

# **MAXIE AND BLOSSOM**

**By**

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## ***MAXIE***

The dance took place in the Iridium Room at the St. Regis Hotel and 55<sup>th</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue on the evening of May 18, 1943 and most of its constituents for the evening were a decidedly less lofty lot than were usually catered to in that venue. The event was sponsored by the local U.S.O. chapter and hosted by its most experienced senior hostess, Marion Beasley, one of the usual denizens of the place and wife of a well-known Manhattan banker who thought the world of her for doing her part of support *our boys*. And while there was no shortage of attractively dressed, groomed and fit-looking young people to divert one's attention, had there been a most-ogled competition, one couple in particular would have been the clear winner.

She was a dark-haired beauty with big green eyes and every other facet of body and face that a man could desire. Her name was Penny and she was the 19-yr-old daughter of Marion and Preston Beasley, both of whom were from wealthy and prominent New York families. Penny had

agreed to attend the dance after being encouraged to demonstrate her patriotism not only by her parents but also by the faculty of the Chapin School, where she was a soon-to-graduate senior.

The young man was a 25-year-old, freshly minted lieutenant in the U.S. Army, tall, trim and elegant in his dress uniform, which looked as if it had been tailored especially for him, which it had been. His rich complexion, prominent yet noble nose, dark hair and eyes suggested he might be of Latin descent, which was also the case. This was not lost on Marion Beasley, who watched the couple with far less enthusiasm than most of the others whose eyes followed them on the dance floor. Penny's eyes never wavered from his, eluding her mother's stern face as he swept her across the floor.

"Too close," Marion said under her breath when the narrow space between her daughter's tennis-toned body and that of her dance partner closed.

Forcing herself back into senior hostess mode, Marion marched toward a small group of soldiers and who had clustered around two attractive blondes, cousins who attended the same school as did Penny. One of the smiling young lieutenants was a Harvard grad who had worked briefly at Preston's bank before joining the service. She smiled, apologized for interrupting and asked the man for a private word. Reluctantly, he followed her to a quieter spot.

"I'd like you to do me a favor, Roger."

"Name it, Mrs. B," Roger Tanner said with a forced smile.

"You remember my daughter, don't you?"

"Penny, yes of course I do. Is she here? I haven't noticed her."

"She is and I'd be grateful if you would insinuate yourself, graciously of course, into the bubble that appears to have formed around her and the young man she's dancing with. And ask if you could perhaps break in and take her for a spin."

“I’d be happy to, Mrs. B. Just point me in the right direction.”

Marion Beasley gazed around the dance floor and after a moment pointed the couple out.

“Ah, I see.”

“You know him?”

Roger nodded.

“We’re both stationed at Camp Kilmer, in New Jersey, although he’s in a different part of the NYPOE, sorry, New York Port of Entry command, from me.”

“Which is?”

“Materiel command. You know, the people who procure the stuff the real soldiers use to actually fight the war and ship it out to their outfits, in Europe or wherever.”

Marion Beasley made a sour face.

“Sounds important,” she said.

“It’s important, alright, but he thinks it’s the center of the universe. Then again, he also thinks *he’s* the center of the universe.”

“I see. Well, without belaboring the issue, why don’ you see if you can manage to get between him and Penny. Graciously, of course.”

“Of course.”

Roger worked his way slowly through the throng of swaying couples, timing his moves so as to approach his targets just as the Glenn Miller cover band reached the last strains of *Moonlight Serenade*.

“They’re not bad,” he said. “Not Captain Miller and the boys, but not bad.”

“I’m sure you didn’t come out here to give us a review of the music, Lieutenant Tanner.”

“No, Lieutenant Perez, you’re right, I did not. I noticed Miss Beasley and hoped I might be able to have a turn around the floor with her myself. Hi, Penny.”

“Uh, hi, Roger. I wasn’t sure you’d remember me, if we ever ran into each other again.”

“Old friends?” Perez asked, a look of mild annoyance on his face.

“More like old acquaintances, but definitely not forgot,” Roger replied. “Now, about that turn around the dance floor?”

“If it’s okay with...Miss Beasley...I suppose it’s fine with me. I’ll just be over there getting us a couple of lemonades.”

“My mother sent you over here, didn’t she?” Penny asked, once Perez was out of earshot.

“She thought you needed reminding that your job is to dance with as many of the boys as possible, not just one of them.”

“So, if it had been a different...sort...of boy, you, say, she still would have recruited someone to split us up?”

Roger shrugged.

“Who knows?” he replied. “In any event, it was an assignment I accepted quite eagerly.”

“Really? I don’t remember you being quite so eager last summer, at that party at the country club.”

The band began playing *Stardust* and Roger took her gingerly into his arms, leaving a visible gap between their bodies.

“You were in high school and I was working at your father’s bank. It wasn’t quite what the doctor ordered.”

“My mother seemed fine with it.”

“Maybe, but you seem to be forgetting the scowl on your father’s face. Perez being about my age and his skin being a trifle darker, not to mention that Desi Arnaz accent—”

“His family is from Texas, not Cuba, and his accent is lovely.”

“Texas by way of Mexico, and rather recently, I’d say.”

“He was born there, El Paso, so not all that recently.”

“You’ve managed to learn more about him in a few turns of the dancefloor than I have in three months.”

Penny smiled.

“You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, as my mother is fond of telling me.”

“I had a feeling she meant WASPs, actually.”

Penny stopped dancing, put her hands on her hips and stuck her tongue out at him.

“You know what?” she said, “I think I’ll go have that lemonade now.”

“Nice seeing you again, too,” Roger called after her as she disappeared into a sea of gliding couples.

The whirlwind romance that would ensue began as a solo act with Penny laying in her bed the night of the dance softly repeating *Maximillian Gilberto Valentine Perez, Maximillian Gilberto Valentine Perez, Maximillian Gilberto Valentine Perez....*

It became a duet on the evening of Penny’s high school graduation. The fact that Maxie could not leave the base for the weekday afternoon event saved her parents the angst of turning down her anticipated request that he be invited. But she had accepted Maxie’s invitation to dinner at Toffenetti’s in Times Square that night in lieu of dining with her parents and older brother at Le Pavillon, which was located at Fifth Avenue and 55<sup>th</sup> Street, across from the St. Regis, where

Penny and Maxie had first met. Penny found it ironic, although the irony had seemed to have been lost on her livid mother and father. Following the event, they had gone straight to the drawing room of their brownstone and sat sipping Scotch and talking.

“I don’t exactly relish the thought of little Perezes crawling around the living room floor,” Marion Beasley said as they settled into deeply upholstered club chairs before a now dormant fire.

“You might be getting just a smidge ahead of things, dear.”

“From the first time I saw how she looks at him my hackles came up, and they haven’t gone down since.”

Preston Beasley smiled and took a sip of his drink.

“Which was barely a month ago,” he said. “And it’s not as if he’s about to be shipped off to a war zone. If he’s good at his job, and Roger Tanner says he is, he’s very likely to spend the entire war right here.”

“And your point?”

“My point is that he won’t have the excuse of rushing her into...anything.”

“Like, you must sleep with me tonight, my darling, for tomorrow I’m being sent to a foreign land where I might die?” Marion vamped.

“Something like that, dearest. But it means she’ll also have enough time to come to her senses.”

“Since when has time ever had that effect on her? And she’s off to Radcliffe in September, so the clock is ticking anyway even if he’s not shipping out. Oh, God. You don’t suppose she might be thinking of skipping college and marrying him, do you?”

Preston mulled it over for a moment and finished his Scotch. After refilling his glass, he carried the crystal decanter to where Marion sat and topped-up her glass.

“I’m thinking of offering him money to end the relationship,” he said when he sat down. “I don’t think it would take a great deal. I’ve had someone looking into him—”

“How very raffish,” Marion said. “Do tell.”

“Let’s just say that his Army pay is more than he or any of his people back in El Paso have ever earned before. And you might have noticed that he likes fine things, something he can indulge as long as he’s single and doesn’t pay room and board.”

“Do you suppose Penny’s told him about that damn trust fund your father set up for her and her brother, do you?”

“Short of asking her, there’s no way to know, but it would certainly complicate things if she has.”

Marion was about to say something but the sliding doors opened and Penny stood in the open doorway, her face impassive. She had changed from the obligatory Chapin School white graduation dress into a form-fitting black dress with a full pleated skirt that highlighted, without displaying, her ample bust-line and displayed more than enough of her shapely calves.

“Dear God,” Marion said.

“Perfect,” Penny said, “he’ll love it.”

Before either parent could respond she had turned and was marching toward the front door, a black Whiting and Davis mesh clutch tucked under her arm.

It was a short taxi ride to the landmark corner restaurant at 43<sup>rd</sup> and Broadway. Maxie was already there, seated along the banquet, and he stood, smiling broadly, as she approached, and took her hands.

