

# **Anything but Still Lives:**

**The Worlds of Edward Hopper**



**a collection of painterly prose**

**by**

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## Introducing Mr Hopper

American realist Edward Hopper (1882-1967) was principally a painter of landscapes and cityscapes. Through iconic and oft-reproduced works such as *Nighthawks* (1942), Hopper gained widespread recognition as the artist who gave visual form to the anonymity, isolation and (perhaps) boredom, loneliness and stagnation of twentieth century American life.

This was something new in art, to reflect the sense of human hopelessness which began during the Great Depression, yet continued as an overarching *leitmotiv* until his death. Throughout, however, Hopper tried to remain immune from the cultural statements his works influenced: ‘I don't think I ever tried to paint the American scene,’ he said in a 1956 interview. ‘I'm trying to paint myself.’

According to art academic Brian O’Doherty (2004), Hopper paintings are presented with a neutrality which invites contradictory readings. Sheena Wagstaff (2004) also describes how his work has been ‘subjected – through different levels of expertise – to feminist, Marxist, Freudian and semiological analyses, as well as cultural studies of social history, power and gender relations and film theory’.

Nevertheless Hopper himself refused to be pigeonholed. At its simplest, he described his motivation as being informed by Johann von Goethe, a quote of whose he always carried around in his wallet: ‘The beginning and the end of all literary activity is the reproduction of the world that surrounds me by means of the world that is in me, all things being grasped, related, re-created, moulded and reconstructed in a personal form and an original manner’ (cited in Wagstaff, 2004).

Of course, Hopper saw his role as achieving this via the medium of visual art rather than through literature. Yet in reflecting the interconnectivity of all aesthetic pursuits – those informed by, and resulting in, for example, written, painted, filmed or composed forms of creativity – I have enjoyed the opportunity to spin the wheel one more time and contribute to the notion of what constitutes ‘art’ with this simple collection of painterly prose, inspired by Hopper’s paintings, and where the introduction of song lyrics into these stories represents an attempt to conjoin disparate narrative art forms into a single holistic framework.

*Easy come, easy go.* As Elvis Presley sang in the 1967 movie of the same name (*sailor beware, take it slow ...*), the motifs Hopper presents are likewise transitory, yet suggestive of solidity, urging the viewer to be mindful or cautious in their ‘reading’ of a particular scene. Hopper’s images may be brief flashes, at most specious moments ‘frozen’ in time. But they sear the retina, sing the melancholy blues, last in one’s memory long after the last riff has faded.

Fusing individual narratives on the one hand with the cultural layers that produce them on the other, I have worked to tease out fictions which are as representative of historical time and place as the everyman or woman perspectives of the actors at their core. Thus guided by the America of Hopper’s palette, nine of his canvases provide the contextual, cultural and temporal backdrop to this suite of stories.

### **Narrative understatement**

In that selfsame 1956 interview, Hopper was drawn to comment at one point that if you could say it in words there would be no reason to paint. Yet the point of all creative expression is to give external voice to the inner landscape of the artist – no matter what their form of artistic endeavour – be it literary, painterly, musical, filmic or one of the myriad other truths that reside in each individual’s consciousness.

For Hopper, it had come down to this, writes O’Doherty (2004): ‘Some two-score master-images, stamped into the popular imagination. Their iconic status, to which the work offers a mild and steady resistance, is reinforced with each generation. Hopper’s images now voyage across decades, cultures and geographies, as if each were accompanied by passport and visa. (They) have become coin of the imagination, easily accessible referents that frequently project themselves on everyday experience.’

In his paintings, Hopper revealed the ‘truth’ of everyday life, confronting viewers with the interior life of ordinary people. His challenge, successfully mastered, lay in his inherent ability to convey such authenticity of vision (Wagstaff, 2004). As the artist himself described in 1933, ‘my aim in painting has always been the most exact transcription possible of my most intimate impressions of nature’. Such was his interpretation of the Goethe quote which accompanied him everywhere, resulting in, as Margaret Iversen (2004) holds, ‘masterpieces of narrative understatement’.

The interconnectivity between Hopper's art and other narrative forms has also been noted by the likes of Swiss philosopher Alain de Botton (2002): 'In 1906, at the age of 24, Hopper went to Paris and discovered the poetry of (Charles) Baudelaire, whose work he was to read and recite throughout his life. The attraction is not hard to understand: there was a shared interest in solitude, in city life, in modernity, in the solace of the night and in the places of travel.' He describes how Hopper found his artistic 'poetry' in 'ignored, often derided landscapes ... sanctuaries for those whom Baudelaire might have dignified with the honorific 'poets''.

Needless to say, Hopper's paintings have inspired words and stories long before my humble collection was conceived. The Whitney Museum, for example, commissioned new fiction about Hopper for its catalogue of a 1995 retrospective, deeming the resulting anthology 'Hopperesque'. John Updike, however, in the *New York Review of Books* that same year, characterized the spare prose of the volume more 'Hemingwayesque' with its clear intent to produce narratives honouring Hopper's deliberate honing of expressive understatement.

According to art historian Gail Levin (2000): 'That Hopper's pictures have inspired fiction should not surprise us, for he and his wife were always reading, even reading fiction aloud to one another. Hopper and his wife Jo liked to name the characters in his paintings and spin fantasies about them.' That his paintings have likewise inspired filmmakers and photographers is also no coincidence. Themes of urban alienation or existential loneliness are classic expressions of 'Hopper film noir', the stage-feel of his paintings, with their stark use of light and shadow, oft-repeated in films and photographs throughout the last century. What captures the imagination of writers, it seems, is the same quality film director Sam Mendes described in a 2002 interview: 'Compositionally, Hopper constantly ensures that your imaginary eye is guided off the frame of the picture. You begin to imagine what's on either side of the frame. In other words, what's important is what is off-camera.'

Wollen (2004) cites filmmaker Wim Wenders' view that Hopper paintings could be expanded into imaginary sequences as the viewer imagines a before and an after to each still scene: 'Hopper's tableaux thus contain a temporal dimension which, in each viewer's mind, could be vitalised and set in motion,' a technique which Hopper described in 1939 as follows: 'Carrying the main horizontal lines of the design with

little interruption to the edges of the picture is to make one conscious of the spaces and elements beyond the limits of the scene itself.’

And so we are drawn to wondering, and wondering leads us into the realms of our own imagination where, as a simple matter-of-course, narratives develop beyond these ‘frozen moments’, regardless of our preferred means of creativity.

### **‘Silence is so accurate’**

The lack of action in a Hopper painting could be likened to the pauses in a play by Harold Pinter. Spaces, silences, what is left unsaid (or in Hopper’s case, unpainted) is the action, filled with meaning, with inscrutability. As American abstractionist Mark Rothko mused on Hopper’s rendering of the American experience in 1958: ‘Silence is so accurate.’

Most Hopper commentators focus on his perceived themes of melancholy, pensive inflection, loneliness, estrangement, or impersonality. But as David Anfam (2004) describes, a ubiquitous common denominator uniting an otherwise diverse commentary is a consensus about his pictorial silences. Anfam holds that scholars over the years have traced a crisis in European culture dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in regard to human relationships with respect to space, architecture and the domestic or urban sphere. ‘By the same logic,’ he writes, ‘Hopper’s many blank walls, vacant windows and dramatic facades eventually ‘speak’ in lieu of his mute inhabitants ... they enunciate an ultra-materialist American era in which things – invented, mass-produced by assembly line, consumed, bought, sold and discarded – gained the edge over people.’

One can present a similar case for sparsity and silence in narrative expression. Ernest Hemingway famously said: ‘Prose is architecture, not interior decoration, and the Baroque is over.’ Gustave Flaubert similarly held: ‘Words are like stones with which one builds walls.’ The implication here is that the architecture of fictional works is not evident, as such, to a reader. Strong foundations are necessary, granted, but should be obvious to no one but the builder/architect thereto, hence Hemingway’s iceberg theory as an oft-cited grail of truth for young writers: ‘Only 10-20% of an iceberg is exposed, and the great movement is under the water where the bulk is invisible.’ In this analogy is crystallised the whole notion of how much *needs* to be said versus how little *has* to be said.

Contemplating the analogy in my own vernacular, it is as if the grains of sand in the settling pond of Hopper paintings (as much as Hemingway prose) fall to earth to render the base of the pool itself rich with organic matter. What is visible to a viewer or reader, however, is accessed via its surface – clean, translucent and fresh, yet replete with meaning invisibly arisen from the depths.

Hopper was very conscious of stripping out the inessential features of Hemingway's scorned 'interior decoration' to present his thoughts on canvas as clearly and concisely as possible. As Wagstaff (2004) writes, his desire was to reach a kind of plausibility, offering the minimum amount of information necessary to suggest that the scene could actually happen – 'a painterly manifestation of what Goethe's quote was all about'. She describes this intermeshing of emotional reality and narrative fiction, in effect, as achieving a cinematic purpose – aiding believability of the narrative as well as inviting the viewer to perform feats of imaginative projection.

The spare quality of a Hopper scene also enables the viewer to focus more on the characters (or actors) within their stage-like setting. Peter Wollen (2004) quotes from Hopper's wife Jo's journal to confirm this intention: 'Figures stand out in space, not fastened to background.' It is such 'standing out', or the seeming three-dimensionality of his actors, that gives them weight and the painting a degree of solidity. The paradox, however, is that while they stand out and dominate the material space the canvas affords their story, so powerful is their inner removal (or pensive inflection) that we must take on some of their intimate distance as we look, to truly see 'into' them. It is as if we assume an abstracted, slightly hypnotic gaze ourselves in order to be able to view these internal pastures of reverie.

Wagstaff (2004) writes that 'most of Hopper's characters are so immersed in thought that they seem completely unaware of their surroundings. They are posed in dramatic scenes of distraction, absorbed in private thought and sober musing.' Hopper had his own muses in this regard. From Rembrandt, whose work he valued highly alongside that of Degas, Hopper learned the art of conveying internalised thought by focusing on the dichotomy of lighting and shadows. Degas' prioritisation of framing a subject is also cited as an influence which the American artist used to good effect when, like Vermeer, he painted women alone – abstracted in oceanic reveries, and seemingly part of their habitats, even when that habitat was temporary.

Hence, to weave a deft thread between the stories housed in this volume, I have chosen to concentrate on Hopper's earlier works where women are the main protagonists, in the period leading up to and including America's involvement in the Second World War. My aim is to present the worlds they inhabited during this era – anything but still lives! – as well as demonstrate that any issues, concerns, life questions or relationships they faced transcend cultural and historical constraints. Just as Hopper still speaks to contemporary art lovers, my stories are aimed similarly.

### **Still points and stopping places**

In developing this collection, I have imagined Hopper's paintings as 'still points' in each story's narrative journey. The notion of the still point houses the idea of the existential moment, the contemplative finger-click before we do something. It exists, and yet most of the time we do not identify or recognise it. By concentrating on each Hopper still point, by giving it voice in a work of prose, the moment is acknowledged before being extended in either direction, fore or aft. As such, the moment captured in his painting exists in both time and space, as well as beyond temporal and spatial dimensions, something TS Eliot contemplates in 'Burnt Norton':

*... And do not call it fixity*

*Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,*

*Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,*

*There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.*

(from *Four Quartets*, 1944)

It is the same notion which is housed in the Gilles Deleuze's (1993) concept of the 'event': 'To the extent that events are actualized in us, they wait for us and invite us in'. In this context he cites the French poet Bousquet's First World War experience thus: 'My wound existed before me, I was born to embody it', which is analogous to Emerson's (2003) observation that the soul already contains in itself the event that befalls it, 'for the event is only the actualizing of its thoughts'. In short, therefore, Eliot's 'still point' is a momentary event, the instant where temporal and eternal meet, one which Virginia Woolf (1985) describes as a 'moment of being', a sudden shock or 'token of some real thing behind appearances.' Needless to say, for Woolf such events need to be put into words to make them real, or whole, and I see the task likewise with

the stories in this collection. By writing Hopper's art into existence, my felt connection to the spirit of each of his individual work 'events' lives anew, within me and without.

Hopper also informs, in this collection of stories, my understanding of how the philosophical intersects with the experiential. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, was acutely sensitive to the concept of place and the role it played in an individual life's action. According to Krell and Bates (1997), he was convinced that the effects of environment, climate, and terrain on one's life and thought were both tangible and profound, quoting as follows from his works: 'Indeed, we ourselves are nothing other than what we sense at each instant of that onward flow. For even when we wish to go down to the stream of our most personal essence, Heraclitus's statement holds true: one does not step twice into the same river.'

In this context, the 'instants' or moments frozen in time to which Hopper has graciously granted us witness are worthy of reverence. They cannot be repeated, and are therefore akin to 'stopping places', where path and place intersect as a conceptual existential space, in the art of Richard Long. According to Ian Wightman (2005), Long's art enacts the self-same Heideggerian sense of place Nietzsche described: 'Where the truth of being is revealed to ourselves'.

A Sarahan work of Long's (*Clearing*, 1988) clearly attests to the correlation between path and place. As documented (through photography), one sees a path leading to a stone circle – a place to establish oneself within the world – from which another path leads out into the far distance, one assumes, to a further stopping place on his journey. Long (2005) describes what he does as 'the ritual of an anonymous person. I come to some mountains and I move some stones around and then I disappear.' His are works of passage which incorporate (or integrate, as it were) randomly chosen stopping places within the journey.

As a writer, what I see in Hopper's work is stillness, the anonymous capturing or recording of an existential moment, onto which I can graft my painterly prose as a similar 'work of passage' – only possible, however, because of the stillness of Hopper's art. For within the frame exists a tension, an energy to explore what is beyond, to journey on from his Longian clearing into yet-to-be mapped territory. Said tension, I believe, arises from the faces he gives his models – they are inscrutable, devoid of expression. Such minimalism fuels imagination, the viewer seemingly invited to enter

the frame, to ‘read’ the work, or scratch beneath the surface of the canvas to reveal – what? In so doing, we are drawn to move beyond the borders of our known world, on and out, toward an imagined horizon, conjuring a narrative as we go. Hopper’s ‘stopping place’ is really a starting point for internal reverie.

At times in this collection, therefore, the scene depicted by Hopper may commence a story; at times, it may end a story. Or perhaps it may simply form any one of a dozen scenes, backdrops as it were, to the action therein, a split second when time and place stand still, or a breath is drawn – when things are clearly seen under a sharp and uncompromising light, so-infusing the story with a moment of contemplation before movement, which he has snap-frozen on canvas, recommences.

Each fiction stands alone as an entity unto itself. There is no formula to each’s construction. All I know for certain is that the canvases I have chosen as my launching pad into this suite of very-human narratives trace an arc through an America of the interwar and Second World War years, and where the last story connects this thread to the present – extending the then to now, the there to here. Throughout, however, their coherence, or otherwise, is provided as much by the fluency of Hopper’s canvases as the fluidity of my writerly imagination. The stories may differ in length, in perspective, in style, but ever with the possibility for a reader to return to the respective canvas, Hopper’s frozen moment readily available on the Internet, as a point of personal reflection.

Just as a viewer of this great artist’s works is invited to imaginative musings both within and beyond the borders of the canvas, so too I invite the reader – to imagine, muse, develop alternative narratives to the ones presented herein, or extend the existing stories in this collection. For anything is possible in a world respectful of creative expression.

I have lain bare my works of passage in relation to Hopper’s canvases. I now invite you to explore your own.

## Lady Luck Blues

(inspired by Hopper's *Eleven AM*, 1926, in the collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution)

His spit traced a path down the side of my head. A warm, wet slug coursing its mucous trail through my hair, sniffing around for the next green-leafed target. It would need a good wash later, to get all that slug spit out. I knew I needed to remind myself of the chore. I seemed to forget so many things these days.

I didn't want to try moving just yet. Nothing really hurt so bad that it made me think it was broken – just an ongoing dull ache down my right side, and my arm (from what I could see, prone as I was) squashed between my head and the tiles. Oh, and my head wedged against the radiator, producing a dull ache all its own.

I could still see his disgust. Clear as the cratered face of the moon on a cloudless night, it was. Hey – accidents happen! A girl can trip down a flight of stairs as she runs after an ex-lover, begging him to come back. But he seemed to read more into it. 'You goddamned whore,' he'd said. 'Cover yerself up.' Spat. And was gone.

I guess it was time to see that hoodoo woman.

I was in luck. No one else was around on the staircase when it happened. After the morning rush, before the midday scramble. Just me. And before that, him.

I'd gotten up late, see. Well, what? What did I have to get up early for? No job, no life. Wasn't into any of that flapper 'be there and be seen' scene. The hair, the hats, the waif-like bones slip-sliding with ease into waif-like clothes. No. I was full-bodied, full-haired. And up until a coupla weeks back, Ronnie had seemed to like that. Said he liked holding tight to what he was fucking without thinking it'd snap in two.

And yeah, I liked it as well. He'd come in with his moonshine after a Yankees game up in the Bronx and start telling me all about the homers Babe Ruth'd hit, while we got mellower and mellower. And then he'd pull his chair close, closer to mine. And then with his hand. Oh. Nice. Big hands. I liked them big. Big and good at grabbing, fingering, holding, caressing. Man, I liked those hands – how they'd tease, tickle, wander all over till I'd be fair moaning right there at the table. Take me. Take me to bed.

Every night, every day the same. I'd be fair shivering all over and then some. Till one day he left me in bed and said he wouldn't be back. That was hard, that was right hard. Guess I just didn't want to get up in the mornings no more. And now, here at the bottom of a flight of stairs. But I'd better try and move, before Mrs Murphy comes snooping around.

OK. So it's slow and it hurts, but nothing's broken. There's just this ache. Yes, Ronnie, I'm covering myself up now (I mean, what time did I have to do anything except throw on an old house frock when he fair bolted out the door? Of course it's gonna go all skew-if when you fall down the stairs. Ain't that logical? Men. What to make of their silly talk? Just what?).

