standing in my nightgown at the bedroom window, seeing him walking with his rifle, his pointed moon-cast shadow poised in the center of the yard. Trusting its armor, I saw the porcupine crouch waiting. The snap of my father’s rifle echoed inside me these many years.

The rasping came again. I peered into darkness, realizing someone was prying at the downstairs alley door.

Rolling on my side, I lifted the receiver and tapped lighted numbers. Just above a whisper I described to the dispatcher the sounds I heard. I gave her my High Street address, adding, “It’s the bar called Harry’s Haven.” I settled, drew the blanket over my shoulder and listened. In my right ear muffled by the pillow, I could hear the quick-march of my coursing blood.

The prying came louder, insistent and careless.

I remembered then Paula long ago bringing a pistol to our flat.

An uncle presented the gift, saying to her he worried about her, her not being married and all that foolishness with another woman. "Protect yourself," she said he told her, "There's people don't appreciate such stuff and do things about it."

Paula was home next morning brandishing this thing. She was just out of the shower, her slim figure glistening wet, a white towel draped like a monk's cowl over her dripping black hair, the way she liked to tease and entice me, coming near me wet. And what was it she said with his gift held flat in her hand? "I'll slide it under my panties, just in case."

"In case of what?" I'd demanded.

I left the bed, slipped into my robe and went for it. I hadn't seen the pistol since that day she showed it. Sure enough, it felt cold and heavy in my hand. I hadn't held a gun since that foggy morning in the jeep when we secretly rode through forests across the Rhine and Stan thrust the carbine into my hands saying, "I hope you don't need to use this," and I snapped back, "Our basic didn't include weapons but I can handle it if I need to. I did target practice with my father's twenty-two."

I was half way down the stairs, thinking I'd just scoot to the alley door and call out in a loud voice, "You there! I've got a gun here and I know how to use it! Go away right now."

But when I reached the bottom of the stairs, slipped around the half open door, and put out my left hand to find the edge of the piano, I heard the crackling yield of the lock and quick footfalls in the entry.

I peered into the darkness hearing only the dull throb of the compressor in the cellar. With the exhaust fan off, there was heavy scent in the room of beer and tobacco smoke.

I thought, he couldn't know I'm here behind the upright.

Sudden light made me jerk back. The door of the refrigerator in the little kitchen stood open and a slim, bearded man in a glistening wet coat stood staring at the shelves. He reached and brought out the wedge of my roast beef. As he took a savage bite the foil wrapper floated to the floor.

I'd been tempted and made tasty sandwiches for Walter and for me but the rest was set aside for Morgan's lunch. He'd be here in a few hours, in no time, after thirty years away. But for the letters and photos I'd hardly even know him. He'll not slip out of my life again!

The man continued taking large bites, then wedged the roast fragment into the pocket of his coat. He closed the refrigerator door, folding space again in darkness. I took a shallow breath and waited.

Hungry he was. Perhaps that's all he's after.

I sensed his slow movement into the center of the room, so that when I caught sight of his figure in the veiled light from the street I had guessed just where he might be. Walter left only coins in the cash drawer.

With my free hand I found the wall plate and flipped the three switches at once. The intruder froze, hands up to block the light, head spinning left and right.

By the time he fixed upon me, I'd shielded my own eyes from the glare and leveled the pistol at him. "Don't you move," I said calmly. "You can see I have a gun. What do you want in here?"

He kept hands half raised, features twitching. The hands curled palm up in a pleading way. His lips trembled until he stuttered, "I, I, I was hungry, really hungry."

I'd seen him before, an evening or maybe three it was. He got a glass of beer at the bar, then wandered the room and studying each of my photographs on the walls.

"I want you to leave. Stop doing things like you did to my door. If you're hungry come around to the front door and I'll get you something."

He stared at me. "I, I, I'll come fix your door," he said.

"Get going before the cops arrive."

He hesitated.

"Go!"

He took a tentative step, as if I still might shoot at him. Then he bolted out.

Sleep was impossible. Wrapped in the warmth of blankets, I replayed the scene, the kid's departure, the compressor humming, the tap at the

front window, the slim cop in his big white cap, one hand on his holster as he was let inside. He darted glances left and right. In the wintry draft from the open door I realized I hadn't put on my slippers. His questions and the explanations, his suggestion I might have made the burglar lie face down on the floor, his remonstrance at my gestures were wearying. Then he'd said, "Lady, you need to put that gun down," and I put it in the pocket of my robe.