“You look...*encantadora*.”

They exchanged cheek kisses and Penny blushed as he held her chair back for her.

“Which is Spanish for something that sounds wonderful!” she said once seated.  
“*Enchanting*, perhaps?”

“That would also be true, but it’s not the word I’m searching for. Ah, hold on. It’s *ravishing!* You’re simply ravishing!”

“Yes, she is rather, if you don’t mind me saying so, sir,” the smiling waiter who came to their table said in a charming brogue. “Might I get you folks a cocktail while you gaze at the menu?”

An hour later, when Maxie had finished his club steak and French fries and the remainder of Penny’s Hot Roast Sugar Cured Ham with sweet potatoes and coleslaw, he cleared his throat and broke the news.

“They’re shipping me out.”

Panny’s stare lasted a full half minute.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Unfortunately, I am.”

“When? Where? And for God’s sake, why?”

“I have to be packed by tomorrow afternoon—”

“Oh my God!”

“They won’t tell me where. As for why,” he said, letting out a breath, “I’ve learned that there’s no point in asking that question.”

“And it’s final?”

“As death and taxes.”

“Don’t say death!”

“Sorry. I doubt they’ll put me in the line of fire, wherever they send me. I’m too good at getting them the stuff they need. And don’t tell me you’ll wait for me, as much as I would like that. You’re 19, you need to go to Radcliffe in September and live your life.”

Penny began to cry and he moved his chair around so that he could put an arm around her shoulder.

“Let’s be thankful for the time we’ve had, *mi amor*.”

She turned her head and whispered in his ear.

“I want us to make love tonight. I think my brother and his wife are in Long Island for the week. I have a key to—”

Maxie put a finger to her lips.

“I have a room tonight at the Astor, just down the block. They have special rates for servicemen.”

“Let’s get the check.”

When the taxi dropped her off at the brownstone at 3:00AM, Penny’s head was awash with conflicting emotions and she could barely contain a desire to scream. No lights were visible from the street and as she climbed the steps and unlocked the front door, she prayed that her parents were asleep. Like most such houses, an outer, glass-paneled door led into a spacious vestibule, which was furnished as a porch might have been, but with sofas, club chairs and antique side tables with Tiffany lamps in lieu of Adirondack chairs, wrought iron gliders and picnic tables. She slipped off her shoes, switched on a small lamp and fumbled for the separate key that unlocked the interior door. Careful to keep the other keys on the ring from jangling, she slowly pushed the heavy door open, muttering *shit* as it pressed against the heavy security chain that her father had installed the previous summer in the wake of a series of neighborhood break-ins.

*“I hate you, I hate you, I hate you,”* she hissed, unsure of exactly who the muffled diatribe was aimed.

Just after dawn, Marion Beasley unchained the inner door and quietly sat down on the edge of the sofa where her daughter lay, on her side, in a fetal position, fully clothed.

“Let me guess,” Marion said softly, stroking Penny’s hair, “he took advantage of you and then told you it was over and to go home.”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“Then what was it like?”

Penny rolled onto her back and stared up at her mother with tears in her eyes.

“After dinner, he told me they’re shipping him out, today, this afternoon, and that he doesn’t know where he’s being sent. He had a hotel room and—”

“Spare me the details.”

Penny wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Afterwards, I told him I wanted to marry him and that we needed to find someone who could do it right away. He laughed and lectured me about my bright future.”

“Good for him,” Marion said, dryly.

“We had a fight and I left,” Penny said and broke into tears.

Marion took her daughter in her arms.

“He was right, about your bright future, without him. And I have a feeling he’ll do just fine without you. Now, come inside and let’s hope your father doesn’t hear us.”

Two weeks later, Marion Beasley was once again senior hostess at a USO dance held in the Iridium Room at the St. Regis Hotel. Once the young men began flowing into the room, Marion stationed herself not far from the entrance and collared Roger Tanner the moment he appeared.

“Hi again, Mrs. B, what can I do for you tonight?”

Marion ignored what she found to be his impertinence.

“Just answer once simple question, please.”

“Name it.”

“Where did Lieutenant Perez get shipped out to?”

Roger smiled.

“I’m not sure I would call it getting shipped out, Mrs. B. The Army, in its infinite wisdom, sent him off to Washington, DC, to run some kind of new materiel program. And a promotion to captain was part of the deal, the lucky duck.”

“Do you know when they told him he was being shipped...transferred?”

“Couple of weeks before. He’d been angling for a move to Washington, although for the life of me I don’t know why.”

Marion stared off into the distance for a moment before thanking Roger for the information.

“Uh, is Penny here tonight, Mrs. B?”

“Sorry, no, Roger. She’s spending the rest of the summer in Cape Cod, relaxing before the school year starts at Radcliffe.”

## ***BLOSSOM***

Scranton, Pennsylvania was not New York City but even in the in the early years of the twentieth century was a thriving center of coal mining and textile production. Still, most of the educated or ambitious young men of Scranton, those not destined to become coal miners, had made

their way to Philadelphia or even New York to seek their fortunes. Jerome Oberholzer was among them, and had gone off to Philadelphia in 1910 to attend law school after graduating from the University of Scranton with a degree in business.

But unlike the rest, Oberholzer believed he could make his fortune back in Scranton providing legal services to the mining companies and railroads, as well as the textile companies and other growing businesses. Despite its more obvious draws and the relative ease of building a career in Philadelphia, he resisted the pull of the big city to return home, freshly minted law degree in hand, in 1913.

The timing could not have been better. Underground boring by the mining companies beneath the city streets had weakened the ground to such an extent that homes, schools and businesses, and some entire neighborhoods, were being damaged. Laws were passed by the state to address the problem but it was not easy dealing with the coal companies and the Scranton Surface Protection Association, chartered by the Court of Common Pleas, was formed to protect the citizens of Scranton from injury, loss and damage caused by mining and mine caves. Oberholzer was among their counselors. Injunctions were brought and soon thereafter a major court case was brought challenging the mining companies, which were defeated. Oberholzer's career took off from there as the railroads and street car lines expanded and a local button-maker became one of the primary makers of phonograph records.

Within three years he had married and he and his bride moved into a brick mansion just outside the center of the expanding city. Oberholzer was Jewish, albeit of the non-practicing variety, and merely a first-generation American, but he was an important figure in the community who had accomplished a number of good things on behalf of his neighbors. His new wife, the former Myrtle May Brook, was a member of the Episcopal church whose family roots reached

back beyond the founding of Scranton, as settlers from Connecticut who came to the area in the late 1700s and early 1800s when Connecticut claimed the area as part of their colonial charter. Without hesitation, the couple was admitted into Scranton society, itself something of a hodge-podge that included descendants from Russia to the east and Ireland to the west and most places in between, as well as long-established American families, such as the Brooks.

The Oberholzer's first child, a boy, Richard, was born in late 1919, followed in Spring 1921 by a baby girl, who the couple named Blossom in a nod to their home's award-winning gardens. Despite the closeness in their ages, as they grew Richard paid as little attention to Blossom as Myrtle May paid to both of them, most of her time being spent tending her gardens or painting in the small studio that her husband had had built next to the garage. For his part, Jerome Oberholzer, like most men of his stature at the time, spared no expense on his children but gave them little of his time or attention, which Richard resented but which only made Blossom adore her father more. But there was a cook to make them what they wanted and prepare a special Sunday supper each week and a nanny to tend to the things that Myrtle May did not.

The Great Depression barely touched the Oberholzers or most of the people of Scranton. By the mid-1930s, its population had swelled beyond 140,000, mainly due to growth in the mining and textile industries. But pampered as she was, Blossom constantly sought ways to get away, if only briefly. There were sleepovers, Girl Scout camping trips and school excursions and Blossom took advantage of them all, her absence barely noted by her mother and father. Jerome's parents had died before she was born but Myrtle May's were still alive and Blossom relished the occasional weekend and several weeks each summer at the house they had built near Lake Wallenpaupack.

When she graduated from high school in June 1940, the war in Europe put a halt to replicating the summer of traveling around England and the Continent that had been her older brother's graduation gift. Her grandparents were gone by then and her parents had sold their lake house, so spending the summer there was not an option. But so strong was her desire to get away that Blossom, who had been admitted to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia for the fall semester, convinced the school to allow her to attend the summer semester. Her parents did not object.

She did well academically but her Jewish-sounding surname made her something of an *persona non grata* to many of the girls in her dorm and in the sorority she wanted to pledge. Attending Sunday morning services at a local Episcopal Church and wearing the gold gross necklace that her grandmother had given her for her confirmation did not seem to help. But she made a handful of friends and the boys did not seem to be worried about her religious affiliation. Still, despite the discomfort of being at Penn, she returned home to Scranton only for the Christmas and Easter holiday breaks.