Now, take it easy, slow back up the stairs and into the apartment. Maybe a coffee'll set me to rights. Or maybe another gin (well, it says gin on the label but all this bathtub moonshine is pretty much the same – just nice to have a choice between labels sometimes). A spell in the armchair by the window, that's what I need.

You know, I'd just been sitting there – earlier, by the window. Waiting till that heavy groggy wake-up sort of feeling passed. Just sitting and looking out at the things I could see. Till the sun'd come in and eclipse the rooftops opposite. Around 11ish each day it was.

Now back sitting here again. Thinking. About how it led up to this moment, and then the what-next, what this what-next would be.

See, just last week I'd been in Mr Frankel's drugstore down there on the corner. I'd gone in to ask if he had something to help me sleep. Something that wouldn't hit so hard as the gin each new morning. And while he was out the back having a rummage around, I did a bit of browsing, as you do when you're waiting, and came across the Lucky Heart shelf. There was this box called reconciliation powder – a man and woman pictured in a steamy embrace. Well, stands to reason I should notice a box like that.

Mr Frankel came back out just about then. He never said a word. But I've been going to him for everything from bellyache to ingrown toenails over the years, so why not tell him the sorry tale of Ronnie? He was honest – I do trust that man – and he said: 'Well, you could try this reconciliation remedy (they're actually crystal salts for putting in the laundry or washing the floor) but I'm not so convinced it works without going to

see a real conjure woman first. Normally I sell these hoodoo products to customers of Mattie Flint. She came up from New Orleans some months back and got herself a room above a speakeasy over on 4<sup>th</sup>. She tells the people what they need and how to use it and then they come in here for their supplies.’

I could understand his caution, but well, that didn’t worry me none. I’d buy the reconciliation crystals and see if they’d work. It couldn’t do no harm.

I washed the floor. My, it smelt nice. And then did the laundry. Ronnie had been gone a week. Unless he had a magic supply of clean clothes someplace, he’d have to be back at some stage. According to the directions on the pack, once he started wearing his freshly laundered clothes – hey presto! – he’d remember he loved me and all would be fine and dandy again.

But Mr Frankel’s sleeping draft wasn’t real effective. I still had to wash it down with gin each night.

Like a miracle, it was, him showing up here this morning. Hadn’t seen him down in the street, or stepping up to the apartment block. Like magic it was. And me not expecting him. But oh, how I squealed and threw myself at his arms.

He never looked at me, no. Just mumbled about getting his clothes and being gone. ‘It’s over, sugar. You know that.’ That’s what he told me.

But still I purred while he packed, and kicked off my shoes and lay on the bed. ‘Just one last time?’ I traced my fingers over a near shoulder as he folded clothes carefully into a carpetbag. Rubbed my bush against his hip, the bedclothes reeking of reconciliation. ‘Please?’ I licked at his ear.

‘No!’ He turned away and made for the door.

Oh God, I thought. Not yet, not yet. It’s all too quick. Grabbing that house dress, trying to get my arms into the sleeves, all the while running after him. ‘Ronnie, Ronnie don’t go. Not yet!’ I called.

He was down the steps before I was out the door. But he kept going, down the next flight of stairs, and that’s when it happened. The tumble. The landing. The spit.

My guts have gone all queasy. Time for another gin.

It took a few days before I wanted to tackle those stairs again. The stiffness was gone but the bruises were still coming out. A huge one on my knee – blue-black as night and

bumpy as a patched quilt. Another, wide and green, smirked from my hip. Head? Couldn't see the damage but it sure felt like a nest of eggs up there.

I dressed carefully, pulled my hair back in a tight braid, a warm broad-brimmed hat covered my ears. The good coat, my walking shoes. Coming toward nightfall, it was. I didn't want folks seeing who was going down the alley where them speakeasy boys loitered. Or that I was headed for the staircase beside the moonshine entrance. Up to Miss Flint on the second floor.

There was no sign out front but I'd checked the address with Mr Frankel. 'Now don't you be scared none,' he'd said. 'She's a good woman with a heart of gold, even if some of her methods seem a bit ... unusual for us white folks.'

I knocked. She called: 'Enter.'

I was in, into another world. There was darkness and light. Colour and jewels. Candles and scents. A fug which seeped through curtains and woodwork and into my pores. I was powerful, I was alive. I fair floated in that fug. There, in the presence of a priestess and the largess of her larder. Take this Ronnie, I gloated. You've got no chance against the spells of Mattie Flint.

'He ain't hit you none?' she asked, eyes of black pearl hooking straight into my heart. 'He gave no reason?' Again, a shake of the head was enough.

She breathed in, breathed out, great slow whooshing noises which filled the room. Settled herself more comfortably, stretched out that wide black frame housed in colours and fabrics that lapped round her like flowers in a bathtub. Closed her eyes.

'Well, we got some choices,' she told. 'It just depends on what you want to do.' She described the black cat bone spell – 'you gotta boil a black cat alive ...' – but trailed off at the drop of my jaw.

'I always offer that one,' she shrugged. 'It's the most powerful by half, but you whiteys, you got a thing about cats.' We discussed some more, but –

'I'm desperate,' I told her. 'I don't want no more sleeping drafts, gin or falling down stairs. I just want to be loved – good and proper every night. His hands, you gotta see his hands, Miss Flint. They hold a girl just right and I just can't take no more of being alone in that bed. It needs a man in it. It needs my Ronnie in it.'

She cocked her head, the better to scan my face. The beads on her headscarf did a little dance. ‘OK’, she said, ‘There’s nothin’ else for it – we’re gonna have to goofer him.’

Well, I didn’t know what the hell she meant by that, but it seemed Mattie Flint was being practical. ‘He gonna either die or love you,’ she said. ‘There ain’t no middle ground with goofer dust.’

I nodded. I was ready. If there was no Ronnie for me, there’d be plain no Ronnie.

‘That’s the way sister,’ the hoodoo woman chuckled. ‘I needed to see some fire in those eyes of yours. There’s too much water in you from what I see. Water can be good (she didn’t sound so convinced) but things slip through water and away. What you need now is fire. Warm you up. Warm him up. Make that sucker burn till he’s back in your bed.’

We set to work. She went about measuring out ingredients – fresh graveyard dirt (you gotta get it from under the headstone, see, before the spirit flies away), rattlesnake skin that she pounded up good till it looked like grit, some dust from a blacksmith’s anvil, a pinch of sulphur, a sniff of salt.

The mix went into a red flannel mojo bag (she called it a Jack Ball) together with a matched pair of lodestones for Ronnie and me. She whispered some gibberish and then I had to spit on them for good measure (sweet). Last to come was some love-me oil. I smeared it on my hands and rubbed it all over the flannel. It smelt good. I got wet. If only Ronnie could get the feeling back so easy.

The mojo bag was tied good and tight with a long length of gold thread. ‘Now pin it inside your brassiere – it’s gotta be worn next to the skin,’ she said, helping settle it in place.

‘You listening now? Every day at sundown you gotta do the ritual. First pee on the Jack Ball (she moved right on, stopping none for my reaction), then hold it by the hanging thread and swing it back and forth, back and forth, like this (she demonstrated with an imaginary bag). Call his name to draw him to you: *Ronnie, Ronnie, love me or die*. That’s what you gotta chant. Now you practice,’ she said.

I obeyed.

‘Keep those eyes closed and move to the rhythm. Shift those hips. Feet a little wider. You gotta want him in you, bring him back inside you,’ she lured with her hands. ‘OK. Now you’ve got it. Keep that up till you’re in a trance.’

???

‘You’ll know,’ she promised. ‘You gotta be in the mood, honey.’ She’d almost finished with the instructions. ‘So no more gin. Or coffee. Or sleeping drafts.’

I nodded.

‘You got a gramophone?’

Again I nodded.

‘Then take this record and you just keep playing it till you’re in the mood. And then you start that chant.’

It was dark when I left, the Jack Ball tucked safe next to my heart. Next day at sundown I’d start.

I tried to stay calm, but couldn’t help it. I just got more and more excited all next day. Even went down to Mr Frankel to get some more Lucky Heart love-oil. It smelt so good, I just wanted to drown in that bottle.

I took care to dress just right. Something satiny and low-cut. Oh yes. I’d peed on the ball, dabbed love-oil all over, listened to Betty Smith wail the Lady Lucky Blues. Her voice clawed away inside me, her pain my pain. Rubbed raw, bled dry:

*Lady Luck, Lady Luck*

*Won’t you please smile down on me*

*There’s the time, friend of mind*

*I need your sympathy*

*I’ve got his picture turned upside down*

*I’ve sprinkled goofer dust all around*

*Since my man is gone I’m all confused*

*I’ve got those Lady Luck blues ...*

I set up a sway in time with the rhythm, the Jack ball swinging back and forth of its own accord: *Ronnie, Ronnie, love me or die. Ronnie, Ronnie, love me or die.*

I tried several ways – once it sounded like a child’s nursery rhyme. That didn’t do it for me. Other times, it came out too high- or low-pitched. But then I found it – the

lyric pathos of a minor key. Oh yeah. This would call the sirens ... *Ronnie, Ronnie, love me or die. Ronnie, Ronnie, love me or die ...*

Trance? What trance?

I saw his face, his smile, his slow moving toward me across the room ... his kisses on my mouth, neck, breasts, hands coursing familiar territory far below. His murmurs of sugar, sugar, the bed on fire, oh how I laughed, cried, called out loud and long.

Oh – oh – oh.

It was 11am. The sun was bright, the apartment stripped bare by its insistent glare. It was late. But there I was, still lying in bed. An empty bottle of gin on the floor, the packet of sleeping draft tipped over on the chair. I rolled out of the sheets, love-me oil spilled through its folds. Put on my shoes. And went to sit by the window.

## The White Light of Nothing

(inspired by Hopper's *Automat*, 1927, in the collection of the Des Moines Art Center, Iowa)

The tiny circle of light held her. Unblinking. When would this call end? All around, fellow traffic girls were answering calls, reaching, pulling, making connections, switches in, switches out, lines, wires criss-crossing here and there, all a-flurry, all a-blur except that tiny circle of light stuck fast someplace behind Eleanor's eyes.

'Miss Mendel. Miss Mendel! Is something the matter?' The supervisor's voice called from a long way off, a long way off and far behind. Closer to her ear, Rose was calling down a trumpet: 'Ellie, are you OK?'

Behind a wall of smoke-stained glass, that's where Eleanor was, with a small circle of light. Everything else stuck, frozen, while the circle grew larger and larger till suddenly it was all white light and she was tipping over, over, and down into a sea of white light ... now the same voices were saying the same things, but directly above her face. She lay on the floor, stool upended beside her.

A nurse arrived – a spell in the rest lounge was called for. Rose could stay while she sipped water. The nurse was a little wooden, patting a cool cloth to Eleanor's face as she lay on the couch. 'You'll need to be examined by the doctor,' she told and left the room.

Eleanor sat up, stuck in a new frozen moment. The world seemed to shift without her realising, and suddenly a new situation would present itself. The white light, the couch, where next would she be stuck?

Rose held the glass, Rose brought it to her lips, Rose told her to sip, Rose started to cry. 'Oh Ellie, you know what'll happen now, don't you. You'll have to go away to one of those company rest homes. And who knows for how long!'

'But Ruth said it's not so bad.'

'Well, she would,' Rose snorted. 'But look how she's watched. Mrs Jennings never takes her eyes off her. They're just looking for another excuse to oust her – and the same'll happen to you!' She cried some more.

'Calm down,' Eleanor hushed, 'or she'll have us both in with Doctor Flynn.'

The doctor's office at AT&T was like any other's. Brightly lit, a desk, two chairs, examining couch, papers, books, charts, things.

'Miss Mendel – a fainting spell, hmmm? What brought that on, do you think?'

'I don't know, doctor,' she replied. The question hadn't actually occurred to her. He read her file, every now and then looking at her from over the top of his glasses.

'It's your first I see. But your supervisor has noted that you are susceptible to lapses in concentration? Inertia? Inactivity?' He was clearly expecting some response but she couldn't just now. She was getting that stuck feeling again. 'These can be symptoms of nervous exhaustion, nervous fatigue, you know.'

Stuck. Still. Still stuck.

He sighed and took off his glasses. 'I'll need to conduct a brief examination,' he said, 'but I think the diagnosis is quite clear.'

She was instructed to breathe deeply while the stethoscope did its work. 'Hmmm, you say you're well otherwise?'

'Yes.'

'Hmmm,' again. 'Do you enjoy your work here?'

'Yes.'

'Hmmm.' Then – 'I think a few days at our Cottage Green Rest Home in Pennsylvania might be in order,' and started to write on a pad. 'You just need a small correction to your habits,' he said to the writing pad. 'A proper amount of sunshine. Food and rest. A proper view of life, even, which can only be achieved if we take you out of your customary environment and place you in a company rest home for a period of recuperation.'

'My customary environment?'

'Yes, yes.' One hand shooed away an imaginary fly as the other continued to write. 'Work here, home life and so on. Just a little correction needed, to counter this view of life you have.'

'View of life?'

'Yes, yes – this inertia, these lapses of concentration. We need to correct your – your –'

Stuckness, she thought.

He looked up at last. 'That's all, you may go.'

‘Where?’ she blinked.

‘Well, home of course.’ His tone shifted up a notch. ‘You can’t continue your shift now, in this state.’

‘What state?’ This was confusing.

‘This state, this state of’ – searching for a word that might register – ‘nothing!

It exploded out of his mouth, rushed through space and landed in her lap. Which is where she found it – this thing called nothing. Dark down there, and murky. Smoky, foggy, glass stained and suffocating. Nothing clear in the nothing. Where had the white light gone? Where was that beautiful sea of white light that had grown from a tiny lamp on a Ma Bell switchboard?

‘Oh,’ she managed as the nurse came to unstick her from the chair and help her to the cloakroom.

The nurse put on her coat and hat. Gloves as well. Into her handbag went the doctor’s letter. ‘Now you go home and get a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow you can take the train from Penn Station down to Cottage Green – it’s just outside Philadelphia on the main interstate line. All the instructions are there in your bag. Give the doctor’s letter to the Matron in charge and soon they’ll have you right as rain. You’ll be back with us in no time.’

February. Spring was on its way but the nights still closed in early. It was cold out. Fog was coming up from the East River as Ellie made her way downtown. She looked fine enough in her full green coat with the faux fur trim, matching brown gloves and mustard yellow cloche. She hoped that no one could see the nothing, pulling the coat tight around just to make sure.

The streets were quiet for early evening. Everyone with somewhere to go was there already, it seemed, snug-warm and cosy by a fire in the grate. Home. Home. She was supposed to be going home. The doctor said. The nurse said. But she couldn’t. Not yet. She couldn’t face her parents – didn’t want them to catch a glimpse of the nothing. She could already see her mother’s disappointment, as clear as the switchboard light which had flown inside her.

Her mother’s disappointment. Her mother’s happiness. So happy when Eleanor had been accepted to operator training school. Her mother’s application textbook perfect, her mother wooing the company nurse during home inspection – it was her

victory, pure and simple. She always knew what to say, what to do. Mother never got stuck – frozen in a moment wondering how or why she got there, how or why she'd get out, or whether she'd even bother.

Ellie was passing the diner near 46<sup>th</sup> and Broadway when she saw the light again. It was the same milky white-white, the same round and hopeful moon. Here now, hatched in two long rows across the ceiling of a Horn and Hardart automat. She stood and let them blur – all together into one huge disc of light, a shimmering sea of white filling her eyes and memory. It was singing lessons on Saturday mornings and a treat from Mother before going home – lemon meringue pie and iced chocolate milk that splashed from a lion's mouth, froth-creamy and cold.

She looked in – to self-service vending machines and clean stone-topped tables. A coffee. A coffee might be a good idea. Pushed open the wide glass door with its polished brass handle and went over to the nickel thrower's counter.

'Looks like you need something against the cold, honey, you being as white as a sheet!'

She received her change with a wan smile. The coins jingled in her hand as she moved past signs for cakes, pies, pastries, sandwiches. A man stood at the macaroni and cheese window – three nickels in the slot, a turn of the knob and out popped his meal. She really wasn't hungry. She waited till he'd filled his coffee cup – 'no one makes a better cup of coffee, hey Miss' – placed her own under the ceramic dolphin's head, and pulled the brass handle. The pungent liquid hissed in. Wet, she thought. Water, she realised. Water never gets stuck.

She moved to a table over by the door. Far from the chatty man and the nickel lady. Close to the door where no one wanted to be, where a blast of cold air smacked hard each time someone entered. This was practical, this was safe, she thought. My coat can hide the nothing. She looked at her cup, removed one glove, the better to hold it, and slowly brought the hot edge up to her lips. Yes, her hand was shaking, but that was normal at the end of a long shift. Tired, that's all. Soon she'd be ready, able to go home and face a living room of smiling photos, papered walls and chatty mother.

But not yet, not quite yet.

Her eyes focused on the cup in her hand. Focused on thinking about where the nothing had come from. How to send it away? Send it someplace it couldn't come back

from? Someplace far beyond, far down, a place beneath the deepest seas – where white light would surround it, eat it up, stop it from getting inside her. Beautiful white light – that’s what she needed to protect her from the nothing. What did her father say when she was like this? That she was under the sign of Saturn. He also said there was someone called Freud who would call her melancholic. She didn’t know – Dr Flynn had called it the nothing. That was enough.

Things seemed much easier when Mother was around. Mother liked making decisions, telling everyone what to do. Mother decided what classes Eleanor should take at school, what instrument to learn, what books to read, what needlework to practice. Mother had read the recruitment notice for telephonists at Ma Bell, noting the good working conditions, employee benefit plan and a savings fund, even – more than any of the department stores were offering. Where would she be now if it weren’t for Mother?