I saw right off this fellow was decent, but from our stuff years ago I had every reason to resent cops—there'd been the patronage and favors, then Harry's death and their betrayal of us.

Sent everyone packing, it had.

Later—the way memory pulls us back to replay scenes and tasks us with actions we might have taken, things we should have said—my mind jumped back through details of the terrible night Harry was killed and the local police we intimately knew came around to give us such a bad time.

To mind came the young man with my roast beef in his pocket, my description to the cop, the beef from which I'd planned to make our lunch, and walking with the cop to inspect the back door.

In the warmth of my bed I could still feel the chill of standing there with the cop, as if I were walking barefoot through powdery snow. He used his flashlight to examine marks on the jamb, said they were made by a screwdriver, jiggled the door and handle, and said, "This'll stay shut if we prop a chair against it. You can get a locksmith to fix it in the morning."

I thought good luck on a Sunday when the locksmith I knew would either be hung over, off to church or having a leisurely morning go with his girlfriend. Tomorrow is now today, another dreaded seventh of December. Again it's a Sunday. Day of Infamy he called it in his speech. Same fateful moments these blows fell on Paula and on me.

"A screwdriver can be a weapon," the cop lectured.

"The boy was very hungry," I told him again.

Then when he made his remark, "Well, ma'am, with someone your age ..." I shut him up, snapping, "What age is that?"

Maybe the way my chin stuck out at him prompted him to leave. He stuck his little flashlight in his pocket and made for the front door. We did have a gracious exchange of goodnights. How am I to manage this happy day with Morgan on scant sleep? My God, the funeral only hours ago with practically no repass after, place where I might have unwound a little. Instead, just those few women friends sitting around the big table slowly sipping whiskey, some of them soda pops from their glasses. Morgan finally returning and this fool kid fractures my sleep. I switched on that lamp and grabbed a news magazine from the night table, a National Enquirer some woman leaves on my table. That's good medicine for insomnia.

I was unaware when my fingers relaxed their grip and the pages slid away to slap shut on the carpet beside the bed. They lay in the pool of lamplight until grey light from the window slowly gained.

When I was again aware of rain raking the window, it was past the time I usually stir. The blankets held me snugly, making me linger.

Eyes closed, I clutched the scene of another dream then reached for the paisley-covered volume in which I tried each morning to record them, to catch them before rising and finding they've danced away.

I wrote, "I am in the parlor at the old house, playing euchre with the girls. Not one man has come across the porch to interrupt our game and be entertained upstairs. Harry isn't playing cards with us, nor is he noodling at the piano. Except for our big round table and lamp the room seems to be at some other place."

In parenthesis I note, "This is memory intruding because in the dream the piano isn't even there."

I wrote, "Except for our big round table and lamp, the room floats in space. Beyona is my partner, she who never sat down to play cards with us. I make the trump and put down cards but cannot take tricks. I have the knaves and aces, but for some reason these cards aren't good enough. Who are the other two girls? Not my girls. They win all the tricks. And there are faces on all the cards—not just the kings, queens and knaves but

faces of people I've known.”

I leaned into the pillows and had a laugh. That was good, the part about taking tricks. But best is that after all these many years I should dream about Beyona.

Why not? After Birdy she might have been my first lover on the calico side. Strange the way Harry's passing opened a door. Bathing her and comforting her in her pain days earlier is when my feelings got started. Beyona, God only knows where you've gotten to by now.

On my feet again, I tuned the university station. In came the very opening notes of “Harold in Italy.” Barging into my bedroom came the orchestral rumble, like someone sliding heavy furniture about in the next room.

Then the sweet melody was announced.

The open ties of my lavender robe dragged over rugs and linoleum. I started coffee, then water for my shower. This railroad flat I'd shared with Paula since the summer the war ended—days, weeks, now forty-one years. Where did the time go?

It wasn't that Paula kept better order. It was the cancer, our lives lurching around that sharp bend in the road that caused all this stuff to be left strewn about.

With the melancholy sweep of the Berlioz, tears slid down my cheeks. I drew one hand across my face and stared at the furniture in the dark, shade-drawn front room, remembering young Everett folding the bed away into a couch each morning, first grunting at his little boy effort, later doing it with one hand, always putting the little cushions back just right, the way Paula had shown him we would like having them for the day while he was away at school.

Morgan must be awake in his hotel room. Soon he'll be making his way uptown.

I glided away from the stove and counter past the spindly TV cart and dining table with its deep scattering of papers and headed for the shower.