Her brother was in law school in at NYU in Manhattan, his resentment having led him to a narrow-minded focus on becoming a better, even more successful lawyer than the old man. They were a mere 90-minute train ride apart, but Richard never came to Philly, nor did Blossom make the trip into New York. For the summer between his second and third years at NYU, the elder Oberholzer had offered to pull strings to get Richard a summer associate job at one of the old-line, white shoe law firms in Manhattan and his animosity for his father did not prevent Richard from accepting the offer. If he did well, it was likely to lead to a full-time associate position when he graduated the following June. Apparently feeling magnanimous or, she preferred to think riddled

with guilt, her father also pulled some strings to get Blossom an office assistant job in a prestigious Philadelphia law firm.

She lived in a women-only hotel not far from the office, enjoyed the work and was surrounded by what she thought was a better group of people, both at the firm and among the residents of the hotel, than she was at Penn. It was the best summer she had spent since the final one at Lake Wallenpaupack and it passed all too quickly. She had talked her parents into allowing her to rent a small apartment not far from U of P's downtown campus and the fall 1941 semester turned out to be much more agreeable than had her freshman year.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor occurred shortly before Christmas break and brought with it a cloud of uncertainty. Richard remained in New York but Blossom came home to Scranton where the three Oberholzers spent the two weeks in virtual solitude, only occasionally sharing a meal and hardly speaking. She was more of relieved than usual when she boarded the train to return to Philadelphia after the break.

Her Fall semester grades had once again been quite good and she was looking forward to the Spring, when more of her courses would relate directly to her major of international relations. But uncertainty turned to near-calamity when her father died suddenly a week after classes began.

The irony was that World War II created a great demand for energy, which led to the highest mining production in the area since World War I, as well as a greatly increased demand for textiles. But the Oberholzers would not be along for the ride.

### ***MAXIE AND BLOSSOM--1***

Despite from being what his wife termed a full-bodied man and a two-or-more-packs-a-day smoker, Jerome Oberholzer appeared to be a robust man. It was likely that and an ego that matched his body type that deterred him from acquiring more than a minimal amount of life insurance. And while mother and daughter argued about it, ultimately Blossom convinced her mother that there was little reason for her to remain at Penn. Once that was settled, Myrtle May fought the university's provost and head of finance until they agreed to return the tuition already paid for the Spring semester.

Acrimony became the norm between the two women and when her mother decided to put their house up for sale, Blossom began to make plans for an exit, this time a permanent one. She needed a fresh start in a new place, somewhere no one knew her. She had made connections while working at the law firm in Philadelphia the previous summer and one of the partners, who had been impressed with her understanding of finance and with whom she had had a brief fling, arranged an interview for her with a former partner who had founded a law firm in Washington, DC specializing in government contracting. Blossom and her mother argued about it right up to the minute she got into a taxi for the short drive to the Scranton train station.

Tall, attractive and sophisticated, with red hair and pale skin, Blossom made a good first impression, which she followed up by once again revealing a surprising understanding of financial matters. She was hired on the spot and assigned to the fledgling firm's government relations department, where she became the assistant to the department's single employee, an older woman who had retired from a career at the GAO, the federal government's General Accounting Office. With the U.S. war effort ramping up and companies littering falling all over themselves to sell their wares to the government, most of whom had no prior experience contracting with Washington, the firm grew larger each month. Within a year, the government relations department

had grown to eight people, with Blossom as second-in-command. She shared a two-bedroom apartment in Foggy Bottom with another girl, a junior lawyer at the firm, and attended all manner of receptions and parties, including some at foreign embassies. She was popular, attracting what she knew were very eligible men, but Blossom made it clear that she was not eligible, at least not on a long-term basis.

Through the war years, Blossom's relationship with her mother remained frosty. The two occasionally communicated by letter and Blossom made it home to Scranton for a few days at Christmas. At least her mother had reconsidered selling the house. Instead, the Oberholzer mansion had been converted, under Myrtle May's direction, into a half dozen apartments, the nicest of which was now her home, and the rest of which allowed her to live rent-free and pay for the building's upkeep and have enough left over to live well enough, if not in quite the style she had become accustomed to. The arrangement also allowed her to continue to tend her prized gardens.

When Blossom visited for a long weekend during the 1944 Christmas season, a man had come into her mother's life. He worked for Lackawanna County doing what Blossom had not quite understood and lived in one of the smaller apartments on the ground floor. When the three of them went out for dinner on Blossom's last night in town, he was dressed to the nines and Myrtle May appeared to be in no way embarrassed to be seen with him.

Business began to trend downwards after hostilities in Europe ended in the Spring of 1945 and following the surrender of Japan on September 2, 1945, business slowed to a crawl at the law firm. Her boss decided to retire a few months later after terminating several other employees. Blossom took over a diminished unit and became bored without the frenetic pace and whirlwind social opportunities that the war had brought with it. The International Monetary Fund had been established at the Bretton Woods Conference at the close of 1945 and hiring of staff began a few

months into 1946. The law partner who oversaw her department jumped at the chance to participate in the formation and growth of the new organization and Blossom jumped at the chance to accompany him.

Her visit to Scranton during Christmas 1945 had not gone especially well, with her mother paying far more attention to her no-longer-new suiter than to her daughter, and Blossom decided to skip the event entirely in 1946. Instead, she celebrated at a Christmas day dinner dance held at the officer's club at Fort Myer, in Arlington, Virginia, hosted by a retired general who had also accepted a position at the IMF. There, she met and was swept away by a handsome major with the intriguing moniker of Maximillian Gilberto Valentine Perez and the best-fitting uniform Blossom had ever seen.

She decided on the spot that she would marry him, although she kept that particular piece of information to herself. By the time she got the opportunity to say *yes*, in the Spring of 1948, she had been promoted and was enjoying both her job and the renewed social life that the IMF enabled. As for Maxie, he had left the service and accepted a civilian position with the Department of the Army. He was based at the Pentagon and had a small private office with a window looking into an inner ring courtyard, which was a major step up from the office he had shared in a temporary building on the National Mall throughout the war. They were married in January 1949 at the Washinton National Cathedral and held the wedding party at the Hay-Adams Hotel in downtown Washington. It was a modest but elegant affair that was attended by Blossom's mother and her *friend* Paul, Maxie's mother, who he had flown in from Texas, as well as several dozens of the pair's friends.

Myrtle May and Lupe Perez, the difference in their strata painfully obvious to each other, exchanged one smile and no words during the ceremony at the church and avoided each other for the duration of the celebration.

Maxie and Blossom departed long before the party ended, hurrying to the room Maxie had booked upstairs in the Hay-Adams. Still groggy from an all-but-sleepless night, they boarded a flight for Miami the following morning at Washington National Airport, dozing off before the wheels left the ground.

## ***MAXIE AND BLOSSOM--2***

The baby changed everything, and not merely in the typical way that a baby changes everything.

Darcy Elizabeth Perez was born in August 1950. Blossom had reluctantly left her IMF job at the end of June. Maxie had been promoted for a second time and they had been able to save most of Blossom's salary, giving them enough money to make a down payment on a small brick house in a new development in Silver Spring, Maryland. It was a longer commute to the Pentagon, but was affordable and provided more space than the tiny apartment they had lived in since their marriage, as well as a yard for Blossom to tend and the baby to play as she grew. They moved into their new home days after her IMF colleagues held a baby shower for Blossom, the first of its kind she had ever attended. Despite her advanced pregnancy, Blossom spent her days sewing, making curtains for their new living room, kitchen, breakfast room, bath and two bedrooms, which Maxie dutifully hung after dinner each night as they were finished.

Perhaps more interesting was what she did not do. She paid no more attention to the room that would be the nursery than to the others. She supposed things had changed when her pregnancy advanced to the stage of eliminating both lovemaking and dancing from their activities. Maxie had always been focused on his work, dodging the occasional muttered *spic* and doing whatever it took to overcome the deck being subliminally stacked against him. And now, he was hung up on chief of staff, a title he craved, she thought, more than he craved her. She did not actually think about it much. She did not have to. She simply felt it. And as she settled into the changes that were happening around her, and settled into a kind of benevolent fog, she began to feel the coming of a life that was very different from the one she he envisioned on their wedding day.

She could not quite put her finger on it, but it was not an especially good feeling.

Maxie did not notice that anything was wrong until after the baby was born. He had been indifferent to the baby's gender but Blossom had been counting on it being a girl. When it was, and when he acceded to her name of choice, Darcy Elizabeth, she suddenly evinced enough of a decline in mental well-being for even Maxie to notice. It resulted in something of a forced rapprochement with her mother since Maxie could not take much time off work and could not afford any sort of full-time or live-in care. And to his surprise, Myrtle May agreed although somewhat reluctantly. *For the sake of the child* was how she put it, but she arrived two days later and Maxie picked her up at Union Station, where she stood outside in the evening heat, suitcase in hand, the same expression on her face as she always seemed to save for Maxie.