But Mother couldn’t be on the switchboard with her. She had to watch for that tiny flashing light by herself. Anytime, anywhere it could pop up – someone wanting a connection – NOW! Having to watch more and more closely for that instant when the light was put out, extinguished – needing to disconnect – NOW! And always the supervisor hovered. Timing and monitoring calls – how fast the girls were, how polite, how accurate. The reason for more pay or less at the end of each week.

They were trained to be the voice with a smile. Eleanor had attended the long and difficult training sessions but it was still so hard to learn. She couldn’t believe there were so many places to stick your tongue or your lips to make sure you spoke just right, and always with this smile.

Sometimes you’d see the other girls, stretching, yawning, complaining of backache or headache or sore tired eyes. Telephone shock, they called it. But it never got to Rosie. How did she do it? So sweet and chirpy all the time, chewing gum with a wet smacking sound and smiling down the line at even the rudest caller. Skipping along the switchboard as if through a wildflower meadow. Always singing. Always making you laugh. Like when she made fun of the Al Jolson song they played on wireless radio:

*All alone, I’m so all alone*

*There is no one else but you*

*All alone by the telephone*

*Waiting for a ring – a ting-a-ling ...*

Sure, she poked fun but still the girls would go quiet at the end, feeling how all alone they were with little flashing lights and ting-a-lings instead of men.

Funny, thinking back, how quiet she herself became. If she didn't have to talk to a caller, easier not to talk at all. Saving energy for the next burst of tiny flashing lights that demanded undivided attention. Rosie would ask: 'You're not saying so much these days, Ellie, even on breaks. What's eating you, sweet pie?'

'Nothing,' would be her stock-standard reply. Nothing – the nothing – sitting right there in her lap. Eating her up from the inside-out. She quickly drained the coffee and looked around. No one had seen her thoughts, had they? No one had seen the nothing, there hidden by the table edge? She was alone, wasn't she? All alone?

A Cuban bussing tables came to clear her cup away. 'You finished there, Miss?' he asked in a thick accent. She nodded and moved to put on her free glove as he wiped the table down.

It was bare now. Bare and clean. White. And round. Big and round as a disc of white light. She sat, gloved hands in lap, hiding the nothing, staring into all that white, stuck. Tears came. Because of the brightness, all the white, that's all. Oh, how to fall into you forever! she thought. Into an ocean of white light, never having to surface and face the nothing. And tears drip-dripped onto the smooth surface of her phosphorous moon.

She walked home across the Williamsburg Bridge in the light of moon risen. Full and round. Stopped to watch its reflection skate across the surface of the East River. With each breath of wind scudding the fog away, its milky whiteness melting and spreading through the water, becoming lighter, whiter, bigger. As big as the sea itself. Maybe here it was. The light to take the nothing away, light as wide and deep and pure as the sea.

Over on the river bank, there was the nothing, that's where it lived. Over there where it was dark. Thick with sludgy oily fog, city fog, damp fog. There the glass was stained with nothing. Only within the moon's watery shimmer was there light. The light of knowing. It had tried earlier in the day, she realised now, tried to take away the nothing, this wonderful fulsome light. There at the switchboard, growing and growing inside her. White light pure. But it must have got stuck somehow.

But now. Now maybe a second chance. Water never gets stuck, she remembered, and her heart gave a little leap. No more nothing. Only white light. Here. Now.

She leaned over the railing to get a better look. Yes. Maybe. Here it was after all. Waiting for her. To come.

## Laughing at Clouds

(inspired by Hopper's *Chop Suey*, 1929, in the collection of Mr and Mrs Barney A Ebsworth)

Let me tell you the story of Jane and Frances. Well, more like it's the story of Jane as Frances told it to me. See, Frannie's the apple of my eye, tells me everything. It don't matter none that most girls these days think their Moms are too old-fashioned, what with the clothes and the hair and this whole flapper thing. Me and Frannie – we're tight, tight as a well-knit sweater.

Frances now, she works at Macy's downtown on 7<sup>th</sup> & 34<sup>th</sup> Street, in the lingerie department. She likes helping the ladies with their stockings and smalls, even though she don't wear so much of them herself! She's a little chatterbox, see, and the ladies coming to Macy's appreciate that.

But, she says, she never met anyone who could jabber on like Jane. Jane's over in cosmetics, and when it's a bit quiet on the floor or they have their tea break, there's always time for a quick chat. Apparently no one can fell silences like Janie; she just chops straight through them like a log-busy beaver.

Anyhow, these two were soon thick – same age, same interests. So they decide to start having lunch together each Saturday after the shops close at one at a chop suey place in Chinatown. Bit of a treat, you know. Well, one Saturday back in March, there they are at their regular table.

Oh, it's a simple place, Frannie tells me, but nice enough. The tables are always clean with little lamps on the windowsill. The girls can take off their coats and hang them by the door. Lots of well-to-do types pop in there, she says, because it's always on the way to somewhere. Jane likes it because it's easy to meet her boyfriend afterwards. He's down at the Exchange.

'Eddie always makes sure we do something special on a Saturday afternoon. After he's rung through the 1.30 quotes to the papers, he's free as a bird,' she chirrup to my Frannie.

OK, so Frances doesn't have a boyfriend yet. But that's not bothersome to me. She's a pretty girl and bubbly to boot; soon enough the boys will come sniffing around. Turns out in any case that Jane meeting Eddie was a bit of a fluke. He studied at Brown, so they don't exactly move in the same circles, if you get my drift.

Well, the story is she'd had to run a message up to men's wear, and was left waiting by Mr Symonds while he fitted a young gentleman with a new suit. When he came parading out with a dapper swagger, well, Janie couldn't keep her eyes off him, and he neither! He made a point of tracking her down in the store after his purchase was made, and then asked for her personal attention while he chose perfume for his mother's birthday – you can imagine how long he made that conversation last!

Mother's birthday? A likely story – oh, how I giggled when Frannie told me. I mean, we mothers have heard all these ploys before, we know a thing or two by our age, don't we? But Frances was genuinely impressed – and who am I to spoil her fancy? 'He must be a really sweet young man, Mom, to spend all that time choosing just the right thing for a birthday present!'

Now, where was I? Oh yes, Jane had scored herself a beau. And one with money and education and background to boot! I'm sure you know how those boys who worked the trading floor with the brokers made out – very, very well, I can assure you.

So on a chilly day back in March, the two of them head off to Chinatown to their favourite chop suey place, sit down, order, begin to chat. And, according to Frances, it all went something like this:

'You're never gonna guess what,' Jane started. 'Eddie's asked me to marry him!' Her brown eyes shone bright gold she was that happy.

'He never!' Frances countered. 'I mean, how long have you been going out now?'

'Well, it must have been a good six months since we met,' Jane went on in between mouthfuls of rice and vegetables. They both negotiated their chopsticks with ease. It really was the done thing these days.

'I mean, we're being quite proper about it all. We don't go to those petting parties ... he's squeezed my bubs a coupla times but that's as far as we've gone – no nookie. Remember he took me up to meet his parents at Rhode Island a month back?' She thought and chewed in sequence. 'I guess he wanted to check on their reaction before asking. You know, whether I'd fit.'

'Mmmm,' Frances managed before Jane started in again. She pushed bean sprouts around that little China bowl and kept right on listening.

‘You know, it’s the right time and all. So Eddie says. We’re in the middle of a bull market, a big bull market really, and they’ve been letting him buy on the margin and he’s managing to put away quite a tidy sum. He says.’

‘What’s on the margin?’ Frances asked.

‘Oh, don’t ask me,’ Jane sniffed. ‘Something to do with the stocks and buying and then selling them again and making money.’ She thought and chewed some more. ‘Oh, that’s right, I remember now – I think he has to borrow the money first to buy the stocks, but then he doesn’t have to pay it back till he sells them again, and by that stage he’s made a profit.’

‘Sounds a bit dodgy to me,’ said Frances.

‘Well, I don’t know. I suppose that’s just how it’s done. The big cheese, he really knows his onions, and he just tells Eddie how to do it.’ She shrugged. ‘Eddie trusts him ‘cause he trusts Eddie – that’s how it works in business. It’s only Eddie he’ll send down the speakeasy to get him his gin, you know. Eddie says it’s real funny – he goes in a door and up a flight of stairs and suddenly there’s a guy sitting at a table. You plonk your dollar down in front of him and ask for a fifth of gin. The guy makes it in his bathtub out the back and then he’ll put any label on it you want. Ain’t that funny? It’s the same gin, and all, but you get to choose your own label!’

Fran was busy with her vegetables.

‘Anyhow, Eddie says it’ll be real easy to set up house together. All this margin stuff means he’s got a good credit rating, so we’ll be able to buy all our things on instalment. Even a car – maybe even a breezer! So yeah, Eddie says it’s the right time to get married, so he asked me.’ She giggled and blushed all at once. ‘This afternoon we’re going window shopping for the ring – at Tiffany’s.’

‘Baloney!’

Jane nodded. ‘No, really! He makes good money, so why shouldn’t he spend it on something nice?’

‘Yeah, but Tiffany’s? That’s a bit more than nice,’ Frances reminded.

Suddenly serious, Jane leant across her bowl and hissed: ‘Look Fran – I can’t keep showing up at his college reunions and prom nights with cheap junk like this,’ pointing to her blue paste earrings. ‘It’s another world. There’s a lot of high hats in

those circles, you gotta know how to act, what to wear, what to show off. I'm sitting pretty and I'm not going to blow it.'

She took Frances' silence as approval, popped a water chestnut in her mouth and went on. 'Eddie's shown me this article that says if you put \$15 a month into stocks and shares, you'll make \$80,000 in 20 years. Imagine that! It's this bull market, see. We have to make the best of it.'

'Well, bully for you,' muttered Frances and stared at the table.

Jane humphed into the blackening atmosphere. 'What's eating you? I thought you'd be happy for me, and I was going to ask you to be my maid of honour,' she fidgeted, 'but if you're not interested ...'

'Yeah, sure I'm happy for you! And I'd be thrilled to be maid of honour ... thanks, thanks for thinking of me!' Frances hoped her tone was positive enough. She patted at her cloche hat, smoothing bumps that weren't there, loosened the scarf at her throat.

'Aw, applesauce,' came the textbook coy response.

That done and dusted, they chatted amiably about customers they'd served in the morning. Which ones needed more attention than others, and what they thought of the new stocking range just arrived – art silk in 'boulevard' and 'Spanish brown'. Perfect for summer, they agreed. Jane told that her mother had bought some Butterick patterns to try out the flapper fashion. They giggled and wondered if she'd be brave enough to swap her corset for a Lastex girdle.

'Do you want to trade books this week?'

'Mmmm,' said Frances. 'Shall we order some noodle juice first?'

'Yeah, sure,' signalling to the waitress for a pot of Chinese tea. Mid-afternoon sun streamed in through the restaurant windows and Jane blinked into its sudden shaft of light. 'Oh look, the sun's come out,' she observed. 'It's nice when the sun comes out.'

'Yeah,' Frances squinted, pulling a New Eagle Library book from her handbag while making her own weather prediction 'Those clouds look menacing.'

Jane screwed up her nose at the book's title. 'The Man She Hated? Do you really think that's the sort of thing I should be reading right now?'

Frances laughed. ‘Well, you know what’s gonna happen – they’ll get together in the end. And it’s a good one,’ she continued. ‘Mrs Alex McVeigh Miller – you like her, don’t you?’

‘OK,’ Jane agreed and brought out her own book to share, *The Tie That Binds* by Bertha M Clay. ‘See if this’ll convince you that life’s more fun with a man!’ she teased.

‘Mmmm,’ came Franny’s soft response. ‘I guess it’s just that I haven’t met anyone who’s taken my breath away. You know, like they write about.’

‘Well,’ Jane admitted. ‘Maybe it’s not like that for everyone ...’ Her voice trailed off as each decided this wasn’t a subject best broached in the moment.

Suddenly everything was all a-flurry. ‘My, look at the time – I’ve gotta scram! I promised Eddie I’d be at Dean and Delucca’s corner by 3 – oh, I’ll never make it!’ She gulped hot tea, fanning her throat dramatically and looking at Frances over the rim of her cup with big eyes. ‘Can you imagine? I’ll have to run in my Mary Janes!’

Then it was all a-rush to extract the compact from her bag, powder her face, re-pencil those eyes, and flesh out full lips in ox-blood red. She looked up and stared at Fran as if into a mirror. ‘You really should wear more make-up, honey, you’re almost invisible!’

Frances gestured outside. ‘Seen what the clouds brought? It’s raining pitchforks out there.’

‘Damn.’ Jane pulled her cloche down more firmly, encasing her head in the figure-hugging tea cosy, and blew a kiss across the table. ‘Oh well, I’m just going to have to brave it. I’ll pretend to be Ukelele Ike,’ and she was gone, singing at the top of her lungs:

*I’m singin’ in the rain*

*Just singin’ in the rain*

*What a glorious feeling*

*I’m happy again.*

*I’m laughing at clouds ...*

Frannie could hear her all the way down the block till the sound segued effortlessly into the plish-plash of rain against window glass.

Old Mr Wong himself came to clear the table as Frances finished up her tea, draining the tiny square pot to avoid heading outdoors herself. She smiled and thanked

him, left a generous tip for the workers to share. Pocketing the money with a small bow, he continued to wipe the table clean.

‘You crazy friend, you crazy friend, you crazy friend lotsa trouble one day,’ he said shaking his head. ‘Talk too much, talk too much too loud. And what about?’ throwing his hands up and almost scattering bowls and chop sticks to the four winds. ‘‘Bout nothing! Big fat talk about big fat nothing.’ He looked close at Frances and rubbed his fingers together two inches from her face. ‘It just paper. It just paper, you know? Big – fat – nothing.’

Frannie came home to dinner that night and told me and Stan the latest news from the Jane files (mind you, she did this each Saturday evening). The wedding duly took place in late summer up on Rhode Island, with the reception at the yacht club where young Ed’s Daddy’s a member. My Frannie looked a picture – she’s never been so dolled up! And she got to keep the dress and all. A coupla boys from Fred’s circle made overtures at the time, saying she looked like Louise Brooks of all people! A real gush, but to her credit, she told them she ain’t interested.

‘It’s not my world, Mom,’ she explained. ‘I don’t want the sort of life Jane’s got. It makes my guts kinda squirm. The stuff they do, the things they talk about – maybe Mr Wong’s right, in a crazy Chinese sort of way ... it’s all a sort of nothing. In the end.’

Anyhow, as rules go, Macy’s had a good one to help Fran stay apart from that world. Jane had to resign once she’d wed, and the friendship slipped gently away. And, well, a month or so back the stock market started to fall. It’s now mid-October, see.

Frannie came in last night from work, saying how crazy it’s been downtown all week with the news of falling stock prices every day, the customers all jittery and telling stories and all. It’s true. My Stan said it was only a matter of time before the luck ran out. Big bull market, indeed. I mean, he’d go into the barber and get a tip for Standard Oil, for heaven’s sake, rather than a decent shave! It made no sense. Everyone was talking about the stock market, even the bellhops at hotels thought they knew their onions.

And so Frannie says, ‘I wonder what’s gonna happen to Jane’s world now?’

Indeed, I say. Indeed.

## A Dime Spared

(inspired by Hopper's *Hotel Room*, 1931, in the collection of the Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid)

*I have failed I have failed.* She stared at the timetable on her lap but couldn't seem to make out what it said. *I have failed I have failed.* Tears dripped slowly onto the page, blotching all to an inky mush of fine print. *I have failed I have failed.* 'Aarrghh!' she cried and hurled the book across the room. It missed the vase on the dresser, instead reaching the windowsill, and there lay limp, seemingly curled in foetal comfort. Away from her rage. *I have failed I have failed.*

She must have slept. The light was still burning. But dawn had arrived to cradle the city in her arms. She went to the window, retrieved the timetable from the sill. Stood, shivering in her underwear. Hadn't she bothered to take out her nightdress?

She looked out on a brief sear of sunlight, bronze-coating the building opposite. Soon enough it was gone, she was gone, back to the gloom of her thoughts. That blasted timetable. *I have failed I have failed I have –*

'No!' she said out loud. No, don't start that again. It won't help. We'll try again soon, she encouraged her psyche. It'll be OK. We'll try again soon.

There was a tap at the door. 'Housemaid,' was the muffled explanation.

She rummaged in her case till she found a robe, pulled it on and went to the door.

'Can I make up your room, Miss?'

'Um. No. Not yet.' She chewed on a fingernail.

'But Miss, it's my last, and then I'm off.'

She smiled. 'It's OK. You don't have to bother – I'm checking out.'

'Oh, thank you, Miss,' and a broad grin. 'Have a nice day!'

She closed the door, let the robe slip from her shoulders, sat back down on the edge of the bed, and picked up where she left off the previous evening with the train timetable. *I have failed I have failed.*

*failed I have failed.* Her shoulders hunched. She moaned a low note. Clare Baker-Hamilton. What are you going to do?

That book in her hands. Lines and lines of names, numbers, destinations, times. Looking, searching for the train back home. Change at Chicago and then on and up. On and up to Montana.

She could picture the scene – getting off the train, her family patiently waiting. Joe scuffing the dirt with a holey boot, not wanted to meet her eyes. Ma and Pa a mix of happiness at seeing her safe and well after so long, and profound disappointment. That she had failed, her white collar smudged with the grime of unemployment.

She'd only just finished paying them back for the four months of courses through business college. It'd cost so much and there hadn't been much left out of her pay packet each week to put aside. For a start, the lodging at the Barbizon wasn't cheap. It was a genteel residence after all – her parents hadn't been happy for her to come to New York City without a good place to stay, and the YWCA's reputation was very sound. Prospective tenants needed three letters of recommendation. They'd gotten the pastor, her high school teacher and old Mrs Grimes for whom she'd cleaned once a week after her stroke. All proving what a good girl she was, with high thoughts in her head.