Wet warmth enveloped and refreshed. It felt not so much that I was bathing as flushing away emotions, cleansing life itself. The radio vol-

ume was spooled high. Wrapped in the big towel, rubbing dry, too late I remembered my intended call. By now Everett and his wife are at Port Columbus prepped to board their jet for California. Tomorrow then.

This morning I'll have my time at the keyboard before Morgan knocks. Bach. Bach will put me in the mood for so promising a day. There was Paula's last moment of lucidity, her pleading to be remembered. "I'll be your consort, present in the pleasures and treasures we've shared."

I kept the volume up for the melodic passage, the theme with variations, feeling that movement inwardly like some surging offshore wave that rises and holds, rises and holds, but does not break. Comes the viola, Harold wandering in the Abruzzi, where Paula and I spoke of vacationing. We'd fly to Rome, take trains north and east until our eyes fell on a village where we'd live, taking in food, wine, vistas and the people. We'd encounter pifferari performing their instruments, learn Italian we promised and never return to dreary Columbus. "Why not next year?" one of us would say, but next year never came. Years too now gone. Why do we fail to pursue our dreams?

Near the bureau, my eyes fell on the rank of photos and the print of the Arizona Paula long ago taped to the glass. Crouched like a fierce bulldog on the harbor water, gun barrels like thrusting swords, the grey battleship decayed year by year into the grey of surrounding water. Tape holding the snapshot to the mirror she'd replaced several times over the years had gone again opaque brown and brittle to my touch.

December 7, forty-five years on, it is once again a Sunday morning. Yearly we two commemorated our special day with candles. I went to find and light one. The first I found had scent of sandalwood. Roosevelt was a master of words for that moment in history. My hero, yes, when he spoke of a day of infamy it chanced so personally true for us. Lights were going off just then for nearly everyone.

In Pete's last mail that photo came, a month before the torpedoes scuttled his ship. Down below he might well have been. No dive into burning oil for him with hopes to swim away. Brother Harry's last day too, a navy stoker and a bawdyhouse piano player, two who'd never met

but were compatriots of sorts. Last year again, Paula briefly here, our fading images laid out, the reminiscences, the grieving. Synchronicity formed this bond between us as hard as cement.

Where did we put them last time? Here in the one drawer we shared. There's Harry in his unironed shirt. Here's Pete Walker on deck, another on shore in his whites, and here the one with Paula together for the last time at Goodale Park. His last leave was the summer before war began. In spite of what Paula long ago revealed to him, Everett would want to have the photographs. Some I must copy and hold forever in my hands.

I thought, what did it matter who his father was? But she might have let the story rest. It surprised me—bam!—the way she came right out and told him one afternoon when he was about ten, “Your father wasn't the man standing on the ship. Your father was another sailor I met on a train.”

She was always like that, and what I loved about her, that taking the unpredictable path. The way she said she had irreverent fun confessing to her haughty priest behind the screen, more than once she also reminded Everett, “I never knew his name.”

Everett hadn't acted surprised. He seemed to have it down, the way children take in the vibrations around any family secret. He shrugged and walked away. Our little boy he was, like the one I'd always wanted to keep beside me.

“Cathartic,” Paula said our ritual was, this sitting watch in front of the candles and pictures, retelling our stories each December 7, for her part, drawing out the details of the life she and Pete planned, going on like an actress reciting lines. I was deep into our ritual but how was I to project the future Harry might have had. I got stuck on that one because my brother was never one to plan. If I step out in a cold-clouded moonless night like the one on which he died, there is ever that wall of memory.

Everett would want the photographs, if only because they meant so much to his mother. My fingers swept down the face of a drawer and looped through one of the Hepplewhite handles. Here was the recent one of Paula, a print made from a negative I found. How very youthful and

beautiful she stayed. Dark hair framed her sweet rounded face.

My finger gripped the drawer handle tightly. The light in Paula's pale blue eyes drew me and I felt as if I were falling into the image. I felt myself swaying.

Clutching that thin handle steadied me. I closed my eyes and drew away. Then came the blinding flood of tears.

Settled in the wing chair, eyes closed, my thoughts drifted to Saturday, standing in wet grass, thinking the undertaker people had done their best for the viewing, erasing vestiges of pain and pumping color back into Paula's cheeks. Despite her sixty-four years, Paula's hair was still black with only those few wisps of grey. She'd had trouble enough for more.