“Thank you for coming,” is all he said before taking Myrtle May's suitcase and leading her and Paul into the nursery, where he gestured at a pink and white flowered loveseat set against the wall opposite Darcy's crib. “It's convertible into a pull-out bed—”

“And it’s where you’ll be sleeping, at least until Blossom gets out of the...hospital,” Myrtle May said. “I’ll sleep in your bedroom and Paul can sleep on the living room sofa. You *do* know how to give the baby its bottle, I assume, since you haven’t killed her yet.”

Coming from anyone else, Maxie might have taken the comment as a joke, but as his mother-in-law glowered at him, he knew it was not meant that way.

“Yes, I’ve learned how, Mrs. Oberholzer,” he managed.

She was a small woman and he towered over her, yet his physical presence had no apparent impact on her. Her bearing was outsized and he had been overmatched since the first time they met. Blossom’s greater stature was due, no doubt, to her father having been a large man and Maxie could not help but wonder how Oberholzer had stacked up against Myrtle May. Had he, unlike Maxie, been able to win her over with his charm?

He was smart enough, and very good looking, but it was charm that had gotten Maxie as far as he had. At school, in restaurants and shops, with colleagues and superiors. Everyone he met succumbed to it to one extent or another. Women. Especially women.

But not Myrtle May Oberholzer.

For the next two weeks, the makeshift household fell into a routine of sorts. Maxie’s official work hours were 8:00 to 5:00 but with chief of staff seeming closer to reality he was in the office by 7:00 and rarely left before 6:00. Paul did all of the cooking and dinner was on the table within minutes of 6:30. They would then cluster around the tiny screen of the huge Philco television set in the living room, taking turns holding and feeding the baby. In addition to his considerable cooking skills, Paul had also demonstrated his diaper changing acumen and, to Maxie’s and Myrtle May’s relief took care of that task about 90 percent of the time. Darcy was put down at 8:00 and by 10:00 Maxie moved quietly as he entered the nursery and changed into pajamas. On a good

night, Darcy awoke for feeding three times and went quickly back to sleep. Too often, though, she awakened more often and took longer to settle down and fall asleep and Maxie's arrival at the Pentagon would be closer to 8:00 in the morning than 7:00 and his coffee intake doubled.

Everyone's nerves were frayed by the time Maxie and Myrtle May drove his Chevy to DC General Hospital on Massachusetts Avenue to bring Blossom home. She was still a bit shaky but at the time of the prior visit, the previous Sunday, the doctors had removed the casts on her wrists, apparently satisfied that she was no longer a threat to harm herself. Maxie was given a small bottle of phenobarbital and a prescription for additional refills and strict instructions about how and when it was to be used.

Blossom's outlook seemed to improve the moment she entered the house, although she seemed confused initially when Paul came out of the nursery to greet them, baby Darcy cradled in his arms. He and Myrtle May stayed for several more days, slowly turning as many housekeeping and baby care tasks as they thought she could handle over to Blossom. When the taxi came to take them to the train station, Maxie and Blossom stood in the driveway, Blossom holding the baby, waving goodbye. But as soon as the cab went out of sight, Blossom turned and handed the baby to Maxie.

Things had settled back into a routine by Christmas. Blossom had come to terms with her new role, Maxie had been given a performance bonus and Darcy proved to be less of a burden than either of them had imagined. When Myrtle May phoned to say that she had sold the family home, since converted into apartments, and was moving to Spain with Paul, Blossom's initial anger and surprise were quickly replaced with the sense of a cloud having lifted. Once his initial shock and disbelief passed, Maxie found the bottle of champagne they had saved from their wedding party and they made love, for the first time in many months, while it chilled.

The following Christmas was the first time that Blossom heard from Myrtle May. It was by way of a brief letter that arrived in a fat envelop filled with color photographs of she and Paul and the small, cliffside apartment they were renting on the shabbier side of Marbella that looked out at the turquoise sea. After reading the rather businesslike and impersonal letter several times and leafing through the pictures, Blossom placed everything back in the envelope, went outside and pushed it as far down into the trash barrel as she could. Back inside, she washed her hands, scooped up the napping Darcy, dressed her in a snowsuit, laid her down gently in her carriage, shrugged into her own winter coat and went out for the longest, most rapidly-paced walk she had taken in years.

## ***DARCY***

She was seven when her mother decided to let her walk to Sunday morning church services by herself.

A year earlier, at her father's behest, they had sold the house in Silver Spring and moved to a rental apartment on Columbia Pike in Arlington, Virginia. Maxie's reasoning had been that the daily commute to the Pentagon from the Maryland suburb was becoming a chore. He also argued that, unlike their small house, the apartment building had a swimming pool for Darcy to enjoy all summer long. He was quite pleased with the move but Blossom was devastated, something even Darcy realized. She had been torn away from her beloved garden, as well as the relative solitude the single-family house provided. She would now have to deal with neighbors of a stripe every time she left the apartment. And Maxie's suggestion that she devote a corner of their

new living room to a large collection of houseplants, while providing some solace, was akin to putting a band-aid on a stab wound.

It was only through overheard, heated conversations between her parents that Darcy eventually learned that the real reason for the sale of their house was that it had provided cash that Maxie needed to join Westwood Country Club, a half hour drive away in McLean, Virginia. There, he could not only play golf to his heart's content, but could invite colleagues and superiors to join him *at his club*. Before, he had had to join the rabble on public or military courses or accept the occasional invitation to join a friend or colleague at their club, without being able to reciprocate. Darcy noticed the bounce in his step, which was in direct proportion to the loss of cheerfulness that she could easily discern in her mother.

Maxie pointed out that Blossom and Darcy were welcome to use the club while he was at work, an option that held little appeal for Blossom, a non-golfer who also did not play tennis or get any joy from interacting with other women. There was also the matter of getting there and back. Maxie drove their car to work every day and Blossom had been discouraged by her husband from getting a driver's license. The only option was public transportation, which entailed a 90-minute trip in each direction that required two buses. Having the apartment's swimming pool at her disposal left Darcy with little reason to press her mother to take her to Westwood, especially on weekdays when she was one of only a handful of tenants to use the pool.

Her father's absence on most weekend mornings and early afternoons was welcomed, though. It meant that he was around less often to grow red in the face at some imagined trespass the child had engaged in, at which point he was dramatically whip off his leather belt and either threaten a spanking with it or, on occasion, actually follow through. Her mother's relative disengagement from addressing Darcy's needs or wants any more than was absolutely necessary

left the seven-year-old to fend for herself much of the time. Only years later would she realize how outrageous it had been to allow a small child to walk alone, crossing busy Columbia Pike, to attend church services. Blossom did however, give the little girl a dollar before she left so that Darcy could buy herself lunch at the counter of the Woolworth's store that stood roughly halfway between their apartment and the local Episcopal church. Darcy merely thought it a bit odd, or nosy, when the person behind the counter or the occasional patron made mention of her solo dining.

There were occasions when Blossom's mood enabled her to lavish attention on her daughter, playing card or board games or preparing her favorite sandwich for lunch on summer days when the weather ruled out a pool day. But by and large Blossom remained rather aloof and at times was in enough of a state that Maxie would march Darcy to their car and drive to Glen Echo Park, where half the time she was left to fend for herself on the kiddie rides while he went off to enjoy the more adult-oriented amusements. And as they left the park, always sooner than she wanted, he would eat half her cotton candy.

As she got older and acquired a few good school friends, Blossom was only too happy to okay Darcy's request to spend the afternoon or even sleep over at one of their homes, offers that Darcy was rarely able to make to her playmates. Blossom's remoteness and the nearly complete absence of attention from Maxie did not stop her parents from reminding Darcy that whatever situation she might become involved in, she was first and foremost to always behave *like a good girl*.

During the fall of her first year of junior high, Myrtle May announced that she and Paul would be returning to the United States and taking up residence once more in Scranton, this time in a rented apartment. Blossom had not been on an airplane since her father had taken the family to Chicago when Blossom was eight and she talked Maxie into paying the somewhat higher fare

for the short flight to Scranton, rather than taking the train. Mother and daughter dressed up for the event and were thrilled when Myrtle May and Paul escorted them to a new Cadillac when they arrived in Scranton. The apartment was in a new building and seemed nearly as spacious as the one Myrtle May had reserved for herself in the house in which Blossom had grown up.