Words like 'failure' hadn't been in her vocabulary back then, but neither had 'Great Depression' meant very much. She had tried to save money but it was hard. Expenses like the Barbizon, but also the navy blue wool jersey dresses with those starched white collars she'd needed to buy to last a full working week. Only coffee and a doughnut for lunch at the drugstore counter, though, and she didn't smoke Wings or Camels like the other girls.

Yes, she'd get right off that train, straight away hand them her purse. And they'd look inside, disappointment less than a second away. Nothing more to show for more than a year in this damned Big Apple.

Her bare shoulders hunched some more at the prospect. No, she couldn't go back. She couldn't show them she'd failed. She closed the timetable with deliberate finality. There had to be some other way. Still, she had to move out, had to leave, leave now. And until two minutes ago that had meant going home, getting on that train and going home. But –

No, no, no, she steeled herself. You may be a failure. But they don't need to know about it. Ma and Pa and Joe have enough of their own troubles without you lobbing in with some grenades of your own.

Time to dress and finish packing what she'd started the night before, pull on her wool crepe hat and slip into her shoes, stand at the dresser in that closet of a room which had been home since she'd arrived in this town – a room, no bigger than a cupboard, the same as any other in the hotel. Twenty-three floors of tiny rooms, all with the same bed, dresser and easy chair, all with the same working girls as their sole occupants. A colony of ants, that's what they were, with a code of conduct and a code of dress, strictly enforced from the day the establishment had opened on the Upper Eastside's 63<sup>rd</sup> Street four years prior.

The door of her room closed, almost by itself, yet the key lingered in the lock. Are you really sure? it asked.

She took the elevator down to the lobby, crossed the terrazzo floor to a polished mahogany reception desk, handed in her key – 1027. 'You've already finalised your account, Miss?'

'Yester evening,' she confirmed as the boy behind the counter pulled a receipt from the pigeonhole.

'But my plans have changed slightly,' she continued. 'Is it possible to stow my luggage till later in the day?'

He smiled. 'No trouble,' he said. 'And no extra charge.'

Relief swamped her belly. Ridiculous, really, as it would probably only amount to a couple of dimes, but she was so conscious of how quickly her savings would disappear if she didn't stay vigilant. Turning to go, and buttoning her coat in expectation of a typical November morning, she inadvertently caught the eye of Mrs Molly Brown sitting there on the grand lounge, perhaps waiting for her driver, perhaps just sitting and waiting to be noticed.

'No!' Mrs Brown exclaimed. 'You're not leaving us, sugar plum?'

She sat down beside the famous figure, Titanic survivor, charity fundraiser, actress and teacher, and sighed. 'I'm afraid so, Mrs Brown,' and, lowering her voice, 'I lost my job, see, and, well, prospects are slim.'

The older woman took her hand and gave it a firm squeeze, accustomed as she was to dispensing homespun wisdoms. ‘Follow your heart,’ she advised. ‘It’ll show you the way.’ And – ‘God sends these things to try us. But there’s always someone worse off. Now don’t you go forgetting that!’

Clare’s eyes were moist. Yes. If her parents knew she was wallowing in self-pity, they’d be doubly disappointed.

‘Now, un-hunch those shoulders,’ Mrs Molly Brown commanded, ‘and go find your way.’

It was chill out, a briskness that stung her cheeks and pushed her hands deeper down in her pockets. She began to walk. Downtown. A natural instinct, it was where her office job had been until a few days ago. Down in the Garment District at a workshop – twenty cutters and machinists making factory overalls for the Brooklyn Shipyards, amongst others. It was their biggest contract, the one they didn’t dare lose.

She’d been the manager’s secretary, working her obligatory 44 hours, taking dictation, typing up letters of introduction, letters of offer, letters requesting payment, letters demanding payment. Letters she walked up to the General Post Office each day beneath shadows cast by the new Empire State Building. And then back to the office, filing all those carbons of all those letters. Filing, filing, filing. So many letters. So many carbons. So much hope wrapped up in so many words. Still, it didn’t help. Slowly, slowly, slowly, business slowed down.

She walked, pushing her hands as far into her pockets as they would go. Three days back, Mr Massey had sat her down, told her the news.

‘I’m sorry, Miss Baker-Hamilton,’ he’d begun, ‘but I have to let you go. And half the women on the shop floor as well. I don’t know if it’ll be enough for us to keep the business’ head above water, but I have to try. My wife will make the typing, I just can’t afford your salary no more.’

He’d given her an extra week’s pay together with the ten despondent women chosen at random. It was more than the union would have been able to negotiate in these God-awful times. ‘Guilt money,’ one called it with gritted teeth. But no, Clare thought, he’s just a good man. We were lucky to be working for a good man.

Always someone worse off, she remembered, as her feet maintained their perpetual motion, past the Garment District, still heading downtown, now on 6<sup>th</sup>, the Avenue of the Americas. She walked. It didn't seem to matter where.

Always someone worse off, she thought, remembering the women laid off with her, women she'd only ever known slightly. Most were migrants with limited English. She had been shy amongst them in the tea room, hadn't experienced such types back home in Montana. They were all older, tougher, with families, kids to feed, husbands already out of work or gone for good. Their jokes were rough. Their teeth were clenched. It fit the times.

Yes, Clare, she reminded herself, stop being such a sop. There's always someone worse off.

She came across a bread line. Poor souls. They stood and shuffled, in a dance with no partner. From foot to foot, to a beat with no tune. Muttering occasionally, or standing mute, shell-shocked by ill-fortune, blowing stale breath into mitten-less hands, tugging collars higher around cold necklines caked in grimy sweat.

It was only November, she thought. It'll only get worse. Poor, poor souls.

The line continued in the direction she walked. But she slowed her pace, couldn't help but move more slowly as a mark of respect, in silent concert with their plight, watching the faces, registering the pain, acknowledging the sorrow. So the line continued and turned the corner at West 14<sup>th</sup>.

Follow your heart, said Mrs Molly Brown.

She turned where they turned. And there, halfway along the block, reached the head of the queue. Outside the Salvation Army Temple, its door firmly shut.

The first man in line, dull bloodshot eyes, chin chunky with grey stubble, arms firm across his chest, stood erect and eyed her suspiciously.

'You waiting for a meal?' she asked.

'They'll tell us when it's ready,' he responded.

'Will there be enough places for all of you?'

'As long as there's one for me.' Oh – the sadness, resignation, determination in his voice. Churned together in a soup of survival. I have only enough reserves for me.

She wondered if he had a family. Or had left a family. She wondered if he had labels like 'failure' at the forefront and turned away from his face.

But in point of fact, he had looked away long before, looked down and away from her sympathetic eyes. Pity, she realised. Forget pity, and while you're at it, cry halt to all those ego-stroking noises of compassion. He wants action. They all want action, action to lift them out of this malaise. No comforting arms or kind words requested or required, thank you very much. Give over. Leave be! It brings nothing but satisfaction to a wallowing pig. They were beyond that. Dignity! their bowed bodies begged. Dignity, if you please! And a warm, full belly so we may tackle another day.

She turned away from his face and immediately into another, a picture stuck to the wall beside the door. A placard, actually, of a Salvation Army officer captioned as follows: 'There is no reward equal to that of doing the most good to the most people in the most need.' And ascribed to Evangeline Booth. Whoever she is, Clare thought. Whoever she is, those are fine words.

Spontaneous, immediate, deliberate. Like a jump from a cliff, launched in mid-stride, with no hesitation of how or where the landing might be. She knocked, opened the door and announced to an empty room: 'I want to help.'

The bell tinkled a second time as she closed the door and stood firm in the foyer, a voice appearing before its owner. 'No, no – it's not time yet,' stopping short as he caught up with his words, rounded the corner and saw Clare.

'Err – can I help you, Miss?' the young man asked.

'I want to help,' she repeated.

He lost some of his stiffness, smiled. 'That's mighty kind of you. This way.'

He led her fast down a corridor, down steps to a basement and round back of an eating hall into a kitchen. 'You can leave your things here,' he pointed. 'Aprons are over there,' he instructed.

'Mavis?' he called to an older woman with stiff curls. 'Can you assign a task to Miss – Miss –'. He looked at her blankly.

'Baker-Hamilton,' she said.

His eyes crinkled at the corners. 'We'll discuss formalities later,' he said. 'For now, good luck.'

She watched, listened and learned. 'Mavis makes a little go a long way,' a girl called Sally, probably around her own age, told. 'It's hot and wet, and well, bread always fills a belly. No matter if it's stale,' she smiled. 'It's always good for dunking.'

She stood on the line and handed out rolls. Few smiled. ‘Don’t think they’ve got any more smiles left in ’em,’ Sally whispered. ‘But we try to keep it pleasant,’ and gave a wide and toothy grin to each one with a ‘Here you go,’ or ‘This’ll fill you up,’ which Clare tried to copy as best she could.

After all were served and at tables, the young man and a group of his fellow uniformed Salvos came in and sang. Bible songs, of course. They had good strong voices, and these voices were full of love. For God, Clare acknowledged, but especially for the grey wan faces bent low over their soup bowls.

‘Come on,’ Mavis roused. ‘No rest for the wicked. You can get to helping with tomorrow’s breakfast – we’ve got doughnuts to make,’ as the men filed out, back out into the cold. They seemed a little cheerier though. There were conversations to be heard now, and some hummed the tunes just sung.

She found herself doing likewise as she mixed sugar, lard and eggs into the batter. Mavis laughed. ‘You’ll soon get the words, m’ dear, and be singin’ ‘em in yer sleep!’ as they shared a chorus of one old favourite:

*I love to tell the story,  
‘Twill be my theme in glory,  
To tell the old, old story,  
Of Jesus and his love.*

‘I never get around to memorising the rest,’ Sally admitted as she cut dough and melted lard in the pans for frying.

Clare’s energy was waning. She hadn’t slept much last night, she remembered, trying to stifle a yawn, but wasn’t too successful.

Mavis smiled. ‘You’ll sleep well tonight, young lady.’

At that, Clare stopped short, was wide awake. Sleep. Sleep? ‘I – I don’t know where,’ she stammered. ‘I hadn’t thought that far ahead.’ So they stood and fried up those doughnuts and talked about what to do. Clare was adamant. ‘I’m not going back home to Montana,’ she said. ‘I want to help. I want to help here. Every day. But I’ve no place to live, no job, no money.’ She chewed her lip.

Mavis chuckled. ‘You sound just like a bum!’

‘What you need is a flophouse,’ Sally giggled.

The young man, Major Mitchell he was called, materialised in the doorway. 'There's a room upstairs – high up, in the attic,' he said. 'It's just a cot, mind, but we'll be able to find a blanket, and there's an old tin stove in there you can use for heating.'

'Very basic,' he stressed, looking at her fine wool dress under the starched apron. 'And you'd have to eat as the men do. There's nothing else here.'

'I'd be mighty grateful, sir,' Clare said.

'No,' he said. 'The Lord brought you to us. It's us who are grateful.'

They sent Harvey with her to collect her luggage from the Barbizon. Harvey, a real bum, who also wanted to help. 'Idle hands do the Devil's work,' he told. 'I seen what some o' them boys gets up to with all their darned wasted hours – I'd rather be a Salvos gofer any day.'

Harvey also accompanied her with a kettle to street corners in the months which followed. They rang the bell. They banged the tambourine. They accepted every coin with genuine grace. Panhandlers always moved on when they set up. 'It's like a gentleman's agreement,' he told. 'They don't want to compete – they know the good works that come from Salvos donations, that they're just as likely to score a meal as the next bum.'

He smiled toothlessly at a little girl who dropped a dime into the kettle with one hand while holding firm to her mother with the other. 'People ain't got so much money now,' he explained. 'But they ain't got so much resistance to giving neither. What I sees is people got more compassion in hard times. A lot o' them know that there but for the grace of God ... You can read it in their faces, by golly.'

Harvey told he'd always been a bum. It was the reason he never got low. 'It's the only life I evers known,' he said. 'I got no need for money, I've never had any. Never had nothing, so don't want nothing – see? I'm used to eating slim, sleeping rough.' He shrugged. 'It's the new poor I'm sorry for. The ones who've fallen furthest – you can tell,' he said. 'You can tell by the eyes – it's not just a body craving a decent feed, but in here too,' pressing hard to his chest, 'where there's a heart craving decent hope.'

He started to sing:

*They used to tell me I was building a dream, and so I followed the mob,  
When there was earth to plow, or guns to bear, I was always there right on the  
job.*

*They used to tell me I was building a dream, with peace and glory ahead,  
Why should I be standing in line, just waiting for bread?  
Once I built a railroad, I made it run, made it race against time.  
Once I built a railroad; now it's done. Brother, can you spare a dime?  
Once I built a tower, up to the sun, brick, and rivet, and lime;  
Once I built a tower, now it's done. Brother, can you spare a dime?*

One day Clare sat and wrote a letter to her parents. She sat at a big long bench in the dining hall, a cup of coffee at her elbow, an old serge housecoat covering her increasingly threadbare wool jersey dress. Sat and wrote about what she felt, what she had learnt, what had been, what might become. Had gone and put the savings she'd never touched into a money order which now lay in the envelope awaiting her letter's companionship on a long overland journey home to Montana. Yes, she was certain of her conviction, her choice – she was at peace in the place where hope lives.

It was hard to remember the feelings of before, of when she had faced this transition from the then of normalcy, through the despondency of failure, to the finding of her way. She sat and thought about it in the few precious moments of silence before her next work would be needed. No – it wasn't there. She couldn't conjure the memory, or emotions, any better than a rabbit could be pulled from a hat. The only thing which had stayed with her from that time, accompanying her every act, was Mrs Molly Brown's squeeze of the hand and heart-centred words of wisdom. Yes, she had indeed done as advised.

Just then, Major Mitchell – John – came in to stand quiet behind her while she finished her letter, placed it in the envelope and sealed its contents with a kiss. At last, she looked up, around and into his eyes. And he reached down to squeeze her hand.

## One Day, the Singing Bird

(inspired by Hopper's *Room in Brooklyn*, 1932, in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

'I'll be going now,' he called from the door. 'Back before dark.'

She could hear his fidget with the handle, knew he was watching for some reaction. Knew he cared, knew he hesitated before leaving her alone with this sadness. But she had no energy to muster a reaction, one at least which would put him at ease. Her hair hung neat, flat, head turned a mite toward the streetscape below – shoeshine boy at the corner, grocer putting out apples, chalk scratching a price on the front of a crate.

She knew he still watched the nape of her neck. His deep breath, a slow and deliberating intake of air, filled the space between them. He walked back toward her, heavy boots scuffing the linoleum, hat crushed in his big fist, came up and placed a hand on the back of her rocker to slow its perpetual movement.

'You'll be OK?' he questioned of no one in particular. Then – 'I'm trying, Maddy, I'm trying real hard ... let's see if there's something going on down at the naval yards today, hmmm?' Walked away, back to the door, closing it with a finality which meant that this time he hadn't looked back.

Now she was free. To sigh. To let out all that stale air – how long had it been trapped inside, tightening her throat? A pity to replace with more stale air. The acrid air of this city, this place.

She resumed her gentle rocking, a comfort in the face of all things foreign. When she rocked, the dirty chimney tops opposite began to sway like a breeze-rustled tree. Back and forth, to and fro. Well, only if you blurred your seeing. And pretended just a little. The rocker's rhythmic squeak blocked the street sounds below. That itself was enough. For now.

The sun, low but bright in this early morning sky, slowly began to warm the room. Yet still too chill to take off her robe. No, let's be honest. She mostly didn't take it off, instead staying snug-wrapped, cocooned from the cold of this foreign town, cocooned with her baby quietly growing inside.

She looked over to the vase of flowers standing there on the little side table Papa had made. A wedding gift, when there'd been no money for anything more than make-

do. But where did he say he'd gotten those flowers from? In he'd come yester evening, all smelling of moonshine. That's right – the flowers had come from an old lady over by Driggs Avenue. Here he was, coming home from a blind pig, a few coins still jingling in his pocket (surprise, her first reaction to this news) and an old lady having stopped him. Hand held up, flowers held out, imploring: 'Please sir, good sir, kind sir, spare a thought for the babes your coins will help feed. Take a few blooms home to your own good family. Your few coins will bring good into more than one life.'

He wept as he relayed the tale. The grog talking, she couldn't help but note, even as her own heart bled for that self-same hardship wrought on the shoulders of innocents. 'There's always someone worse off, Maddy, from what I see. And we've seen a lot already in this town, ain't we. So when she spoke of babes, and I thought of ours soon to come ...' Spare a thought, indeed.

She had to admit it was nice to have flowers. Something pretty, just this once, to soften the sparseness of the room. Yes, only this room. It, and a tiny side room just big enough for a bed and their trunk. A makeshift kitchen ran against one wall, shared bathroom down the hall. And the baby? Where would their child fit into this nothing space? Maybe she could tidy out the trunk as its little bed? To be frank, she hadn't given it much thought as yet. Thought needed energy and she had none to spare. All gone in the rocking and the looking, the sighing and the sitting. All gone. All gone.

Hard to think back to a life before this, a life before everything was all gone, all used up and snuffed out here in a Brooklyn shoebox, with a view onto identical brownstone shoeboxes, a sea of grubby chimney pots above, litter and melancholy below. Where was the green? Where was anything green hereabouts? She had to think hard to remember, to re-remember green, shut her eyes tight to the starkness of those brown building blocks across the way, set against a blue-blue sky, too blue for so much brown. The rocker squeaked back and forth, to and fro, harder, faster. She was trying to enter that other space where life had been, had been before now ...