Men in black suits slid the casket from the hearse. How could I have watched with such calm detachment? Why? Numbed by the months-long medical passage to this day? I counseled others it might be this way for them. Grief diminished with the waiting. I was taking my own medicine.

How, I reflected, do these anonymous hired men put on such solemn faces? What did they think about as they lugged our treasures across the mist-wet grasses of Greenlawn and put them down beneath the tent over that opening in the earth? Was it about the Browns-Buffalo football game they'll watch tomorrow afternoon, or what they will be doing with their wives or girlfriends after dark?

Now forty, Everett stood near me. He and his wife had arrived only hours earlier from California. He clutched the woman's hands tightly. Much the way I'd watched raindrops rolling down windows of the mortician's black car, I saw tears streaming down their cheeks.

Beyond this pair stood stone-faced cousins and men and women from the office where Paula had worked. There should have been far more of them, I thought, but as she hadn't been to work in four years their memories were likely fading. How quickly an image not carefully hung can slide out of a frame. Huh! What did it matter?

Leaning deeper into my chair, I felt a pang of guilt. How came I to be so soon moving toward moments of acceptance? Should I not feel more and not let go?

But didn't I give advice and counsel for those who came to sit at my table in the bar ladling out their guilt?

"When a loved one is five, ten years in a nursing home, dying day by day, why there is little left for you to grieve." I would tell them. "They've been drawing away from you month-by-month, and year-by-year. When death finally arrives, little of the person is there for you at all."

Of course that was mostly when the object of love has long since drifted from reality and doesn't know the visitor, becoming dead for the visitor. In Paula's case, her mind was less affected, at least until heavy meds were required.

My four-year grieving too had been day-by-day, week-by-week, after the metastasis, the months of watching Paula's skin grow pale, the shell of her shrinking while the cancer moved silently about from organ to bone to brain, like a cat devouring something under a blanket, so that now I felt often only a dryness like the desolation of a room from which all the furnishings have been removed and there are only scattered fragments of paper and the boles of dust.

Even so, her priest's recital was too mechanical and swift to suit me. Paula was not one of his most faithful. But after all.

The men lowered the glistening coffin. Dirt was clutched and thrown to thud down upon the box. As I wiped my muddied hands on the grass I saw the young people come forward. They glanced at each other, unsure whether they should imitate what we had done. I found a tissue in my bag.

Standing on the wet grass, time compressed. Too soon, it seemed, we were in the black cars moving away. The undertaker's big car carried us smoothly, as on a cushion of air. No one spoke. We passed the white and grey markers, the black iron fence. The car eased out onto Harrisburg Pike.

The Pike, we called it back then. and I was thinking all that ride back about passing along this way between the city and Pleasant Corners in the spring wagon one special day when I was five. Harry and I were taken to see the great flood and there, later that day, we saw the bloated body of the woman in a muddied flowered dress floating face down just at the edge of the Scioto River.

I sighed, mugging my image in the long panel of glass. In one rash moment, I thought, you damned bedroom looking glass, if you don't shape up I'll carry you out back to the trash. I didn't want to see any more of my changes.

I carefully chose the suede skirt and a white blouse. Back to the bureau I went for cream to smooth those two deep wrinkles across my cheeks. In the crowd of taped images, there was mine, the young teen dancing girl. When had I lost that lithe figure? And who of the many guys snapped this of me? I was under so many in those years. All in white and slim as a rail, poised as mother showed me, up on one toe. Vanity. Still it's hard to dismiss and yield. Next over was the splendid one I made and framed of Paula.

I turned away.

How agreeable, I thought, this gloomy morning light was making our bedroom a splendid watercolor. The rumpled unmade bed was at the center of the frame. I'll record this that so speaks to the moment of this important day with Morgan. But no, I saw, with the rain it was too dark.

I picked up the Leica to carry it down and possibly record Morgan's reactions. I considered the camera's pig-like snout—as obscene as the giver, that misbegotten Cuyler, man of panache and glitter, always a waterfall of words, the son-of-bitch. I muttered under breath, “I hope by now worms have devoured him in a grave. Good riddance!”

Should I even keep so stained a gift, I wondered? How it has traveled with me! What horrors have traversed its glass.

I tugged at my sheets and blankets, first on one side, then the other,

then straightened the quilt covering. I puffed and patted the pillows. Six months, or is it more already since she last slept here? How, together, we made this bed most mornings, one on either side, each tugging gently against the other, our game played with an exchange of smiles.

Eyes closed, I stood a while beside the bed.

Bach summoned me down the stairs.