To the surprise of each, grandmother and granddaughter quickly formed a tight bond and Myrtle May lavished gifts of clothing on Darcy that she said better suited a young lady than the clothes that Blossom picked out for her during their almost daily shopping trips. But as Myrtle May and Darcy grew closer, Blossom drifted further apart from her mother, taking solace in card games with Paul during the last two days of their stay. Blossom and Darcy sat in near silence on the return flight to Washington National Airport and the taxi ride home.

It was not until the following day that Darcy learned that her mother had insisted that Paul drive her to the department store where Myrtle May had made the purchases and returned all of the items but for the frilly undergarments for a cash refund. Darcy did not speak to her for a week and Darcy did not see her grandmother again until Myrtle May and Paul drove to Washington, DC for a short vacation at the start of the summer after Darcy finished junior high.

Despite an overall lack of input or assistance from her parents, Darcy managed to navigate her first year of high school surprisingly well. Having realized her academic strengths and shortcomings on her own, she was able to convince her advisor to minimize the number of math and science courses she had to take in favor of as many courses like English Lit, History and Psychology that could be justified. She tried out and made the drill team, which was not quite as elite as the cheerleaders but provided similar opportunities to meet other students and socialize, as well as flex her dance muscles.

She turned 16 early in the summer and to her great surprise her parents paid for driving lessons at a local school that used VW Karman Ghias of all things for instruction, and Darcy mastered the manual transmission cars with little problem. To her even greater surprise, when she passed her driver's licensing test on the first try, her parents bought a VW bug for her to drive, on condition that she use it to travel to and from a summer job and chauffer Blossom around on weekends and occasional evenings when Maxie was playing golf or otherwise occupied.

The little car, a pasty pale blue with an off-white interior, improved her social life for the remainder of high school, although her parents restricted the hours she was allowed to drive, especially with other teens in the car. The VW improved Blossom's day-to-day existence, as well, since she did not have to rely on Maxie to get around, and it markedly improved her mood.

Darcy did well enough in high school and on the SAT exam to be admitted to several decent universities. Blossom, who had briefly attended the University of Pennsylvania and Maxie, who had graduated from George Washington University and gone on to earn an MBA there, all courtesy of the GI Bill, tried to discourage her, both of them arguing that an entry level job with the federal government was the right direction for their daughter. But at 18, Darcy, who had visited Maxie's office on a handful of occasions and who wanted to get as far away as possible, could not imagine being cooped up all day at a place like the Pentagon. California was her goal but after a great deal of discussion and yelling by Maxie, she ultimately prevailed on her parents to allow her to apply to several east coast colleges with what they considered reasonable tuition charges.

As had been the case throughout high school, her parents provided no assistance at all with the selection of target schools, the preparation of applications or arranging for her high school to send transcripts to the schools to which Darcy decided to apply. The most they were willing to do was provide checks for the modest application fees, a task that Maxie undertook with an obvious

lack of enthusiasm. And just as they had appeared surprised at learning that her high school grades and SAT scores were in the upper percentiles, they appeared equally surprised when four of the five colleges she had applied to accepted her. The University of Virginia at Charlottesville was her sole rejection and she took it in stride, a good thing since her parents merely shrugged at the outcome. But in any case, not only had she set a high bar by applying, but UVa's location, a mere 100 or so miles from home, was closer than Darcy wanted to be.

Her parents declined to participate in the process of winnowing the four remaining schools down to one, but in the end the decision was a simple one. The two that were furthest from home, the University of Maine at Orono and the University of Florida in Gainesville, were the only two that Darcy seriously considered. It was the likely benefit of Maine's cold and dry climate on her frizz-prone hair as opposed to the impact of the Florida heat and humidity that made the selection easy. Her parents seemed pleased that Maine was slightly less expensive. And her mother was relieved that her school of thought was not located below the Mason-Dixon line.

No one in the Perez clan understood the true nature of the Maine climate but her parents did provide a modest budget for Darcy to shop for clothing more appropriate to an anticipated harsher than mid-Atlantic winter. Darcy supplemented it somewhat with the money she earned as a cashier at Hecht's department store during the summer, following high school graduation. There was a rude awakening at summer's end, a few days before she was to leave for Maine, when Maxie announced that he had sold the VW for not much less than it had cost to a Pentagon colleague, rather than allowing her to take it with her to school. Her anger escalated when he told her that the man was buying the car for his college-age son.

She was tempted to crash the car or otherwise harm it in some way on her last day of driving it to work but somehow resisted the urge, settling for making it clear to Maxie how upset

she was by completely avoiding him. It was not exactly a victory, on any level since, to add insult to injury, Blossom told her that rather than drop her at National Airport for a northbound flight, they would instead drive her all the way to Orono.

“Why don’t you just shoot me and get it over with instead of killing me slowly?” she told Blossom before storming off.

Darcy was sure there was an ulterior motive and Blossom admitted as much when Darcy challenged her that evening. Maxie had bought the VW to make his own life easier and never intended for her to keep it. And they had been planning for weeks to take a long vacation on Cape Cod following their detour to Orono. Darcy was unsurprised given that for several years they had not taken their annual, two-week family vacation at the same hotel as always in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. More to the point though, Darcy realized that her parents never did anything for her that did not also provide some significant, and usually higher, level of benefit to them.

They left for Maine an hour before dawn, as they always did when beginning a vacation, her mother fearful of being seen leaving with suitcases, especially since Darcy had three unusually large ones. They stopped for breakfast shortly after sunrise at a rest stop on I-95 in Maryland, her father careful to park their Chevy Impala where it could be seen from the table. The scene was replicated five hours later when they stopped for lunch at a Howard Johnson’s and Maxie filled the gas tank, north of New York City. Darcy, who had slept badly the previous night managed to nap between the two meal stops. But for the remaining six hours of the drive, Darcy fidgeted in the back seat, forced to listen to her parents plan their Cape Cod adventure while listening to a string of bad music on the often staticky AM radio.

They spent the night at a Holiday Inn on Main Street, just south of the university campus. Maxie carried the suitcases into the room while Darcy walked to Pat’s Pizza, which had been

recommended by the desk clerk, and brought back pizza and Cokes for dinner, something that did not exactly bring a smile to her mother's face. They watched the evening news while they ate and went to sleep soon after, weary from the long drive, her parents in the two twin beds and Darcy making due on a folding cot. In the morning, after checking out and loading up the car, they headed to a local Howard Johnson's, then to campus. There, after following signs to the student union, Darcy checked in and was given directions to Knox Hall, which would be her dormitory. It was only then that the Perez's discovered just how immense the campus was.

"Good luck on these hills at night in the snow," Blossom said helpfully as they pulled up in front of the mid-rise brick building.

Darcy checked in once more, this time with a resident assistant, and given her room assignment. The next hour was spent with Maxie lugging his daughter's heavy bags up to the room while Blossom made the narrow bed that Darcy had chosen from the two in the room, her roommate having not yet arrived, with well-worn sheets and blanket that had several years back graced Darcy's bed at home. It was then off to the student book store, where Blossom seemed to enjoy tracking down the titles on the list that had been provided to Darcy. The mood shifted, though, when they went to the cashier and Maxie insisted that Darcy write a check on the freshly-opened account that would be her only source of funds.

She had seen her parents and others write checks any number of times but had never done it herself. But when she proudly handed it to the cashier, he smiled, pointed out two errors, and handed the check back to Darcy. Maxie, who had been hovering over her and must have seen the errors, began yelling and berating her while other students and parents looked on. Darcy did her best to keep her composure and with shaking hands wrote another check as Maxie made a show

of tearing the errant one into tiny pieces and tossing them on the floor. The only payback a shaken Darcy could muster was forcing her father to carry most of the heavy texts back to her dorm room.

“Don’t take it to heart, dear, he’s upset that his little girl is leaving home, that’s all,” Blossom whispered as she kissed her daughter goodbye while Maxie waited in the car.

They were the last words her mother said to her until Christmas break.

Her roommate, Jayne, turned out to be a bitch, refusing to make her bed or help cleaning up their shared space and inviting friends who lived down the hall for generally drunken bull sessions whenever Darcy needed to study. The library, a five-minute walk in the snow, was Darcy’s only viable option and she once came back to find her bed had been short-sheeted by Jayne and her friends. It was the final straw. On a Saturday night, when Jayne and company congregated in another girl’s room, Darcy pulled back the covers from Jayne’s bed and dumped the sodden contents from the small metal trash can that Jayne never emptied, onto the bed, tucking in the top sheet and blanket over the mess. She then filled the empty can with all of Jayne’s bras and panties, added her roommate’s prized cashmere sweater, took an unopened bottle of Johnny Walker Scotch from Jayne’s desk drawer and poured the entire fifth of liquor onto the pile of clothing.