Ah yes. Now she saw – a sunny day. Back and forth she went on the old swing Papa had tied to the strongest straightest bough of the apple tree, there in the midst of an orchard of apples. An apple tree planted when she was born, no less. 'Keep a green tree in your heart, Maddy, and the singing bird will come,' he ever-counselled when she

low. Learnt by heart from his Gran-mamy's American Presbyterian Mission book of Chinese proverbs.

Back and forth she swung, higher, higher, looking up through green summer leaves and ripening fruit to sparkly sunlight and blue-blue sky. Not too blue, no sir, just the right amount of blue-blue. She laughed, happy, here in her memory, a green tree in her heart. Jake stopping in for a lemonade and a slice of cake and her coming in to make polite talk, smoothing her dress, rubbing grass stains from her knees.

Jake.

No, she didn't want that memory. That memory connected then to now. No. And pushed off again on the apple tree swing.

Squeak went the swing, its ropes trailing long and languorous from a sturdy branch. A happy squeak, not strident, rather melodious, chatty even. Still, she slowed her passage to let other sounds enter the space of their conversation, she and the branch – of the breeze shifting leaves, of singing birds twitting about up high in the crown, of her father calling instructions to the farm boys, which field next to plough.

Opened her eyes and again saw Jake – couldn't help it. He was part and parcel of life back then as much as all the rest of it. Fine muscled body, tanned and fair-bursting out of his work singlet, beaten-up old hat shielding his eyes. Blue-blue, not too blue, no sir, her Jake's eyes. He was the one. He'd be the one. Watching him talk things over with the boss, her father, respectful he was, and considered were his responses. Verily could she watch his thoughts form before replying. With wisdom, she expected.

But her Mama full of reproach. She shouldn't be having such thoughts yet. 'You learn all these good-wifely things first and then a man'll come a-courting you,' she'd say as Maddy sat over her sewing, unpicking the mistakes from the day before.

She'd sit in the old front room to sew. Mama in the rocker, Maddy on a stool at her feet. The windows wide in here, wide and high. Only past nightfall would they draw the curtains, cosy up the old farmhouse a tad. But in the afternoons they would sew and darn and patch and mend. The linen, socks, farm clothes. All these things that needed sewing and darning and patching and mending. All the while seeing what there was to see out beyond those high wide windows. The porch with its flower pots, the corner of garden set aside for vegetable-growing, past it the orchard. Which in turn gave way to

the wide-wide fields of Papa's corn and wheat, and their placid herd of dairy cows dappled against Vermont's green hills.

Sometimes, though, she looked beyond this beyond. Into the blue of sky. Such a blue-blue. And air so fresh. Such a fresh-fresh, that she drank in, in huge grand gulps. Sweet, so sweet it was, living with all this blue and all this green. With squirrels and hares and foxes and deer and birds all round, and their farm smack-bang in the middle.

Jake.

Jake too in the middle of it all. To watch him pull an old flannel on over that work singlet, wash his hands at the pump in the garden before coming up onto the porch and into the house, a fine smile always set on his fine-fine face. His hands big – big as a bear's, too. And Maddy always trying to sneak a peak at his broad chest, its hair and muscles no shirt wanted to hide.

Soon enough he was eating with the family every night before heading back to his lodgings in the village. Soon enough he was walking Maddy out to the orchard, a shy hand placed over her own as he rocked her back and forth on the swing. Soon enough warm sweet breath was in her ear, its love talk all tender and soft. Soon enough that warm breath was in her mouth, on her neck, at her breast.

The wedding was a simple affair, times were getting hard by then. But that was of no concern or consequence to happy lovers. The pastor rode out from Stowe, and a three-piece jig band came to make the dancing. Mama did the cake, a sweet confection of cream curls and rich fruit, and everything took place in the orchard. Maddy had even managed to concoct a dress out of some old ivory curtain ticking, with a little lace for the sleeves and bodice courtesy of Aunt Peggy's sideboard runner. And there was Mama's wedding sampler, all rolled up in crepe paper and tied with ribbon, to take her breath away – a cross-stitch of her favourite things. Hares and deer, a sugar maple and red clover border, bride and groom placid under an apple tree at its centre.

Jake had shaken her own apple tree till its pink-white blossoms filled her hair and carpeted the ground with springtime joy. My, she looked a picture. There was enough happiness for the whole world to be smiling that day.

Late in the evening, when things were quiet, everyone tired out from the dancing, the laughing, the feasting and the drinking, the band had played Vermont's own ballad,

*The Legend of Margery Grey.* The audience hushed, she remembered, in the face of this melancholy air, though she had to admit she hadn't taken so much notice. Then.

*In her arms a laughing baby  
With its father's dark hair played,  
As he lingered there beside them,  
Leaning on his trusty space,  
'I am going to the wheat lot,'  
With a smile said Robert Grey,  
'Will you be too lonely Margery,  
If I leave you all the day?'*

It wasn't long till the milk soured for want of a buyer, and the apples rotted before being sold. No money for anything. All because of some crazy men, and something called stocks and bonds, and President Hoover not knowing what the darned heck to do.

That was when he'd said one night, tucked up in the slim bed they shared in her childhood bedroom, 'Maddy, it's time we went searching for work.' That was when the swing stopped altogether, the apple bough squeak fell mute. And her eyes wide in the dark, hand pressed to a stopped heart, while his cigarette glowed with each silent draw.

He had argued the case well. Mama and Papa couldn't keep supporting them, the farm brought in nothing nowadays. All was wasting away, wasting away, the land as fallow as a sucked-dry river bed. And what was Mr Hoover doing about it? Hadn't he failed the man on the land? On and on.

She looked to the window, uncurtained this evening the better to see the moon once risen. But look what else had crept in through the glass – the now, the now of this life, a now where no apple tree bough supported her heavy heart, a now where she sat in Mama's chair, rocking, instead.

'New York,' he'd said. 'There'll be work in New York.'

And more. 'We'll come home, don't you worry none. We'll come back, Maddy, when we've made some money to help your Pa run the farm again. You know, proper like. When the market picks up again. It's gonna have to, Maddy. This ain't a forever thing. I'm sure of it. But we gotta do our bit to help. And the best way is to make some money. Somewhere there's money to be made.'

New York, he'd said. There'll be work in New York.

‘Remember Mickey O’Connor? He wrote his parents that he found work in the naval shipyards in Brooklyn. Every day they come out to the gate and tell how many men they need on the works. Some days it’s more than others ... but always the young strong ones are likely in. Scrawny city tykes have nothing on us mountain farm boys.’

Oh, so convincing he made it sound! Oh, how she and Mama cried while Papa nodded his assent! He said there was a good governor looking after the state of New York – a Mr Franklin D Roosevelt. ‘He’s got some grand ideas and if he makes it to President, then we’ll be sharing in the good fortune too,’ said Papa.

There was nothing for it but to pack the trunk and wrap up Papa’s side table, Mama’s rocking chair. Mama said she’d keep the wedding sampler safe, though. It’d be all framed and waiting for them by the time they got back. ‘Just you wait and see!’ Down to the train station at Waterbury-Stowe in the old buggy. No tears left by then, but she and Mama sure hugged tight till their breath gave out.

Oh, how many state lines they crossed! New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York. Till finally into Pennsylvania Station, New York City. Where everything was so big and tall and dirty and cold.

Where no birds sang. Where people walked grey-faced and sombre. Where bread lines stretched round blocks, for blocks. Where the sun had a hard time peaking between buildings to bring a little hope to chill limbs and sad hearts. Where Jake told tales of nineteen shoe shiners in just one street, all hankering after a penny. Where the grocer told tales of fights breaking out at the neighbourhood dumpster over scraps of putrid maggoty meat. Where she answered the door a dozen times a day to grimy-faced youngsters with bruises on their arms selling newspapers, or hawkers peddling anything from cheap neck-ties to rubber balls. Till she answered the door no more –didn’t want to see it, face it, their sadness no more. Nothing for it but to sit in Mama’s chair and rock, just rock and rock the days away.

Soon enough, this day, the sky turned that ruddy stain of a city-lived dusk and Jake’s key was in the door. This time he smelt of tar and oil and was tripping over his words with news of a couple of hours spent in the yards on a cruiser called *New Orleans*. There he was at the kitchen sink, stripped to the waist, washing up. ‘Tomorrow, tomorrow I’ll be back again. There’s sure to be more going on tomorrow.’

So she listened, and looked at that fine muscled body, into those blue-blue eyes. Believed what he told, because she wanted to, because she knew he wanted her to. What did it matter? What did any of it matter? Here was now, there was then. All the same – what you believed, what was real.

What you believed was what was real, she decided, pulling the green tree out of Papa's proverb and plopping it straight back where it belonged, in her heart. What you had inside was what was real.

She sat in Mama's rocker. Papa's side table held the flowers. Jake came over to her, smelling of Sunlight soap and hope. Their own apple tree would fruit, she knew, hugging her belly tight. The singing bird would come. One day.

## Perfectly Fine

(inspired by Hopper's *Compartment C, Car 293*, 1938, in a private collection)

I can honestly say that I don't think I had ever seen anyone, anything so perfect, everything in place as it ought to be. The way she walked – my, it was as if she glided on water, like a swan, where any hint of movement is sunk beneath a becalmed sea. A swan, which seemingly arrives at here – from there – without any effort, without any conscious intervention.

That is how she entered my life. As a perfectly presented floating swan. And the truth be known, that's how she stayed. Everything in place, no disorder or awkwardness. Ever. I wasn't even curious or intrigued to know if she picked her nose or flossed her teeth like the rest of the population. Disbelief suspended as surely as her wings arched, feather by curled feather, over her beautiful back. Her neck, long, slender and unblemished, sculpted by the hand of God himself, turned and nodded in my direction. Here was perfection's countenance, right in front of me. Lucia, my new secretary.

When she started in the firm, others called her the ice queen. Impenetrable, they claimed. Too cold to touch, fingers needing to be ripped raw from that frigid surface, they joked. There could be no expectation of her eventual melting, or even a remote chance of softening, they insisted. She would never open up like the other girls who came and went through the brokerage – mostly on their knees, in front of open trousers.

But that's what held her apart, above, on high. This self-elevation, this 'I'm complete' aura which cloaked her form. All white light. White light and perfection – that was the aura, those were the words it spoke. I made no attempt to crack it, break through as others did, content simply to bask in the radiance of this light, and observe. Probe with my mind, penetrate, peel softly away each layer of a perfect whole to reveal its inner essence.

Her husky's eyes, for example, a clear intelligent arctic blue that said she could see straight through you and back out the other side. Her smooth curled locks of hair, the colour of ripened wheat; her elegant hand, swiftly, seamlessly, taking dictation; her skirt perfectly exposing the curve of her hips without being provocative. Her legs – I

imagined they would be soft, cool to touch at first, but gradually warming the closer I came to the source. Her source. Of life. Energy. Power.

I would need to shift in my seat after thoughts such as those, clear my throat of its lump of desire, while she watched me with those eyes, pen poised for the next notation.

It was after we'd worked late one evening, tidying up a very important deal, that I offered to walk her to the subway, to be sure she arrived home safely. She seemed genuinely appreciative of my concern. And so it began, our companionship. Slowly. Smoothly. Gliding across water, unruffled perfection.

The other men made lewd suggestions of a tiger lurking under her cool veneer. How she'd be in bed with smudged lipstick, hair askew, passionate eyes, a wild cat scratching, clawing. I'd carry her mark the rest of my days, they said. But I stopped my ears to such talk. She was my angel. Perfect inside, perfect out. She settled me, calmed me, was protective of me. Compassionate, even, to my way of being.

We married in a small registry office ceremony. She required none of the usual trappings. Just us, witnesses, and celebrant. So beautiful, so pure in ivory silk, she was. Perfection suited her so well.

I tried. I tried hard. But how could I be a god to her goddess? What passed in a dreamscape didn't replicate in reality, a lump of desire which stayed forever in my throat. She stroked my head, said it was OK. Some things needed time.

Soon after, though, she took to wearing black. Her light was going out, and all because of me. She was in mourning, and so started to read. Read, read, read. The world sighed and shook its head. Meanwhile, my parents awaited an audience. We would go to Chicago for Thanksgiving.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Limited stood at Grand Central Terminal. In 16 hours we would be pulling in to La Salle Street Station. The train looked superb, all those gleaming new Pullmans. The maiden run had been in June, cutting four precious hours from the journeys of my youth.

'I understand Henry Dreyfuss was the designer,' she remarked as we walked the length of plush crimson carpet leading to the door of the car. The porter, George, introduced himself by way of buttoning a carnation to my lapel and handing Lucia a small bouquet and cello-wrapped basket of perfume.

‘It’s a wonderful example of art deco industrial design,’ she commented as he led us to the compartment, pointing out the dining and lounge areas on the way. For my shave next morning, I would visit the barber in the club car. I needed to look my best for our arrival.

‘They look so divine in their uniforms. Ebony skin encased in red, white and gold – such a perfect combination,’ she said when we were alone. ‘But is it true they are all called George?’ and giggled at her self-made joke before settling into her seat with the current edition of the New Yorker and a Reader’s Digest.

Ah, now she would close down. Shut down on me as surely as a shutter is pulled to at day’s end. To darken the world, a world where was no room for me. A world of words and scenes and lives she never shared. Except to tell she wanted to begin herself – to write. And to present said stories to the New Yorker or Harper’s or Scribner’s, even the Atlantic Review.

Much as I loved her, much as I was smitten by her perfection, I knew this to be a silly girlish dream. How could her correctly proportioned life possibly extend to literary ability?

Oh, how she had laughed.

‘How can you say that? You have no idea of what I write or how I compose. What things I have in my head, inside here (at which point she would press an open hand to a beautifully rounded breast – deflating it, deflating me), things that are just waiting, wanting to be written.’

‘Then show me!’ I’d implore.

‘No.’ The answer would be sudden, immediate, her features growing dark. Dark and closed as her high-buttoned mourning dress. ‘You’ll read it when it’s published. You are my husband, not my critic.’

Lightening, just as suddenly, coquettishly even, she would show me a passage from one Erskine Caldwell (it was too much really – to think she read his works! He who writes of sex and violence and poverty, ignorance and racism! But nevertheless this is what this particular mentor of hers advises doubtful husbands such as myself): ‘When a woman gets a notion in her head, no matter how silly a man thinks it is, give in to her. Let her go ahead every time and do what she wants to. That’s the finest, and cheapest, insurance in the world to keep peace under the roof, and peace is what a man wants

around the clock when he's married.' At which she'd kiss me full on the mouth. To seal the pact.

So, yes. Today as any other. When the magazines came out, she went in, and I left on the other side of a high and dry stone wall of words.

We pulled out with a whistle and wheeze of brakes, off through the suburbs. I brought some papers from my satchel, accounts to correct, revise, but couldn't concentrate. The rocking and rolling of the train induced a kind of reverie, I suppose, only satisfied by giving in to it and staring out a window at passing scenery.

Occasionally I'd try to re-engage her in this life on earth, describe to her the route I knew so well. Following the Hudson north before heading out to Buffalo, then cutting south-west to meet Lake Michigan before coming along the south shore of Erie, up into Chicago and home. Yes, I knew the route well. Hence and forth all those years whilst at Columbia. Still knowing what I'd see and when, which stations awaited us, which fell behind. Remembering with joy the patterns of the landscape as they shifted with the compass needle as much as the seasons.

I heard George whistling from further up the corridor long before he appeared at the compartment door to turn down the beds before dinner.

*'Blue Skies,'* she said. *'Lovely.'*

Of course, once that damned tune was in my head, there was no way of shunting it out. It backboned my reverie. As the cars rocked and rolled over those steel railroad tracks, I sifted and sorted through the lyrics time and again. Could I remember them all? And correctly sequenced? George whistled on, the train wound through the valley, colours melded to a late-afternoon mush, and my brain kneaded itself in concentration. Like leavened bread pulled and pounded, stretched beyond yielding. How did it go again?

*I was blue, jut as blue as I could be  
Ev'ry day was a cloudy day for me  
Then good luck came a-knocking at my door  
Skies were grey but they're not grey anymore  
Blue skies smiling at me  
Nothing but blue skies do I see  
Bluebirds singing a song*

*Nothing but bluebirds all day long  
Never saw the sun shining so bright  
Never saw things going so right  
Noticing the days hurrying by  
When you're in love, my how they fly  
Blue days all of them gone  
Nothing but blue skies from now on  
I should care if the wind blows east or west  
I should fret if the worst looks like the best  
I should mind if they say it can't be true  
I should smile, that's exactly what I do.*

Ridiculous. After each verse I was turning the words upside down and inside out, looking for meaning in a meaningless dirge. I should mind, indeed!

Blue, blue, blue, I repeated: the blue of the sky, the blue of her eyes, the black of her dress, the black of her hat, the green of the walls, the white of the lamp, the book in her lap, I feel like a nap! Nothing escaped my caustic humour. On and on we rolled toward the gathering dusk. On and on she sat self-absorbed and oblivious to my emasculated presence.

Couldn't he stop that infernal whistling?

'I'm off for a short stroll,' I told her. 'Might have a cigarette.' Would she deign to look up, acknowledge the statement? I decided to rephrase it as a question – better to encourage a response. 'Do you want to stretch your legs?'

She lifted her eyes to my face. Her lips perfectly flush. With desire. For something written on a page no doubt. Oh, the anger of impotence. Not a pretty grimace. I needed that cigarette. A stretching and limbering of sad obsessions.

'No. I'm perfectly fine,' was her predictable response, and resumed her reading before the last word had even left her lips.

Always I watched her. But why was she never interested in looking at me? Constantly absorbed in those damned stories, stories she thought she could write herself. Ridiculous, preposterous! Couldn't she just be satisfied with this life? Watching from the compartment door – couldn't she feel my eyes on her? Still she never looked

up. Embedded in her reading, stock-still she sat. Legs smooth and beautiful, dress sleek and demure, hair just so, only a wisp or two of yellow straw visible from beneath an identical just-so hat. All in black, all in mourning.

