

The Adulterers · *Kenneth Mason*

Gwen Forester passed away on July 8 at her home in Spartanburg. "Mrs. Pug," as she was affectionately known to three generations of Tremont boys, was the widow of former Athletic Director William "Pug" Forester. She served as School Postmistress from the time of his death in 1962 until her retirement in 1976.

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I WAS THIRTEEN YEARS OLD and a third-former at the Tremont Academy for Boys when I happened to glance over at Mr. Forester's table one Sunday night at supper and see Mrs. Forester send an anguished look over her soup spoon to Mr. Potter, buttering his roll three tables away. Their two gazes embraced longingly in mid-air; then Mrs. Forester turned to say something to Mr. Forester, and Mr. Potter turned to say something to Peewee Welch. I recognized that look; I'd seen it lots of times in the movies my mother and I used to go to during the years she was a widow in Tremont, before she married my step-father and moved to Chicago. It was the way Irene Dunne looked at John Boles in *Back Street*, the way George Brent looked at Ruth Chatterton in *The Crash*, the way Adolphe Menjou looked at Barbara Stanwyck in *Forbidden*. I looked back at Mrs. Forester. As though she felt my eyes on her, she suddenly stared straight at me, even though I was at Mr. Barry's table, nowhere near Mr. Potter's. She smiled at me. She was always catching me looking at her, and she always smiled at me when she did. I smiled back. I liked Mrs. Forester. She looked like Claudette Colbert in *The Sign of the Cross*. I wasn't surprised she was committing adultery; it was a mystery to me why she had married Mr. Forester in the first place.

Mr. Forester looked like Charles Laughton in *The Island of Lost Souls*. He parted his hair in the middle; his eyes only opened halfway. He was six-foot-two and weighed two hundred and thirty pounds. He got his nickname, Pug, when he was an all-Conference guard for Clemson in 1928. He had been on the Olympic shot-put team the same year. In addition to coaching football and basketball, Mr. Forester taught manual training and was in charge of the Nature Club's overnight camping trips up Bald Mountain.

Henry Potter was hall master for the third form. He looked like Leslie Howard in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. He wore black shirts with a white knit tie. He had played on the Princeton tennis team. He taught third and fourth form English, and he coached dramatics, one play each semester. He was such a good director that each spring a special performance of the commencement play was given for the public at the Imperial Theater in Tremont. When my older brother Ron starred in *Journey's End* his fifth form year, the *Tremont Citizen-Times* reviewed the play and said the production was of professional caliber. They said the same thing last year about *Androcles and the Lion*, in which I had played Lavinia.

Mr. Potter lived in two rooms at the west end of the third floor of Larkin Hall. Mr. and Mrs. Forester lived in the married master's apartment at the opposite end of the same floor. There was a door from the hall into their living room, but it was always locked; their apartment had its own entrance from private stairs from the ground floor. The only time the Foresters unlocked their door to the hall was on Thursday nights, when Mrs. Forester invited the boys on the third floor to come in their bathrobes for a glass of milk and a cookie before bed. Once, when Mr. Potter was away, Mr. Forester opened the door and shouted at the boys to quiet down. There were twenty third-formers on the third floor; we could make a lot of noise, especially when we all came piling in at 5 P.M. after athletics, or 9 P.M. after study hall. My room was right next to the Foresters' apartment. I could never host an after-lights gripe session because the Foresters would hear it if they were in their living room; I knew, because I could hear them when they had company. Another thing wrong with my room was it was the farthest from the can.

I wasn't the only person who didn't think Mr. Forester was the right man for Mrs. Forester; my mother didn't either. Actually, Mom wouldn't have approved of anybody Mrs. Forester married because she thought eighteen was too young for a girl to get married, especially a bright girl like Gwen Malone who had gone to Chatham Hall and who should have gone on to college. It also didn't help that Mr. Forester wasn't from Tremont and Mom didn't know who his people were. She knew Gwen Malone because Mr. Malone had the big insurance agency in Tremont and had handled the insurance payments after my father died. Gwen's older sister Dorothy used to babysit when Ron and I were little, and both girls had

helped at the house the summer Mom came out of mourning, serving at two garden parties she gave. I was only six that year, but I never forgot how much fun it was helping the pretty Malone sisters fold napkins and put out place cards before the party started.

After Ron was boarding at the Academy, Mrs. Forester would always come over to talk to Mom and me when we came out for a basketball game or a play Ron was in. I could still call her Gwen then, but Ron had to call her Mrs. Forester because she was a faculty wife. The year I entered first form, when Mom drove Ron and me out for the first day of school, I saw Gwen and yelled "Hi, Gwen!" out the car window. "Mrs. Forester, you dope," Ron said, giving me a poke. "I forgot," I said. "Well, don't forget again or you'll get stuck five points," Ron said. When Mrs. Forester came to the car to talk to Mom while Ron and I were unloading our stuff, she smiled at me and said, "How are you, Randy? I'm so glad to see you. If you ever need anything after your mother moves to Chicago, you let me know, you hear?" "Yes, Mrs. Forester," I said.