When Jayne returned an hour later, staggering into the room, Darcy was sitting up in bed, reading from a book of Shakespeare plays. She glanced up at Jayne, who stood, bent over, gazing down into the trash can, a confused look on her face, then went back to her reading. Moments later, Jayne threw up into the can and ran out of the room.

When Darcy returned from morning classes, all of Jayne’s things had been removed from the room. When she returned late in the afternoon, a new girl sat on Jayne’s bed, which had been freshly made with homey looking sheets and a colorful Afghan.

“Hi, I’m Katy. I heard you needed a new roommate and I couldn’t stand mine, so here I am,” she said in a noticeable down-east accent.

She and Darcy quickly became fast friends. Katy invited her to join her at her parent’s house during Christmas break but Blossom had insisted she come home to Virginia, and so she went. It was not until four days into the five-day holiday period that her parents sat Darcy down to tell her that Maxie had accepted a promotion that involved a move of indefinite duration to a U.S. Army base in Germany.

Darcy stared at them, her mouth agape, for a full minute before finally asking, “What about me?”

“It really shouldn’t be a problem, sweetheart,” Blossom replied. “You can come and stay with us all summer and visit at Christmas.”

“Come to Germany?”

“Yes, of course.”

“What about our home, my home, in Virginia? What about my room? My things? How long are you planning to be there?”

“Oh, don’t be so worried. First of all, *our* home will now be Germany. And it’s going to be for a few years—”

“A few *years!*”

“It will be wonderful. We can travel and—”

But Darcy had already run to her room and slammed the door before Blossom could finish. Her longer-term response was to skip returning to Virginia for Spring break, opting instead to spend the time with her roommate and her family at their home in Camden, about 40 miles south of Orono, on the Maine coast. Katy’s father was a lobsterman and her mother sold items she

crocheted through several local crafts stores. Their house was a typical two-story New England, painted pale gray with black shutters. It was old and a bit drafty, with creaky wood floors and old-fashioned radiator heating, and a faded old Ford station wagon sat forlornly in the gravel driveway. Darcy's household was hardly rich, but Katy's family was clearly not as well off financially as was Darcy's but there was a closeness and a natural flow of conversation among them that Darcy had rarely experienced, and envied.

Her mother boiled lobsters and served them on plain, white dishes with baked potatoes and plenty of clarified butter the first night of Darcy's visit. The following night was made even more memorable with the arrival of Katy's older brother and his wife and baby, as well as another local girl who lived in the same dorm as Darcy and Katy, who brought along a guitar. After an hour or so of lively dinner conversation, they huddled around the fireplace in the living room and drank beer or jug wine while singing folksongs.

"I never want to leave here," Darcy told Katy before they went to bed.

Katy smiled.

"The grass is always greener," she said.

Two months later, her linens and winter clothing stowed in the dorm's basement storage room, Darcy boarded a flight from Portland to Washington National. The pleasant young man who had sat next to her on the plane carried Darcy's suitcase out to the arrivals area where her parents all but ignored him. Her father took charge of the suitcase while Darcy and her mother followed him out to the parking lot, where a rented Plymouth, rather than their Impala, waited.

"What's going on?" Darcy asked as her father hefted the suitcase into the trunk, where three other similar cases were already stowed.

Blossom glanced at her watch.

“I’m so glad your flight was on time,” Blossom replied. “I don’t know what we would’ve done if it wasn’t. In about three hours, we’ll all be boarding a flight from Dulles Airport to Frankfurt and then a train to Zweibrucken. Isn’t it exciting, sweetheart? Oh, we’re going to have so much fun!”

And with that, Blossom smiled, kissed her daughter, and eased herself into the front passenger seat. Darcy just stood there, her mouth as agape as it had been when the news about Germany had first been broken. It was not until Maxie slammed shut the trunk, got in and started the car that Darcy finally opened the rear door and eased herself in.

“What about all my things, mother? Don’t I—”

“It was all packed up and shipped out a week ago and we turned in the keys to the apartment yesterday,” Blossom told her. “Your father and I stayed at a motel on Route 50 last night. Don’t worry. Everything should get there a week or so after we do.”

It was closer to a month than a week before Darcy’s things arrived at the enormous U.S. Army base, Kreuzberg Kaserne, at about the same time the duplex that her parents would live in was be ready. Maxie, it turned out, was the highest-ranking civilian on the base and, as such, was entitled the share the two-family house with that of a colonel. Only the family of the base commander, General Turner, had a house all to themselves. During the month it took to make various upgrades, Blossom had been told, to their side of the duplex, she and Maxie lived in a one-bedroom apartment usually occupied by single or childless majors. Darcy was relegated to a room in the visiting officer’s quarters building, which was no worse than her dorm room but had stricter rules about loud music and such. The dining facility was much closer, though, and the food was about on par with that in the college dining hall. Initially she used it only for breakfasts and lunches,

joining her parents in their apartment for dinner, but quickly found the company to be better in the VOQ mess. Plus, they showed new movies on Friday and Saturday nights.

Four weeks after their arrival in Germany and days after the updates and upgrades to the duplex were completed, the Perez's household and personal goods arrived from the United States and Darcy and her parents moved into their new home.

Darcy was glad for the enhanced privacy but that was where her appreciation of the move ended. She had not lived with her parents, in fact had spent little time with them, for nearly a year and her re-introduction into the Perez family unit was not a uniformly happy one. Contrary to Blossom's assurances, all of her things had not made it to their destination. Fortunately, her portable stereo and most of her record albums had arrived in decent shape. Darcy's small bedroom was at the back of the house and overlooked a hillside where a dozen or more horses grazed. On clear days she would perch the small speakers on the sill of her open window and lay outside on a reclining beach chair listening to Bob Dylan or Joni Mitchell, The Beatles or Crosby, Stills and Nash and soak up the meagre German sunshine. Rainy days would find her sprawled out on her bed reading or re-reading volumes of Shakespeare or Pirandello plays or Brecht.

Maxie was rarely around, working long days managing troop logistics for all of western Europe, and his weekends were spent on one or another golf course with the general or other officers or members of his staff.

The highlight of the summer was a week-long trip to Paris with her mother, Darcy's excitement growing as they approached the French border, a mere 20 or so minutes after pulling out of the station. While Darcy stared out at the passing scenery, Blossom spent the remaining two hours of the journey reading. The trip hit its stride on the second day when Darcy came up with a work-around to her mother's 8:00PM bedtime and 6:00AM wake-up call. Darcy stayed in bed

while her mother went out to have coffee and a croissant or pastry at a nearby café. They would then go out and roam the museums and other sites, taking a break to try a new bistro each day for lunch. An early dinner left Darcy with time to sit outside at a café or bistro nursing a glass of wine and watching the parade of mostly fashionable Parisiens saunter past, or to wander up and down the Champs Elysee and around the high-end shopping districts, buying nothing but studying the window displays or, twice, taking in a film, reveling as her high school and college freshman French opened a window for her into new worlds.

She and Blossom were even quieter during the train ride home than they had been on their way to Paris. There was over a month of summer left before she would be returning to Maine and Darcy realized that life would once again be boring and predictable until then. Blossom would read and try new recipes and be of good cheer anticipating the occasional party or dinner at the Officers Club, none of which welcomed children of any age. Maxie, as usual, seemed hardly aware she was there.

She welcomed her return to Maine at the start of September, although not the weather, and was glad to once again have Katy's company on a daily basis.

She fell in love with her English lit professor, a married thirty-something whose love for Shakespeare was contagious, at least as far as its spread to Darcy might have indicated. When he asked if she might be available for periodic babysitting at his home, she gladly accepted, not bothering to inquire of the ages, or the number, of children to be minded. To her disappointment, but not surprise, he never came on to her, even in his car when he picked her up outside her dorm and deposited her back late in the evening.

As for actual dates with boys closer to her age, they were fewer and further between than they had been freshman year, word having apparently spread that she was a good girl. There were

those who seemed to view her as a challenge, though, so her Saturday nights were not always spent alone. But they learned quickly that they were not going to be up to the challenge and second dates were the exception, third dates rare.

She visited her parents at Christmas, at their insistence, this time flying on an Icelandic Airlines turboprop that stopped to refuel in Reykjavik and landed in Luxembourg. The day after her arrival, she and her mother took busses and strolled the local Christmas markets, a German speciality, but the only new acquisition Darcy had in her possession when she returned to Orono was a bottle of Grand Marnier, acquired at off-price during the return stopover in Reykjavik. The only other highlight of her stay was an overnight babysitting job at the professor's house, providing her a brief respite from her parents. As she had done the prior year, she stood firm telling Maxie and Blossom she would not be visiting during spring break, laying the decision squarely at the feet of the difficulty of the trip, especially during a holiday season.