Feeding my anger, all her black, all her perfection, all her beauty. I wanted to hate her, but only succeeded in hating myself more. for my commensurate imperfection. My fists clenched, my breath quickened, my stomach gurgled, my bowels shifted. It was Thanksgiving – for what, for whom? For something lost? But you can only lose something once had. What had she had? Only a cock you could squish like Jello. Only balls that were made of sponge.

Ah, but she had this dream, this idea to write. Caldwell's quote, Sally Benson's experience: 'She used to be a bank teller and now she's a finalist in the O'Henry! It is possible, it is!' She would become animated, alive, her white light back and bright, there in bed as she talked of her dream.

But no wild cat scratches. No, none ever sustained by this flaccid flesh. Our pillow talk only about her dream when there was nothing else to discuss. Neither of us wanting to touch (literally? figuratively? Oh, my wit could be sabre-cruel to my member's lack of functionality!) the most obvious topic. I stood and watched her from the compartment door. Perfectly encapsulated, no holes to plug, no putty-filler required, everything correct and in its place. Why should I ever have expected her perfection to have any room for me?

'Are you sure you don't want to stretch your legs before dinner?' I repeated.

'No thank you,' my Lucia responded. No – her Lucia. Lucia. Only Lucia.

I took my leave as the sun sank low, as we crossed yet another river. Soon the lamps would be lit. Soon dinner would be announced. George. George would come and tell her. And maybe then she'd notice I would no longer bear witness to her perfection anymore. I walked through to the end of the car, lit another cigarette. Stood there, at the end of the galley, stared out at the landscape images of my youth. I had failed her – the penny dropped in my holey bucket as surely as if Atlas had flung a boulder from his mountaintop therein.

Me, the idea of me must have held some promise, some tiny measure of hope, but soon gone, folded like flour into a pancake batter, drowned by the weight of milk and eggs and sugar, the fabric of one or the other melting away, fusing and congealing with

all those daily life concerns and spoils of battle. Ideas hopes dreams desires reduced to a lifetime of lurking as despondent bottom dwellers, sneaking their suck at joy via nausea-inducing algae alone.

I had failed her, and would only fail further, the further we journeyed together. Oh, how it felt! To look that last time in at the door of the compartment. At her and her New Yorker, hope shredded in a tidy lap, the pages cradled, nursed, lovingly handled, like the tiny infant she could never hope to bear.

I looked, watched, wanted one last time her gaze to feel upon my skin, like the sun's warmth, or a fresh summer breeze or even the sting of rain that smacks you fair in the face with disinterest. Anything. Any reaction, I silently begged. Turn your eyes and emotions, whatever they be, on me one last time. Please.

But no. She stayed true to her reading, and I to my conviction, leaving the train at Boulder and crossing to the other side of the platform.

It must have been an express freight to all intents and purposes, its whistle sounding long and clear, its *Blue Skies* reprise a single note to clear the path ahead. I wouldn't fail much longer. This time I'd taste success. And it would be blood red.

You know, she really was quite perfect.

## Season's Shift

(inspired by Hopper's *Cape Cod Evening*, 1939, in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC)

It wasn't often she came onto the Cape these days. But she'd been to see that movie, and it had got her thinking. Thinking about way back when, way back when hopes and dreams were somehow more real. Now. Now? Now all were just memories, just baggage. Stuck in a trunk out back.

But it had got her thinking. As movies do. They're good at that – staying on in your head where they make you can think-think-think. Just one film-maker's take on a subject, perhaps, but seen, remembered, experienced differently, singularly, across a full spectrum of colours, a whole rainbow of possibilities, by each person in each darkened theatre. Those damned movies. They don't leave be. They go on staying in your head, unblinkerred, unfettered by all the baggage brought into the cinema by an unsuspecting ticket-holder. Baggage that's already loaded up in an over-loaded head.

So you can watch sweet romancing in *Bringing Up Baby*, and wish Cary Grant was your honey. Or feel the sting of a slap long after Spencer Tracy's face has faded into the credits of *Boy's Town*. Or wonder why Charlie Chaplin was ever considered a comic when he made such insightful statements about the perils of modern life.

That's how it happened for Jennifer. Jennifer and her memories, Jennifer and her baggage. One day in late summer when she had been to see *The Wizard of Oz*. When they were talking war in Europe.

She'd asked Harvey to come along.

'Fancy-schmanzy,' he'd scoffed. 'Schmaltz-waltz – what would I want to do that for?' Nope. Not interested. 'I'll go play cards with the boys instead.'

So she'd gone with Betty from across the street. Two older women identifying more with a youthful Dorothy than their Aunt Em contemporary.

That song. Lord have mercy. How that song had just hung in the air. How Judy's strong clear voice had just held it up there. High, higher still, till off it had floated. Off and over that rainbow. A final puff of breath and away it had gone. And with it, Jennifer's tears. Jennifer's tears about all that damned baggage.

Baggage neatly bundled and dragged through her life, from one experience to the next, from one movie to the next. Repacked, rebundled at times, but never left behind,

never shrugged off. The weight of it getting ever-heavier, the size of it getting ever-bigger. It slowed her down, the more it contained, the more that prayers went unanswered, words unsaid, dreams unrealised. Till it had slowed her to the point of stopping altogether. Just plain stopped.

The frustration. Oh, the frustration! There were no obstacles in front to mar her passage, all clear white light and a rainbow way off in the distance up ahead. Yet no way of going on, going further, toward it with such a load to carry.

‘He ain’t heavy, Father, he’s m’ brother,’ Mickey Rourke had told Spencer. Oh, but he was a child, with a child’s innocence and a child’s eyes. Jennifer thought different, Jennifer knew different. Jennifer knew how heavy everything was. She watched Judy’s innocence float up and off and over that rainbow. Light as a feather, soft as a wisp of wool, the only thing going with it Jennifer’s tears in a darkened cinema.

Damn that baggage. She shook her head, smoothed her lap, had a last dab at her eyes while the credits rolled. Silly thoughts. Nonsense noises. She and Betty went for a coffee and discussed the movie – how realistic the sets, how wonderful the technicolour. Wasn’t Margaret Hamilton excellent as the Wicked Witch? And to think she’d come back after that fire on the set!

Neither mentioned the damp hankies in their clutch purses.

She couldn’t seem to get the song out of her head. Flanked, as it was, by the poignant, wistful face of Dorothy – a daily visitation it became. Now she stood with hands drowned in dishwashing water, staring out the kitchen window. A robin on the feeder, not a blue bird. That was a start, away from the symbols and reference points. But still it crept in. Words. Melody. The dream of unchained baggage ...

*Some day I’ll wish upon a star  
And wake up where the clouds are far behind me  
Where troubles melt like lemon drops  
Away above the chimney pots  
That’s where you’ll find me  
Somewhere over the rainbow blue birds fly  
Birds fly over the rainbow  
Why then, oh why can’t I ...*

‘I want to go home,’ she said suddenly over dinner that night.

Harvey emerged from behind a wall of newspaper, took the pipe out of his mouth. ‘What?’ His eyes were ten times bigger behind those reading glasses.

‘I want to go over onto the Cape and visit Conor. See how he’s getting on,’ she regrouped.

‘Hmmp,’ he lifted the paper again. ‘You talk regular enough on the phone.’

‘Yes, but when was the last time I was down there?’

‘Well, don’t be gone too long then.’

She took the car and drove slow. Hadn’t called ahead. Down the interstate from Boston, she went – Route 3 they called it. Over the Sagamore Bridge, onto the Cape. It’d only been open a few years. She remembered with fondness the old drawbridge it replaced, before they widened the canal. A memory. Baggage, nought more.

She drove on and into Sandwich, stopped in town and bought a cake and the makings of a nice dinner, settled the provisions in the trunk of the Ford Fodor beside her bags. You’d have thought she was staying a month by the look of those bags. More baggage, she grimaced.

On and out to East Sandwich, down some lanes, the turn into the drive. The drive with its avenue of maples, already hinting at a fire-red fall. The white gatepost. The letterbox daubed with C. O’Grady. *Redwing*.

She pulled up there awhile. Tried to slow her breathing. I want to go home, she’d said to Harvey. And now here she was. Damn those tears.

She motored slowly up the drive, round the back of the house, and parked in the shed beside the Brush Breaker. Each spring fires raged through the State Forest. Only last year Conor had lost three buddies. He was committed to his work in the volunteer brigade.

No sign of the pick-up, though, and the house stood silent. Curtains drawn, yet windows open. Joe hadn’t come to greet her either. She walked over to the screen door.

‘Conor?’ she called. ‘Conor, you home?’

She bricked open the screen door and went back to retrieve the things from the trunk. Then into the kitchen with it all. Neat, clean, everything in its place. She always

marvelled how Conor could keep such a good house without any woman's help. He was completely self-sufficient. Something she wished she'd better learnt growing up. There on the Cape. Where you could be more self-sufficient, where you had to be more resilient. More resilient than living in the city. Living in and with the city. What had she taught her children? Nothing. A big fat zero. They'd never be able to come back. Too soft now. Soft city kids. She'd done that to them. She and her baggage.

Jennifer stood still, listened to the silence. Listened till she heard beyond the silence, re-learning the sounds of nature. Took down the Cafeolette – she needed a cup of coffee after that drive. And a piece of the cake she'd brought. She hummed. Sang. Whistled while she worked. The tune an oldie of Irving Berlin's. Depression-era. Lifting her up and out from her own baggage-filled pit:

*Just around the corner*

*There's a rainbow in the sky*

*So let's have another cup o' coffee*

*And let's have another piece o' pie!*

The truck backfired its way into the yard while she sat, sipped and sang. She heard Joe barking with delight. That slobbering fool had probably launched himself off the tray-back before it'd even ground to a halt in the lean-to. Here he was, at the screen already, now, pawing and whining to be let in.

'Joe. Joe!' She gave him a good wrestle. Oh. He was big and warm and smelled of hay, his coat shining and sleek.

Conor's eyes smiled. 'Now this is a turn-up for the books,' he said and hugged her. Nice. Long and nice.

Another cup o' coffee, another piece o' pie. He reached over the table for the cake knife and she saw puckered flesh, hairless skin.

'What happened?'

'Hmm?' looking up to meet her eyes, looking down to where she stared at his arm. 'Oh,' shrugging. 'From the big Bourne fire last year.'

'You were injured too? Why didn't you tell?' Cake crumbs stuck to her lip.

'Leave be, Jenny,' he sighed. 'It wasn't exactly the first thing on my mind.'

Memories, baggage. They were all capable of carrying the burden. Not sharing the load. Why couldn't she learn from his example? Why did she have to be so wistful? Regretful? Restless?

'Oh God, Conor, I've missed being here.' There it was, out now. 'I just want to be away from it all. The city, the newspaper headlines, the movies living lives that I never had, that I'll never have. What am I gonna do, Conor? What am I gonna do? I just can't think straight anymore.'

Tears fell. Joe scrounged cake from his master's hand. Dog slobber filled the void. How poetic, she thought. How goddamned poetic in the face of all my goddamned self-pity. She slumped and stared at the cake stand.

'Well, Jen. I guess it's that change of life got you all tied up in knots,' he said and pulled a wad of baccie out of his pouch. 'You'd be ripe for it, I guess.'

Her sigh was noncommittal. How to describe her hot flashes, or missing the kids away at college, or not wanting to talk to Harvey now she had no choice. Don't even get her started on the girth of fat she despised that had seemingly appeared overnight. How to describe wanting to upchuck all the debris of the past, regurgitate it from a drain blocked by circumstance and compromise, let it bubble up and out, frothed scum at its surface.

'Sometimes it's like there's a pressure cooker in my head. Slow boiling my brain to mush. I just don't know where the vent is, where the off-switch is.' She took a deep breath, decided, 'I'll only stay a coupla days. Clear my head, you know?'

He nodded. 'As long as you want. As long as you can put up with me. *Post tot naufragia portus.*

'After so many shipwrecks, a haven,' she agreed. *Redwing.* Home. The tears welled. Where did they all come from, damn it? 'Thanks,' she managed.

Coffee drained. Hanky put away. 'I think I'll go out for a walk,' she said. 'Get some fresh air.'

He stood and stretched. 'I got some paperwork to do.'

Out the front door she went, a front door that leapt straight into the meadow. It was yellowing off nicely now, this meadow she'd run and tumbled through as a child. This meadow which held the promise of discovery, of all manner of beetles and bugs, rabbit holes and ground bird nests. Joe dived past her, into a sea of grass and waving

seed-heads, with the closest thing to a whoop she'd ever heard from a dog. And she did the same, laughing. They were two crazy hounds, that's for sure.

She loved this time of year, the season's shift from late summer to early fall, trees starting to turn, mists beginning to rise. The meadow shifting its mood likewise; no longer tinged with the bright brilliance of high summer green, the high grasses had begun to subtly morph into a flaxen-wheat glow, slow dancing with twilight, hugging it close, lingering longer, even as an equinox sun sunk toward the horizon.

'No frosts yet?' she called back to the house, into the front room where he sat at a desk writing cheques.

'No. None expected for another month or so, I'd say.'

'But you still got the party line going?' she confirmed, the warning system where each rang through to the next on the list if a cold night was predicted.

'As long as I'm a registered grower.'

She walked on, crossed the meadow. State Forest clung to its eastern side, scrub oaks and pitch pines all a-jumble, moody and reflective, shadows deepening and chill rising as the sun slipped away. Went to stand at the wetland's edge. The family cranberry bog, where a sea of shiny red bubbles greeted her, waxy fruits ripening nicely. She picked a couple and nibbled slowly, letting their tart flavour burst in her mouth.

To think all this went back to Indians and Pilgrims and a sea captain quietly watching these shrubs grow wild. Seeing how much better they fruited once the wind coated them in sand. This their home, a place of sand. So simple, to be fertilized by nature's hand. Here, at home.

Home, she thought, home. Some of the vines were older than her. Planted by her father, more than fifty years back. Home. She thought. Home. Maybe she'd stay on a bit longer. Help Conor get the crop in.

It wasn't a large venture. But enough for his simple life. Lucky Conor. Lucky, lucky Conor. Dry-harvesting by hand with a wooden rocker scoop, maple teeth combing the fruits from their ground-hugging vines. Loading up the boxes and down to the co-op where they bounced about on a Bailey Separator.

She could almost see the bright red sticky-stained hands of her youth. Each fall the same, each fall the harvest, each fall laughter and camaraderie, all hands on a sandy

deck. Maybe she'd even make a couple of pots of sauce to take back to Harvey. Home-made from home. Her gift of thanks to a Thanksgiving table.

She plucked a few more berries and kept walking. Startled a redwing up out of the bulrushes. Did she have a nest there? With a new speckled egg like Old Mother West Wind told? No, too late in the season.

Over past the salt marsh, across the dunes, down to the beach. Oh. That air. That first full blast of sea breeze. That king hit of salt and damp. Filling her face, her hair. Up and out it went, over and past. Off with the shoes to sand-sink her toes. In and down, deep. Down she sat, straight down where she was. I won't move till the tide shifts me, she decided. Let the tide shift me and shunt off all that baggage.

Could it shift her into the future, perhaps, or would it leave her listing in the backwash of the past? If only. If only she knew. If only she knew for sure.

They had sat beside the radio only a few nights before and listened to the broadcast. England and France declaring war on Germany. What could she do? What could she do but cry.

'You seem to weep a fair bit these days, Jennifer,' Harvey had said.

But what could she tell and where would she start when everything brought her to tears? Everything and nothing – a war half a world away on top of everything going on right here inside. Stifled, unable to breathe, a damned pressure cooker in her head, a lifetime of baggage snapping at her heels.

She stayed on the beach, watched a storm roll by, its blue-black thunderheads tugged south by the wind. Just passing by. Just letting her know. I'm watching, it said. I'll see what you decide.

There and then, with the storm as her witness, she decided to pray – for herself, for the world. These tears seemed worth it.

She walked back through the beach grasses, up and over the wind-smoothed dunes, past the marsh into the meadow. Conor was sitting on the stoop throwing a ball to Joe.

'Joe,' he whistled. 'Joe!' But Joe was doing what he loved best. Nosing around in the grass, sniffing out those rabbit holes.

'Seen the storm?'

He cocked his head over toward the far paddock. 'Mmm, it's heading south.'

She followed his gaze into a golden field of sunflowers. How did she miss noticing them before? ‘When did they go in?’

He shrugged. ‘Just this season.’

She screwed up her eyes, better to see them. ‘When will you pull them up? Isn’t it getting a bit late?’

He looked over to where the evening sun torched their faces. ‘No. I’ll just let them die back and self-seed a couple of seasons. See what happens.’

She smiled. ‘Remember how you sent a book by Thornton Burgess for the children? *Old Mother West Wind*? They always called it Uncle Conor’s book.’ She kicked her foot in the dust. ‘It always made me homesick for *Redwing*.’

That was the thing about reminiscing. It was like telling no one in particular that the baggage was being revisited, but you were revisiting it all the same.

‘Each time the wind would blow, it’d be: *Here comes old Mother West Wind, down from the purple hills*,’ she continued. ‘That’d be how I’d start. And the kids would answer: *With her bag of Merry Little Breezes*.’

Tears pricked afresh, her sigh was audible. *And they’d spin around in the green meadow till it was time to go*. She looked over at his suntanned profile. I’m spinning, she thought, but please don’t tell me it’s time to go. Not yet. Please, not yet.

‘Never read it,’ he said, chewing thoughtfully on the plug baccie. ‘Just posted it off. Pictures looked fine enough though.’

She was shifting, slow-rolling across the sky like those thunderheads.

Well? they asked. What are you going to do now, Jennifer Jane?