If they held a grudge, which was not outside the realm of possibility, especially for Blossom, they showed their hand by letting her know that there would be no more Icelandic flights. Instead, she would, as her mother put it, have to travel like all the other Army brats, by which she meant for free, on standby, in a seat on a military transport plane. The flight itself was bad enough, cooped up in sling seat along the sides of the fuselage with about 50 others, staring at the Jeeps and crates of cargo lashed down in the center. The fuel stop was at a base in the Azores, where there was no duty-free shop and barely enough time for all the passengers to visit the toilets. Given the trip from Orono to McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey and the five-hour wait, mostly sitting on a linoleum floor, to be called for a flight, as well as the train ride from Ramstein, where they landed, to Zweibrucken, it was more than payback enough for skipping the spring visit.

That summer was destined to be a repeat of the previous one but for the offer of a waitressing job at the bar of the officers' club. Five nights each week, Tuesday through Saturday, Darcy donned chinos and a white, button-down shirt and earned nickel tips serving quarter drinks to dozens of mostly polite lieutenants and up. By the end of the summer, she had saved enough to buy the orange wool coat she had coveted a month earlier in the base PX. A new, and sturdier, pair of boots would have come in handy, as well, but there was not enough in the checking account out of which Darcy took her five-dollar allowance each week to pay for a pair and she was disinclined to ask her parents for more.

Junior year Christmas break was a replay of the last such event, but for the fact that her wait at McGuire Air Force Base stretched out over two full days. The return trip to the U.S. was as agreeable as such journeys can be, but Darcy returned to the news that Katy had married Victor, the guy she had been dating, on the spur of the moment on New Year's Eve. Darcy was crushed, not only to essentially lose her closest friend but to now be facing the prospect of another horrible roommate. She did manage to put on a good face for Katy, though, who was a homely girl who had been smitten by the charming Victor. There was a party at his small apartment a few miles south in Hampden on the following Saturday night attended by the dozen or so who had not been around during the holidays and Darcy could see that it was Victor's not unimpressive guitar playing that had likely sealed the deal for Katy. Victor claimed to make his living helping out from time-to-time on lobster boats, but Darcy imagined that most of the money for the apartment and his three-year-old Mustang had come from drug sales, not fishing. But Katy seemed happy and much drinking and singing ensued, and Darcy wound up sleeping on the carpeted living room floor, which was at least a step up from McGuire's linoleum.

She had taken the bus to Hampden but in the morning, with snow coming down in heavy, wet flakes, Victor offered to drive her back to campus. He was just as charming as he had been before the larger audience the previous evening and did not try to hide the fact that he was coming on to her as they headed north, substantially faster than conditions suggested, something she would be sure not to share with Katy.

Her new roommate turned out to be a rich and very beautiful girl from Bar Harbor, whose family owned a bank, which her father ran. Once you got past her snooty attitude and faux cultured, private school accent, she was not a bad roommate. Her best quality, though, was that she drove home each weekend, rushing off in her new-looking MG as early as her class schedule allowed on Friday and usually not returning until early Monday morning. There was much about her to be coveted about Carol Jennet, but for Darcy it came down to the girl's Jane Birken-like long, blond hair, such was its level of counterpoint to Darcy's untamable, shoulder-length chestnut nightmare.

Despite Darcy's very un-Maine-like surname, Carol took a liking to her, which Darcy attributed to the fact that Darcy Perez turned out to be an Episcopalian and that Carol's visage was even further improved when she was standing beside her cute but less curvaceous roommate. The highlight of their relationship was spring break, when Carol invited Darcy to join her for the annual Jennet family getaway, which provided a convenient excuse not to travel to Germany.

When the appointed day arrived, Carol loaded Darcy's battered Samsonite suitcase into the MG's small trunk and eased her own Hartman case into the carpeted area behind the sports car's two seats. But instead of heading southeast, toward Bar Harbor, Carol made the short drive to Bangor International Airport, passing the airline terminals and parking outside a smaller building with a sign reading GENERAL AVIATION SERVICES. Darcy said nothing until Carol opened the trunk and handed over Darcy's suitcase.

“What the heck?”

Carol smiled.

“You have been on an airplane before, haven’t you?”

“Starting when I was a little kid, to visit my grandmother in Scranton. And you might recall that my parents live in Germany.”

“No need to snap at me, missy. Anyway, I doubt you’ve flown like *this* before,” Carol said, setting off toward the terminal entrance, Darcy in her wake.

“Your mother called a little while ago to say they were running a few minutes late, Miss Jennet,” a uniformed woman behind the counter said. “You’re welcome to wait in the lounge if you’d like.”

“Typical,” Carol said softly as she left her suitcase with the woman and set off toward a door across the way, which she did not hold open for Darcy.

Each girl settled into one of two leather sofas that faced each other but Carol stood up seconds later and walked to a credenza that held a large coffee urn.

“Is there a bathroom on the plane?” Darcy asked.

“Yes, but it’s tiny and kind of scuzzy.”

Darcy shrugged and joined Carol, serving herself a coffee once Carol had done the same, but before they could return to their seats the woman from behind the counter cracked open the door and told Carol that her family had arrived.

“My mother has absolutely no sense of time,” Carol said as she set her cup down.

Darcy followed her back out to the lobby where a well-dressed and groomed fiftyish couple stood, along with a much older woman.

“No little monsters?” Carol asked after kissing her mother.

“The twins decided to stay in New Hampshire, something about an interschool tennis tournament. Now, kiss your grandmother and introduce us to your friend.”

Carol’s parents and grandmother were warmer and more welcoming than Darcy expected, given their daughter’s seemingly innate air of superiority. From that moment until their return six days later, they treated Darcy as a member of the family, something that Carol seemed less than pleased about.

The airplane was a Beechcraft King Air turboprop that was owned by the Jennet’s bank, and their destination was Bermuda. There were seven luxurious leather seats in the cabin, astride a narrow aisle, and the lavatory, while tiny, turned out to be anything but scuzzy. Two hours into the four hour flight the copilot left his position to serve them sandwiches and Cokes from a cooler and, unlike in an airliner, the pampered passengers spent much of the time out of their seats, crouched on the carpeted floor in varied conversations, although Carol’s mother spent the lion’s share of the time reading. They were met at the airport by a local man with graying hair and beard, that Carol’s father greeted warmly as Robert, and a woman named Patricia of similar age with braids and a colorful moo-moo. It was she who led them outside to an aging, but well-kept Chrysler station wagon, while Robert, who Darcy guessed to be her husband, made multiple trips carrying out their luggage.

They crossed a long causeway after exiting the airport surrounded by water so deeply turquoise that Darcy could not believe it was real. Their ultimate destination was a pastel blue and white Victorian style house on low, grassy rise in Warwick overlooking the blue Atlantic. Darcy was given her own room, which had a private bathroom and a beautiful water view, and for the most part was left to set her own schedule, although the Jennets did insist on family dinners each

night. Patricia did the cooking with Robert's assistance, and the meals, which were heavy on seafood and salads, were highly seasoned and delicious.

Despite Bermuda being far less culturally rich than Paris, her time there proved to be far more agreeable in every other way than her trip to the French capital with her mother had been. For their part, the Jennets made her feel more at home than she generally felt in her own home and Mr. Jennet evinced more interest in Darcy than her own father ever did and turned out to be impressed with her father's job, even though Darcy did nothing to embellish its description. The highlight of the highlight-laden six days was a party at the local country club, attended by the college-aged offspring of a dozen other members, that included much drinking and dancing. A boy called Simon attached himself to Darcy soon after she and Carol arrived and didn't leave her side until the staff insisted on ending the festivities at midnight. But he kept them at bay long enough to build a tower of champagne coupes on the grand piano, which fortunately was covered, opening a bottle of Moët et Chandon and pouring it in such a way as to create a lovely, if brief, fountain of the golden wine.

"I wish this would never end," she told Carol as Robert drove them home in the Chrysler.

"It always does," was Carol's sour reply.

Two quiet days later they once again boarded the King Air, this time heading northwest, back to Bangor. There were fond goodbyes out in the parking lot during which Carol's father told Darcy that it had been a pleasure having her along and that she would be welcome to join them any time and Carol's mother gave her a surprise hug. She and Carol waved as the Jennet's Mercedes station wagon drove away. Carol then turned to Darcy.

"My father may be happy to have had you join us, but I never want to see you again. I'll send someone for my things tomorrow. And you can make your own way back to campus."

Darcy stood there, in the cold, her eyes wide and her mouth agape as Carol shoved her suitcase behind the MG/s seats and tore out of the lot without looking back. By the time she walked slowly back into the terminal, suitcase in hand, the tears had begun to flow. The same woman was at the counter and Darcy stared at her for a moment.

“Is everything okay, dear? Is there something I can help you with?”

Darcy had saved some money for the trip but the Jennets had refused to let her pay for anything, so she still had the entire \$35 and it was a fairly short distance back to the Orono campus.