I’m frightened Aunt Em. I’m frightened. Her thoughts skittered about the meadow with the breeze. Would that troubles could melt like lemon drops. Would that you clouds were far behind me. Would.

She stood stock still, looked past him. Past him and the dog to the sunflowers.

‘Oh my,’ she pointed, ‘a rainbow.’

And yes indeed. There it was. The evening sun shafting through mist-filled air of a storm never arrived to create this wide prism, this full spectrum of colour. Slap bang in the middle of this season’s sunflowers.

‘Now that be a mighty pretty sight,’ he declared. It was and all. Inky clouds the canvas for this rainbow’s simple note of joy, an archway leading on, beyond those big bursting sunflower heads, that in turn sang their delight at a last chance to glow.

The sun eclipsed purple hills, taking Mother West Wind with it.

‘I want this,’ Jennifer wept. ‘I want this every day.’ She wrung her hands, couldn’t speak any more. It was too much. It was all too much to put into words, a spectrum of wants in her head, their colours beautiful, yet blinding. What to do. Oh, what to do.

Shifting the wad in his jaw, Conor quoted Wallace Stevens: *The exceeding brightness of this early sun makes me conceive how dark I have become.*

‘Wrong season, wrong time of day,’ she sniffed.

‘You get my meaning,’ he said quietly, and held out a hand to her tightly-crossed arms. ‘It’ll pass. Just go with it. Like the seasons. Shift as they shift. It’s all part of life. Each day brings another sunrise, each eve another sunset.’

‘Yes,’ she said, opening the door, heading inside. But stopped on the threshold, her hand still on the knob. Thought: *Just around the corner, there’s a rainbow in the sky.* Yes, Irving. Thought: *Birds fly over the rainbow, why then, oh why can’t I?* Yes, Judy. Thought: *Shift as the seasons shift.* Yes, Conor.

Yes, Jennifer. Time to face-off that baggage, leave it behind in a season long past. She crossed the threshold, shut the door firmly behind her. Strongly. Loudly. Closing off all possible exits to her task.

Joe yanked his head up out of a rabbit hole at the noise. But it was only for an instant. It didn’t distract him long.

## Rosie the Riveter

(inspired by Hopper's *Summertime*, 1943, in the collection of the Delaware Art Museum)

Happy day, hot day, soon-to-knock-off day. Angie Johnson put down her welding gun, took off a thick leather glove and raised her goggles to wipe away the sweat seeping into her eyes. She slowed her breathing from its concentrated whoosh this protracted work always gave her, its slight mix of panic and adrenalin a potent precursor to straight seams and smoothed-out slag, and looked around.

It was getting toward four in the afternoon and all the girls knew it. After the big success two weeks back, when Rose Hickey made national headlines for driving a record number of rivets into the wing of a Grumman 'Avenger' Bomber right here at the factory, management had decided to give everyone this 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend off. All the girls were excited by the recognition Rosie's record had given them. But a whole weekend off? What a reward!

Angie smiled over at her partner, Bella, and tried to wiggle her toes inside these new steel-capped boots. They still felt strange. Only a few days back they had been issued with the safety shoes. Previously there'd been none in women's sizes and they'd just had to make do and be extra careful on the assembly lines in sneakers.

'Trying to wiggle your toes again?' Bella giggled. 'I'm doing it every few minutes too – feels kinda crazy-strange, huh.'

Angie pulled her goggles and gloves back on and settled into this last seam of the shift. Everything was mighty strange if you stopped to think about it. This time last year she'd been in college and the war had seemed so far away. But then Pa was recruited to air force staff at Bolling, and soon after big brother Jim had enlisted too. Pilot training done and dusted, he was stationed out at Pearl Harbour, just itching for an assignment against the Japs.

That had made up Angie's mind – she'd help build those planes for Jim and his mates to fly, cut down those slant-eyes before they ended up hurting any more innocent Americans. She'd taken the New York Central Railroad up to Tarrytown, Westchester County, all the way along the picturesque east shore of the Hudson, walked in the door of the Eastern Aircraft Factory and been assigned to welding.

'Do you know how to crochet?' one of the trainers had asked.

‘Um, no, but I can sew a neat stitch.’

‘You’ll be fine then, sister,’ and after six weeks of classes, she was out with the rest of the girls on the line – welding rod in one hand, fire in the other, rod on the seam, keeping it as straight and neat as she could, before wiping away the remnant beaded slag with a little steel brush. And with every seam she thought: This’ll keep you safe up in the air, Jimmy. This’ll bring our boys back home.

They were long days. Shifts 6am till 4pm, seven days a week. She and Bella came up from Manhattan every day by train while local girls did the graveyard shift because there was no barracks accommodation nearby. The mood was always good, and having Bella to ride up and back with made the trip seem shorter than its 45 minutes from Grand Central Station. Bella lived in Little Italy, she in East Village near Greenwich, so they could walk together a few blocks too. In summer it didn’t matter so much, the days were long, bright and warm. But winter ...

Her mother was always on at her to be careful. There may be a war on, but this is still New York City, she’d say. Especially when you read stories in the *Times* like the one the other day about an old man being mugged by two sailors on the subway. What were they thinking? It just didn’t seem right.

It was a neat apartment she and her mother kept. Ground floor in a three-storey brownstone walk-up. Seemed a bit big now with the menfolk gone, but it was home. The double hung front windows in the parlour looked out onto a quiet street where children played baseball till late in the evenings, and neighbours were permanent and friendly. She’d gone to school just down the street and round the corner at Lower Eastern. She’d walked the dog to the park on Tompkins Square. Yep. Some things had to be stable in a war. Home and Mama were her rocks.

Friday 4pm. She punched the clock and moved out through the big wide factory doors into the light and heat stretching out toward a summer’s weekend. Some girls were already swinging down toward the train station, arm-in-arm singing the latest hit song on the radio:

*She’s making history*

*Working for victory*

*Rosie the Riveter ...*

‘Angie! Ange ...’ Bella ran up behind her with a sack of work clothes held out in front. ‘Can you take these down to the city for me? They’ll just get in the way at the Music Hall, and I can’t afford to lose them ...’

‘Sure,’ Angie smiled.

‘I’ll pick ‘em up in the morning,’ Bella called over her shoulder as she steamed back in through the doors to meet up with others heading to the concert. ‘Bye!’

‘Have a great time!’ Angie called, but she was already gone.

It didn’t matter much that she wasn’t joining them. Only sometimes did she feel the pinprick of nostalgia. For good times and good laughs and being out with a bunch of girls. Or maybe even a boy. But her stomach churned so much these days. So much with worry for Pa and Jim, the not-knowing. Only ever an occasional letter. She felt better at home. Burrowed in a cocoon, with her mother’s knitting needles click-clicking a next pair of socks for boys far away.

*Keeps a sharp lookout for sabotage*

*Sitting up there on the fuselage*

*That little girl will do more than a male will do ...*

Their voices faded but Angie knew the lyrics as well as the next proud Eastern worker. They see-saw-metronomed back and forth in her head as her feet held the beat all the way to the station where she stood on the platform and waited for the train through from Poughkeepsie. A little late coming in, not unusual for a Friday evening. All the factory workers disgorging, all wanting to head home, or down to Manhattan on such a fine summer’s evening for a little fun about Times Square, or on the Mall in Central Park.

The train pulled in with a crunch and wheeze of brakes. She opened the wooden carriage door, edged her way into the compartment and sat down on the first available seat opposite a pair of enormous knees. Out of her bag came the *Saturday Evening Post* with Norman Rockwell’s mythical *Rosie the Riveter* illustration on the cover. She’d wanted to re-read the Memorial Day article ever since Eastern’s own Rosie had set her record. But before she was able to flick the first couple of pages, the enormous knees shifted a mite and brushed against her own, while a voice belonging somewhere above them said: ‘Excuse me Miss, I think I know you.’

She looked up to meet a pair of earnest blue eyes set in the clean-shaven face and close-cropped hair of a serviceman about her age. As she started to make excuses (flirting? in her coveralls? out of the question!), he persisted: ‘No, really. I’m sure. Weren’t you at Lower Eastern Elementary? Your name is Angie, Angie Johnson – right?’

That took her aback. ‘Why yes,’ she said, blinking into the memory of an existence in time and place other than a noisy aircraft assembly line, greasy overalls and stout boots. But still she couldn’t connect this face to her school days – until he smiled.

A crinkled-up kind of smile, wide with lots of teeth and his whole face sort-of lighting up as if every part of it was involved in a singular act of expressing happiness. She saw again childhood freckles on a squidgy nose.

‘Oh my,’ she exclaimed. ‘Toby Danner!’ And they laughed and shook hands, shyly like the ten-year-olds their hearts still housed.

He was on shore leave from the Navy. Coming back from a day trip to the Upper Hudson where he and his Pa used to go fishing. ‘Well,’ he said sheepishly, trying not to bump her knees again, ‘it’s more like leave in between assignments. I’ve requested a transfer to the *USS Intrepid* – she’s an aircraft carrier they launched back in April but she’s still being commissioned down in Newport, Virginia.

‘She’s so big, Angie!’ He barely had time to draw breath. ‘872 feet long, and can take a crew of more than 3,000 men. Can you believe that? That’s bigger than some goddamned towns – Oh, sorry.’ He pulled himself up short in the reportage. ‘Sorry for cussing – you just spend so much of your time with other menfolk, you forget what it’s like being round a lady.’

She blushed. ‘Well, I think you could be excused when I look like this – it’s not really very ladylike.’

‘Oh, Angie,’ he scoffed. ‘That’s silly talk! You’re prettier now than I ever remember at school. Or maybe,’ he reflected, inspecting his knees, ‘it’s just that at school we don’t think much about girls ...’ His voice trailed off in a confusion of etiquette. ‘Well, anyhow,’ he regrouped, ‘you’re one swell gal. And I think it’s just great you working up there at Eastern on the planes. Maybe one of yours will land on the *Intrepid* some day. It can take more than 80 fighters! Can you believe that?’ He was mesmerised by the enormity of the numbers, as well as his place amongst them.

‘Well,’ she reflected. ‘I just think about Jim flying in one of them, and it helping bring him safely home ...’

‘Jim? He’s your big brother, ain’t he? Damn good ball player. Wasn’t he scouted for the Yankees in his senior year?’

She nodded. ‘Yeah, well, there’s always after the war ... maybe.’

‘Yeah, maybe.’ Each in a reverie of casualty headlines or first-hand witnessing of lives cut short.

‘Hey,’ Toby was saying. ‘Maybe I’ll see him out there in Pearl Harbour. That’s where the *Intrepid*’s headed. We should sail before the summer’s out.’

The train journey passed quickly. At Grand Central, he offered to walk her home – ‘I mean, we’re going in the same direction after all.’ And at the intersection of Bowery and 3<sup>rd</sup>, said goodbye. Slowly. Unsurely. ‘Um, do you have plans tomorrow?’ he said. ‘It’d be great to chat some more and maybe have a soda?’

‘Sure,’ she smiled, already thinking about washing her hair, doing her legs, wearing something nice ...

Oh to sleep in on such a wonderful lazy summer’s morning! It was like holidays – a special weekend when she even had a date – and instinctively curled a bare leg out and over cool clean sheets at the thought. Each day up before dawn, and now here it was – 8am and sun streaming in through her bedroom window to lick her body all over. She couldn’t help it – a bubble of laughter caught and tugged at the corners of her mouth. A day off, and a date as well. Oh, it was too much joy. Just too too much.

She rolled over and pulled the sheet again over her leg, the feeling soft, sensuous. What was it like to be touched by a boy – could she remember?

It had seemed so long ago. She had been younger and a bit shy of her body, what it could do, what it wanted to do. But now? She felt the sheet swish against her. Her hand brushed softly the same place, her other wandered to a breast encased in cotton. Buttons. Buttons. I shouldn’t wear buttons today, she thought, noting how both hands were needed to negotiate the territory. But oh, once free and a nipple twitched? Oh. Please. Oh. To make this one weekend special before going back to boots and overalls and goggles, to thoughts of fear and war and not knowing.

She reached for the *Post* with Rockwell's *Rosie* and looked at the illustration with annoyance. A pity he'd made her so butch. While she understood the intention – we can do it just like a man – it seemed a shame not to present a more feminine figure who could do things as well as a man. There weren't many girls Angie knew who looked like this, acted like this.

She put the magazine aside, decided to get up, her nightdress askew with buttons undone. Not just for Toby, no. But for herself. There was a reason to prepare with care.

She kissed her mother good morning and slid onto the bench at the breakfast table in the kitchen.

'Nice to have a lie-in?' she was asked.

Angie nodded, then marvelled at the coffee pot on the table. 'Where did this come from? What about the rationing?'

Her mother smiled. 'Well, why not,' she justified to the cupboard above the stove. 'It's a special occasion having you here in daylight.'

Of all the rationing – meat, peanut butter, cheese, even leather shoes – it was coffee that Angie missed most. 'This is such a treat!' she enthused. 'Sniffing it is just enough!'

Her mother turned on the radio news – always Edward R. Murrow on CBS first thing. Murrow's commentary was on the Navy Secretary's prediction a few days back about the war lasting another three to four years. Would Roosevelt's address to the nation next day confirm this?

'I don't know,' her mother shook her head. 'Sometimes it's better not to listen, better not to know. Then we can't get sad.'

Soon enough though the weather report was on in its stead – hot, sunny, delightful. 'As if we didn't know that already!' the announcer gaily chortled, launching straight into a song from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. Perfect for a steamy southern-like summer's day.

*Summertime*

*And the livin' is easy*

*Fish are jumpin'*

*And the cotton is high*

*Your daddy's rich  
And your mamma's good lookin'  
So hush little baby  
Don't you cry  
One of these mornings  
You're going to rise up singing  
Then you'll spread your wings  
And you'll take to the sky ...  
So hush little baby  
Don't you cry*

Angie sipped from her cup in blissful silence. It was as if everything was being sucked into her, the sun, the coffee, the heat, the song. Recharging her with the joy of life. Recharging her desire to be desired. Spreading those wings so she could take to the sky ...

‘Where are you off to this afternoon with young Toby?’ her mother asked.

She smiled and shrugged in tandem. ‘I’m not sure. Ringling Brothers Circus is still in town till the end of August. Or maybe we could get tickets to *Oklahoma* – it’s been on since March so things should have quietened down a bit by now. Or there’s a Block Dance on the Mall ...’

‘Oh?’

‘Mmmmm, it’s to start a drive to collect phonograph records for the boys overseas. Good idea, don’t you think?’ She finished breakfast, stood and stretched. Everything tingled with self-knowledge and anticipation. ‘Bella will be over sometime to collect her stuff. Maybe I should take the chance to wash mine out as well.’

‘What time is he fetching you?’

‘Three.’

‘Well, I need to sort out these coupons and get down to the store.’ Only the radio was left in the room to make conversation with itself.

Bella had come and gone with tales of last evening’s concert and the boys they’d met on the train back down to Manhattan. The sodas (only sodas?) they’d had at a milk bar near

Times Square. Angie had stayed quiet. She hadn't wanted to share her special treat with anyone yet.

Now she was alone. Alone with her body. Taking care with those preparations. Yes. Long blonde hair loose and free at her back. Yes. Smooth legs leading down to high black pumps. Yes. A dab of rouge and a slick of red lipstick. Yes. And her eyes. Their natural blue edged with black. Oh, and how simple the choice of dress! Her white muslin frock from Prom Night a couple of years back. Tight now across the bust, but that was all to the better. No buttons. Pulled in beautifully at the waist. Billowy to her knees.

No. No petticoat. I want to be seen, she thought. I want him to know that I want to be seen. Her girdle hugged her hips. Everything was smooth, taut, expectant, prepared.

It was almost three. She grabbed her wide straw hat, the one with the black band, and headed out through the parlour. Her mother was there, click-clicking over yet another pair of socks with Gershwin as mood music.

'Such a perfect song for a perfect day,' her mother explained. 'I just had to pull out that old record.' She watched her daughter's sensuous presence disappear out the door. 'You'll let me know when you're going?' she called.

'Sure, Mama.' In any case, the apartment door stood open, as too did the door of the building to catch the breeze.

It had been dark and cool in the parlour. Out here in the street it was baking, heat rising up off the pavement in a sizzle of steam. She stood on the bottom step and let the sun strike her full in the face, closed her eyes to better feel its kiss. Perspiration started to rise, she waited and grew damp with the expectancy of touch, that light touch of hesitant hands that grows surer with each quickening breath.

*Fish are jumpin'*

*And the cotton is high ...*

The music flicked in and out of her reverie as surely as the breeze tugged the parlour curtains apart. All the while waiting.

'Isn't it getting too warm out there?' her mother called. 'He knows which house, doesn't he? Why not come in where it's cool?' But no. In the absence of Toby, she'd let the sun take her higher, to – *rise up singing, spread her wings, take to the sky ...*

She could hear the phone from the pavement. That long shrill bb-rrrr-iiii-nn-gg seemed to hang in the still sticky air long past her mother's answering voice. 'Phone for you,' she called through the curtain. 'It's Missus Danner.'

Angie turned carefully, slowly, on the teeter-totter heels she was now not used to wearing, felt the sweat of fantasy drip and stream down her inner thighs. Moved inside to the shade and cool of the hall, the open apartment door, her mother.

'Angie, love, I just thought I'd call and let you know. Toby won't be stopping by this afternoon for a soda. He got a telegram first thing – and what do you think! He's been asked to report to Newport immediately to help with commissioning the *Intrepid*. He made sure he was on the first train out of Penn Station this morning. He was that excited! And I'm just so proud of him!' The words chirruped in her ear like baby sparrow-talk.

'Thanks for letting me know, Missus D,' she sighed, sweat caked and pooling where it lay, grubbiness lapping the edges of her pure white muslin.

'Aw honey – that's the least I could do! I remember you from school fairs and the like. You were always such a pretty thing and Toby came in last night just a-gushing how sweet you are now. He was right looking forward to seeing you again, sugar, and chatting about old times. But well, there's a war on,' she finished brightly.

Angie let the phone slide back onto the receiver and, blinking back memories unmade, moved past clicking needles and Gershwin to the easy chair by the window.

*Now hush little baby,  
don't you cry ...*

## The Canvas of Innocence

(inspired by Hopper's *Hotel Lobby*, 1943, in the collection of the Indianapolis Museum of Art)

My name is Janet Isobel Langley. And today, Saturday, the twenty-first day of October in the year 2006, is my ninetieth birthday.

It will be quite a celebration (just family, mind, I don't have many contemporaries left anymore) but, as you can imagine, I've been absolved of any organisational responsibility. I can just sit here in the living room and watch all their flurry and carry-on. When the time is right, they'll hand me a glass of Prosecco (that's Italy's version champagne – my granddaughter married into a good Sicilian family) and toast my continuing robust health.

'Bravo Granny,' they'll say. And – 'Here's to ninety more.'

But for now I'm being left to my own devices while the preparations are underway. To patiently wait my turn to be feted.

It's been a long time since birthdays were significant for me. It doesn't mean I don't revere my time here on Earth, just that each day could be cause for celebration as much as any other. I'd like to celebrate Blue Sky Day as many days of the year as I can, for example, or First Daffodil Day for as many more years as I can. But those are more personal, singular. Perhaps that is the sense of the birthday as a landmark, so to speak – an agreed communal opportunity to celebrate. So, I'll let them carry on with their preparations while I patiently wait.

It's been a good skill to cultivate – patience. They say it's a precursor to a long and healthy life. Just the other day I read an obituary in the *New York Times* (when you get to my age, that's regular practice) about the death of purportedly the oldest man in the world. A Cuban, Benito someone, after about 120 years.

He smoked until the age of 108, but in these politically correct times, no one wants to suggest this was a factor in his longevity. Instead they dwelt on his peasant lifestyle – rationed food, work on the land, stoicism in bus queues. Sounds to me like a lifetime of patient waiting.

And yes, I could probably describe my life lessons similarly. The Depression. Thrift – not a word I hear used very much these days. Living without. Living with less. Living with loss. And the War. More living without, living with less, living with loss.

By that stage I was married with a child. People often asked why I never had more kids. But the War made me think hard about what was important; I decided to concentrate on Jenna's welfare, not divide my loyalties, my time, my thrift. Stanley. He understood. We took precautions.

Living in the hotel also gave me good practice in patient waiting. By then, Stanley had been promoted to duty manager at the Franklin on the Upper East Side. He'd wanted to join the war effort but with those flat feet of his and that wonky eye, they wanted to give him a desk job. What was the point of that? He already had a desk job helping run an essential industry!

The Franklin was a sweet establishment. Only nine floors. Nice art deco design. Well-kept, well-maintained, homey even, with all that dark wood, comfy furniture. A gentle breakfast room off the lobby. Gentle. Yes. It's nice to be treated gentle in the mornings.

We were given the suite on the top floor as our living apartment. (Well, it was wartime. No one took a suite in wartime.)

I still have a photo from those years at the Franklin. Brought it with me when I moved in here with the family. I mean, at my age, there aren't many things which are precious, which you want to end your life with – to have, to hold, to remember.

Yes, this old black and white photo was taken in the lobby in 1943 – Stanley behind the reception desk, smiling, me reading a book in one of the lounge chairs. It was for an advertisement we were going to place in the newspaper, its headline: *A Restful Place For Your New York R&R*. A photographer had come and set up the whole scene quite nicely so we could get our message across.

You know, so many establishments were catering for the goodtime Charlies and their party girls. But we wanted a different clientele. We wanted to attract the sort of custom that needed a retreat from the everyday of wartime just outside their door. So that's the image we presented in the paper. A woman quietly reading, a man smiling, ready to serve. A portrait of patient waiting.

Amazing, the response we had. And you know from whom? Whom we didn't expect? Older clientele, from before the war, ones who had shied away from coming down to the City because of how glitzy and loud it had become, because of the locust plagues of sailor boys roaming the avenues each time a ship docked.

I didn't begrudge those boys a good time. I didn't begrudge the girls who wanted to show it to them. But it had sent a lot of Manhattan regulars fleeing the city. Funny how a simple placement in the *Times* seemed to bring them back out of their burrows.

And, Stanley. Oh, he was funny. Would tell me to sit and read in the lobby at every opportunity, especially in the early evenings – good for business, he'd say, for passing trade to see.

You wouldn't believe the number of books I'd go through! (which was a Godsend – oh, how I loved to read – still do in fact – but these old eyes get mighty tired real quick nowadays. Katie's a good girl. She's been my eyes more often than not over the past few years. I miss her though, now she's off in college).

Yes, the books. The New York Central Library like a revolving door for me. Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, Dickens, Hardy, all the classics of the previous century. They became my escape from war. Jenna was seven by then, doing her schoolwork upstairs, listening to the radio, or following the maids around, helping set tables for next morning's breakfast, plumping pillows before bedtime, that sort of thing. I could just read and read and read. And forget that old war with all those glorious words.

Such lovely guests, we had. I remember old Mr and Mrs Barnesworthy best. Younger of course than I am now, but at that time they seemed quite elderly. Maybe it was also in the manner of their dress – very formal, hats, furs, you know the drill. Came down regularly from Long Island to take in a Broadway show or visit the museums. Often they'd sit with me in the lobby in the early evenings, patiently waiting for a taxi downtown or to one of their favourite restaurants on the Park.

Stanley always offered to ring up to their room once the cab had arrived. But each time they graciously declined to enjoy, instead, the ambience of the lobby. A woman quietly reading, a Beethoven symphony on the gramophone, the occasional ring for service, the soft clink of depositing keys or rustle of collecting mail. Low murmurs, the hums of civilised life, while the plinths of the reception desk held the whole establishment together, strong and undaunted.

'You could forget there's a war on,' Mrs B specialised in saying each time they checked out. And, 'Thank you.' Which you knew they meant. Appreciating this little oasis from the everyday. Stanley ran an essential service all right. To my mind a much better use of his time than pushing paper for Eisenhower.

But that's enough of reminiscing. Here comes Katie. The car door's just banged and now there's the run up the porch steps and – 'Granny, Granny – happy birthday!'

My, how she can jump in over the top of my thoughts. And now this shower of kisses. What's this thrust under my nose? 'Roses?' I guess.

'Yep – 90 of them! Dad and I went down to Jamaica Markets. Look – they're all in fall colours. Can you see? Aren't they beautiful? And take a look at the size of this bucket!'

Yes, it is large.

'So heavy!' she continues.

'How do they smell?' I manage, leapfrogging her soliloquy.

'Exquisite!' is her exuberant reply.

I take a heady sniff, then another and another. 'Ah Katie,' I tell her. 'You're my battery charger.' We hug through a mass of blooms before she humps them to the coffee table so I can focus better. Yes, she's my thoughtful loving energy booster. Plug me into the source and I'll zing-zing-zing all day.

Of course I'll only see her on odd weekends now, since she started as a freshman up at Yale this summer. In the Forestry and Environment School, she tells me. But it won't change our relationship. It's like we've had this pact for years. One day, we just locked eyes, not soon after she was born. The old and the new. And that was it. a forever-connection forged right then and there.

She's the middle one, see. The forgotten one. They say the eldest is most responsible, the youngest most spoilt, the middle most forgotten. Which is perhaps why she sought me out with those eyes of hers. A passive vessel for her stories and angst and hopes of future bright. Because I take the time to listen, and to tell. When she asks me things, I tell.

It really firmed up – this asking and telling, this ongoing conversation about old and new, past and future – when I moved in with Sandy and the family ten years back. Sandy, Mario, and the three girls – Shelly, Kate and Molly. It's something you don't see much of in the States these days, we elderly living with our families. I couldn't have imagined closing this life chapter any other way, though. And I can thank Mario for his own commitment and cultural upbringing to helping bring this about.

‘With my Nonna,’ he told, ‘there is also no question. She is cared for by the family in Sicily, you are cared for here. And when Jenna also wants to live with us, there is again no question.’

But Jenna’s only a sprightly seventy with a new man and an apartment at Jackson Heights. Her rose bucket can’t have been quite so heavy back in spring.

Look now. Katie is rushing around helping get things ready for the party. She’s going to bake a Torte della Nonna, she calls from the kitchen.

‘Have you had any practice?’ I say, teasing from an easy chair swamped by roses.

‘No.’ Framed in the doorway she stands, between there and here. Hair long, dark, full-hugging a face of earnestness and delight. Those black eyes twinkle, those lips twitch to a smile. She sees my teasing. ‘I looked it up on the Internet,’ is her counterattack. ‘Plus, Dad’s here to help.’

This Internet thing! Touché, my dear.

I must have dozed off (these things tend to happen) and now I find Katie stirring the cake mix by my side. It seems quite a heavy mixture. ‘There’s apples, raisins and pine nuts,’ she says as she stirs. She’s pulled over a dining chair from the table and is sitting over her task with me and the roses as witness.

‘You were humming,’ she says. ‘What was the song?’

I try to think. ‘Sorry, no clue’ my reply. ‘I didn’t even realise.’

‘Maybe it’ll come back later,’ she says. ‘It sounded pretty.’

We start to talk about life at Yale. I haven’t seen her since orientation. ‘I’ll only come down on weekends if I can car pool,’ she says. Sharing emissions, that’s how she calls it. Orientation was a wonderful experience, apparently. ‘Cool,’ is how she describes it. ‘Awesome.’ Three weeks of cool and awesome. Now that would be something to see. ‘You know, Granny, we just went out into the forest. And had to listen to the trees. Our orientation was to learn to respect the earth. That’s the frame of mind we need to enter the program. Isn’t that cool? Isn’t that awesome?’

She continues to chatter. About what she’s learning. About the environment. What makes it tick. And what doesn’t. The whole class went to see the documentary about Mr Al Gore. ‘Do you remember him, Granny?’ she asks. ‘He was the Vice-President to Bill Clinton back in the 90s.’

‘Oh yes,’ I say, ‘I remember.’ (I’d read a review in the paper and seen a picture of him in front of the world.) ‘He’s put on a lot of weight,’ I say.

‘Yes, but he’s telling everyone about global warming. And about what’s going to happen if we don’t sort it out.’

‘Well he’d better look after his own health,’ I interject, ‘otherwise he won’t be around to tell too many more people.’

She’s not listening. ‘If we don’t quit all this bigger is better stuff, and keep sucking up oil like it’s water, we’re history,’ she declaims. ‘In America, we’re the worst ... did you know,’ she fixes me with unblinking eyes, ‘the way we live today, using up all the world’s resources, we’d need three planets?’

‘Maybe Arnold Schwarzenegger should sell his Hummer,’ I propose.

‘We don’t have three planets!’ She fizzes like bicarb of soda in a pudding mix.

Things aren’t so simple, I want to tell her. Living simply so others can simply live. Black and white dissolve into a spectrum of greys once you start looking deeper. Who decides right from wrong, truth from fiction? Who says what is a need, a want, a selfish desire? Who says enough is enough?

‘If there’s no planet, there’s no us!’ she protests.

‘No,’ I disagree. ‘This old planet will survive. It’ll take a lot more than our bumbling around to destroy Mother Earth – but maybe humankind won’t be around to see it.’

I watch her some more. One minute animated. Lit up. Like she has all the answers. The next darkened by sadness. Consumed by her own black and white, a single right, one overwhelming wrong. All painted on a canvas of innocence – because nothing bad has ever happened to her. Or to anyone she knows.

At the same time, it’s an un-knowing tinged with knowing that it could happen someday. That something could be around the corner, something bigger than any, than all of us. Something that she can’t change alone, that she’ll need help with – a big group of helpers, all with the same purpose. All with the same conviction.

‘You know,’ she says, ‘Al Gore talks about you – that you were the last great American generation – living with and through the Depression and the War, everyone playing a role. And that ever since your generation, American life has just been focused on the me-me-me stuff, the cult of ego, consumerism as a panacea for everything.’

Blunting, deadening our sense of caring, for something bigger than our own narcissism. We've lost our sense of purpose, of community. But, he says the time has come, with this huge problem of global warming, to bring people together, to have a shared sense of purpose again.'

'Hmmm,' I say.

She tells me of all those kids she sees who don't care, who aren't caught up in Mr Al Gore's crusade. Up there on campus in their smart cars, at their smart schools, studying business or marketing. 'Just to make the big bucks,' she scoffs.

I shrug and tell her it was the same in my day. The girls who didn't want to know, who only thought of themselves – goodtime girls with touted-up hair and eyes and lips, only ever wanting to eat breakfast at Tiffany's or dance at El Morocco, its zebra stripes etched into the sidewalk.

Now it was my turn to scoff. To send out the signals of derision and disdain, snort like an old pig ready to flatten any wrongdoer. 'It's a fine line,' I say, 'between saying to each his own, and knowing in your heart that each's own might be wrong.'

'That it's harming the planet,' in her vernacular. 'That it's mixing up boys' minds,' in mine. 'There'll always be those types,' we agree.

But she's young and has ideals, believes it can be different. I, though, accept the adage. How, in the end, Stanley did prefer a goodtime girl mixing up his mind. How I had to stop my reading and get out working to put food on the table.

But Katie? What of Katie and her planet? I see the tears on her cheeks and the fear in her eyes and my old heart bleeds. My wasted old dying heart bleeds fresh.

So here we are at this celebration. Of what? Age? My past? Katie's future? It's fall, a season of celebration. The trees are turning, soon we'll be bunkering down for the winter, but now we have time to give thanks. For what we have, for what we must preserve. For what we are about to receive?

'Shouldn't we be celebrating your innocence, young lady? Your youth? Your future instead of my age?' I ask.

'We're celebrating wisdom, Granny, your life! What you've done, what you've achieved! That without you, there'd be no us!' She's getting exasperated now. I'm putting questions, considerations, obstacles into the path of her brave new world.

'That's what a funeral is for,' I say. Two can play this game.

‘Granny!’ There is no comeback.

‘Benito Martinez Abrogan,’ she mutters and goes back to her mixing and stirring.

Here and now, that’s what I’d like to celebrate. Our family. Four generations of women. All hopes and dreams caught up in the next daughter of Eve, all the way down the line. To Katie and beyond. To a world I’ll never see, to a world I still hope is pretty enough to deserve her.

‘I remember the song,’ I say suddenly into the vacuum. (I must have dozed off again.) ‘Was it this one?’ and begin to hum.

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘Yes, that’s it,’ and her eyes re-light with sparkles as big as diamonds. This is what I want. Just a moment in the here and now. Where she doesn’t worry about the future. Where I don’t ruminate about the past.

‘What is it?’ she asks. ‘What are the words?’

‘Oh. Only an old wartime ditty,’ I tell. ‘Nothing too special.’

‘Please Granny,’ she pleads. ‘Can you remember the words? Can you? Just today. Just because of today.’

I begin to hum again, and suddenly, here and now, the words start to come. Slowly. Crackly. Scratchy. My voice as old as a gramophone recording itself. ‘Bing Crosby,’ I say. ‘He sang this a long time ago.’

The others are watching. They’ve all come in to watch, various tasks temporarily suspended, frozen. Just for a moment. Just for, of, and in this moment. Sandy wiping floury hands on the apron around her waist, Molly caught on the stairs with a book, my own Jenna come in from the garden with fresh-picked snow peas, Mario clearing away clutter from the table, Shelly about to walk the dog. They’ve all stopped what they’re doing to observe this frozen moment. This time capsule. Of an elderly white-haired woman and a clear-skinned bright-eyed child. Sharing a memory made.

*I’ll be seeing you in all the old familiar places*

*That this heart of mine embraces all day through ...*

*I’ll find you in the mornin’ sun*

*And when the night is new*

*I’ll be looking at the moon*

*But I’ll be seeing you*

## References and Citations

For the reader intrigued to view the canvases from which I drew inspiration for this suite of stories, there are many opportunities to do so on the Internet. One need only ‘google’ Hopper’s name and the title of the painting (which I have listed at the head of each fiction) to be presented with a raft of websites offering such information.

Unfortunately, for copyright reasons, I am unable to include the actual images in the collection itself. However, as a start on your own journey into the heart of Hopper’s worlds, may I recommend either of the following sites which hosts many of the works cited: <http://www.edwardhopper.net> or <http://www.wikiart.org/en/edward-hopper>.

Cover image: Hopper at his easel, cropped from a photograph by Reginald Marsh, undated (sourced from: <http://www.artistandstudio.tumblr.com>, a non-commercial, not-for-profit site), which I have reproduced as a low-resolution cover image for illustrative purposes only in a non-commercial, not-for-profit literary work – thus satisfying the requirements for fair use which neither competes nor conflicts with the copyright holder’s use of the original material.

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### **Citations – Song Lyrics**

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*I Love to Tell the Story* (Hymn 969), The Salvation Army Songbook (American Supp.), written by Katherine Hankey (1834-1911)

*The Legend of Margery Grey*, traditional (19<sup>th</sup>c), written by Julia Dorr

*Blue Skies*, 1927, performed by Ben Selvin, written by Irving Berlin

*Over The Rainbow*, 1939m performed by Judy Garland, written by Harold Arlen & Yip Harburg

*Let's Have Another Cup of Coffee*, 1932, performed by Fred Waring & his Pennsylvanians, written by Irving Berlin

*Rosie the Riveter*, 1942, performed by the 4 Vagabonds, written by Redd Evans & John Jacob Loeb

*Summertime*, 1935, performed by Abbie Mitchell (in *Porgy & Bess*), written by George & Ira Gershwin

*I'll Be Seeing You*, 1938, performed by Bing Crosby, written by Sammy Fain and Irving Kahal