Darcy dried her eyes with the back of her sleeve.

“Could you call a taxi for me, please?”

The remainder of the spring 1971 semester passed quickly and without much excitement, with the exception of an anti-war protest that was expected to be massive but for which only a relative handful of students showed up. Darcy was without a roommate for the last six weeks of the semester and never again saw Carol, who was a math major and had no classes in common with Darcy. Having her own room was a delight and no doubt contributed to a notable improvement in her already good grades, not that her parents took notice. The summer found Darcy back working at the O-Club most evenings and was notable only for a two-week driving vacation through various parts of Germany and France. Her father refused to make advanced reservations and they often stayed in dreary or sketchy hotels in which Darcy’s sleeping arrangements were usually an afterthought. But they ate in restaurants that from all appearances seemed mediocre at best but for the most part had surprisingly good food. It all became a blur, seen mostly from the back seat of her father’s BMW 1600. The lowlight was when he realized two hours into an intercity drive that he had left his wallet and reading glasses in the hotel room from which they had just departed.

To one one's surprise his mood and behavior during the backtracking drive to retrieve the forgotten items, as well as for the rest of that day and the next, were the darkest and nastiest Darcy had yet experienced, and there was a great deal of darkness and nastiest to compare it with. The only words spoken during the course of a mediocre dinner that night in a too brightly lit hotel dining room were when Maxie got up to use the toilets and Blossom and Darcy agreed that it was a good thing that neither of them had caused the problem.

There was another trip at the end of the summer, shortly before Darcy was to return to Maine. She and Blossom took the train to Vienna and stayed at a hotel that was more akin to a hostel than the Ritz, but they ate at better-than-usual restaurants. Those experiences were marred only by the issue that at every place they dined, the mother and daughter pair always found themselves seated at the table closest to the toilets or the kitchen, as they had before in Paris, and Blossom again declined to make a fuss over the perceived slight. They attended a performance at the historic opera house one night and walked out at intermission on a German opera that Blossom claimed she could not stomach. The weather was good and they took a long walk, winding up at Demel, where they had *sachertorte* and coffee. It was the best meal of the summer.

The afternoon of their return from Vienna, Blossom and Darcy got home to find Maxie in casual clothes, packing his own suitcase.

“And where are you galivanting off to?” Blossom asked, laying her own suitcase out on top of the bed, opposite his.

“Spain,” was his terse reply.

“Spain? Any particular reason?”

“Three days of golf with General Turner and a couple of his NATO cronies from Brussels. We're catching a military flight. His driver is supposed to be here any time now.”

“I guess they needed someone at the last minute for a foursome.”

Without a word, Maxie finished packing while Blossom began unpacking.

“I guess you’ll be leaving the car, then. Maybe I’ll get someone to teach me how to drive while you’re gone.”

Maxie stopped, a stack of neatly folded Lacoste shirts held in mid-air in his hand, seemed about to say something, thought better of it, and finished packing.

“Don’t forget to write,” Blossom said as he headed out the door.

Darcy stifled a laugh and went to her room to do her own unpacking. But before turning on her stereo, she could hear her mother softly crying.

“I hate him, I hate him, I hate him,” she muttered under her breath.

Although it went unsaid, both women realized that the level of tension in the house was noticeably lower during the three days Maxie was gone, although it reached a higher-than-usual level in the hours leading up to his return. Blossom made meats balls and spaghetti for the welcome home dinner, one of his favorites, which she rarely made, although he paid no particular attention to his meal, notwithstanding cleaning every morsel from his plate. As soon as he finished and folded his napkin, he turned to Darcy.

“Any idea what you’re going to do after graduation?”

The question caught her completely off guard and she nearly choked on the food she was eating. It was the first time he had asked any kind of question relating to college in the three years she had spent at the University of Maine.

“I’ve been thinking about staying there and teaching, if there are any jobs available. I’ve done really well in my lit courses, so—”

“Well, I can still set you up with something at the Pentagon, although it will probably be more or less the less position you could have gotten without going to college.”

And with that, he got up and went to the living room to read the newspaper. Blossom reached out to squeeze her hand, but Darcy pulled it away and, her dinner unfinished, began clearing the table.

The next day was her last full day there and she and Blossom walked to the PX. The boots she had worn for three years, which were intended more for a northern Virginia winter than one in Maine, were literally falling apart and Darcy hoped until the moment they were checking out at the register that Blossom would offer to pay for them, since they were not exactly a luxury, but it was not to be. Instead, Darcy used half of the money she earned working at the O-Club to buy a new pair of sturdier boots, leaving her just enough for two new record albums and a bit of extra cash to supplement her meagre allowance for the next few months.

Maxie drove her to the train station the next morning, giving her a perfunctory hug before unloading her suitcase from the trunk of the car and driving away. The train ride was the easy part. It was followed by a 24-hour wait, including a fitful sleep on a linoleum floor with dozens of other military dependents, before she was called for a flight to Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts. That meant two Trailways bus rides awaited her once she finally got to the States.

*Never again* she muttered as she handed her ticket to the driver of the second bus.

She had been assigned to the same room as the previous year and despite her exhaustion spent the evening of her arrival retrieving the linens and other things she had not carted to Germany from a basement storage room. Her dinner consisted of a Hershey bar and a Coke from vending machines in the dorm’s lobby and after making her bed Darcy fell almost immediately into a deep sleep. In the morning there was a notice taped to the door saying that she had been assigned a new

roommate and to expect the girl's arrival within the next three days, when the fall semester was scheduled to begin. The dining hall had finally opened and after walking back from lunch, Darcy's dorm room door was open and she could hear voices coming from inside.

"Oh my God!" she shouted as soon as she caught sight of her former roommate Katy and her brother unpacking things and making the room's other bed. "What the heck, Katy?"

Katy turned a smiled, Darcy ran to her and the girl's hugged.

"Victor and I split back in July," Katy said. "Don't look so sad. It's actually a good thing. It was a mistake from the start. I was flattered that a good-looking guy wanted me and, no surprise I guess, it turned out he was clearly the wrong guy for me. Anyway, I re-applied to school, the idiots actually accepted me, and here I am."

"Yay," is all Darcy said, tears in her eyes.

Katy was there, her class-load was relatively light and she had two courses with her favorite professor. Fall semester of her senior year turned out to be a winner.

The *never again* resolution she had made after her last trip home from Germany lasted only until Christmas break but, fortunately, the trip to Germany went much more smoothly. Things improved further when her parents told her, on the way home from the train station, that Maxie and General Turner would be leaving the following day for a series of meetings at NATO in Brussels, followed by a short golfing vacation in the south of France. Sitting in the back of the car, Darcy hoped that her face did not reveal the glee she was feeling. It turned out to be the best of the three Christmas breaks she had spent in Germany.

General Turner's son, one year Darcy's junior and home from Penn State for the holidays, asked her out to see *The Last Picture Show*, which was playing in town in its original English language version. Darcy did not tell him she had seen it a month earlier in Maine. He borrowed

his father's car for the occasion and after the movie they walked to a nearby shop for currywurst and then drove to what was said to be the best nightclub in the area. It was not much, a true *boite*, with loud music, dancing and liquor, but it was better than anything in the Orono, Maine area.

He was a perfect gentleman and Darcy had one of the best nights of her life, which ended with her able to maintain her status as a good girl. Better yet, the next day he drove Darcy and Blossom around to several Christmas markets in the region and invited them to join him and his mother at the O-Club for Christmas eve dinner. And he and Darcy hung out at the club on New Year's Eve, still without any pressure from him to have sex. And there was more good news. Maxie would not return from his golfing vacation until several days after Darcy left for the States. To top it all off, the trip back to Maine went as smoothly as it could have.

Indeed, Christmas break 1971 had been by far the best time she had spent in Germany and Darcy had been uncharacteristically sad to see it end. On the other hand, since graduation would be at the end of May 1972, she decided she would conclude her forays to visit her parents in Germany on a high note and not return there for spring break.

Maxie and Blossom's response to that was to remain in Germany, rather than travel to the States to attend the ceremony. Darcy was certain that Maxie was the main driver of that act, since he had not been shy about making it known, mainly in his usual passive-aggressive way, that he had not been in favor of Darcy attending college from the start. In their place, her parents sent two dozen yellow roses with a pre-printed card, in German, saying *Herzlichen Gluekwunsch Tochter von deinen Eltern*.

"This is probably the last congratulations I'll ever get from my parents," she said, as Katy admired the large bouquet.

"I kind of doubt that," Katy said.

“You don’t know my parents.”

“Well, it’s a really beautiful bouquet.”

Darcy sighed and examined the card that the FTD courier had handed her.

“At least they didn’t get them at the PX,” she said.

THE END