Gwen Forester wore her black hair in a short straight bob with bangs over her forehead, just like some of the girls from St. Genevieve-of-the-Pines who came out to school for dances. She dressed more like those girls than a faculty wife too: sweaters and skirts and saddle shoes, and a ribbon in her hair. For dinner she always wore a dress to the dining room, and on Saturday nights she sometimes wore a green silk dress dotted with hundreds of tiny pink buds; it buttoned up the back and had billowy sleeves and a pleated skirt and a little leather belt around the middle. Sometimes she wore it with a silk scarf around her shoulders, the same pale pink as the buds on her dress. That was my favorite. I thought she was beautiful when she was Gwen Malone and I was helping her set the outdoor tables for Mom's garden parties, but I thought she was even more beautiful as Mrs. William "Pug" Forester, even though I wished she had married somebody else. I wasn't the only one who thought she was beautiful. At the commencement dance more seniors danced with her than any other faculty wife, and she danced with them just like their dates did, doing all the dips and twirls as though she were a student herself. Actually, she was twenty-four years old the year I was in third form, and I remember Mom's saying it was strange Gwen didn't have any children yet, Pug being such a big outdoorsman and all.

At vesper service after supper, I began remembering things about Mrs. Forester and Mr. Potter I never would have remembered if I hadn't seen them exchange their look at dinner. Just last Friday, two days before, I'd passed the two of them talking so intently as they walked back to Larkin from play rehearsal they hadn't even noticed me, so I didn't say hello. Mrs. Forester was wardrobe mistress for the Dramatic Society, but why did she go to play practice every day when there was nothing for her to do until dress rehearsal night? I remembered something else, too: the afternoon I'd been stuck twenty points and sent to my room early from athletics for talking back to Mr. Hunt at junior football practice. As I passed Mr. Potter's room at the top of the third floor landing, I heard Mrs. Forester's voice inside, and when I got to my own room at the end of the hall I looked back just in time to see that Mr. Potter had come out into the hall to see who it was and was just turning back into his room. I closed my door and lay on my bed, trying not to cry, I was so sore about being stuck and losing my Wednesday free afternoons for three weeks. A few minutes later I heard footsteps, and Mrs. Forester's door open and close. It hadn't meant anything to me then, but now, thinking about it during vespers, I would have bet anything they had been holding hands and kissing in Mr. Potter's room when I went by.

After Christmas vacation Mr. Potter gave me a copy of *Whistling in the Dark*, the play he had selected for the winter term, and told me I was to play the female lead, Toby VanBuren. Rehearsals began in February. The first week the cast just sat in a circle on the stage, reading their parts from their scripts. The second week we walked around the stage trying to say our lines from memory. From the third week on, the two boys playing girls had to wear girls' jumpers over their clothes and high-heeled shoes at every rehearsal; this was so we'd be used to them by opening night and not spoil our entrance by falling on our faces. The Dramatic Society's wardrobe had inherited a fair number of girls' shoes through the years, but none of them fit me comfortably, so Mrs. Forester had to take me to town on Wednesday free afternoon to buy a pair of high-heeled shoes just for me. I didn't mind; I'd been stuck so many points I would have been on the sidewalk sweeping crew otherwise.

Mrs. Forester said she'd have to decide what dress I was going to wear before she bought the shoes. After lunch on Wednesday she took me up

the private stairway to her apartment, led me into her bedroom, opened the closet door, took out two dresses and laid them on one of the twin beds. I undressed to my underwear. She put a brown wool dress on me; it had long tight sleeves and buttoned high on the throat.

“What do you think?”

“It scratches.”

“Really? It’s nicely lined.”

“It scratches my arms and neck. Can we try another?”

“Of course. You’re the star. We have to please the star. Just turn around for a minute and let me see the back.”

“I’m not the star. Ben Moody’s the star.”

“You’re both stars. Ben’s the leading man, you’re the leading lady.”

“I’d rather play Wally. Wally gets all the laughs.”

“You’ll get those parts later, after you’re older. Your brother started in girls’ roles. Remember him in *The Dover Road*?”

“Sure. He played Eustacia. He wore Mom’s velvet evening dress and got make-up all over it. She was sore.”

“I wish you liked this, Randy. It fits you so nicely.”

“It’s too tight. And it scratches.”

“All right, we’ll take it off. What about this?” She slipped a black sleeveless dress over my head, then made me put on a funny little jacket that barely reached my belly button.

“Won’t do,” she said. “Too sophisticated.”

“You mean too ugly.”

“It would be more polite, Mr. Jeffries, if you kept your comments on my wardrobe to yourself.”

“I mean ugly on me. On you it would be very haute monde.”

“Haute monde! My goodness, don’t we have an impressive vocabulary. And aren’t we fresh. Did I hear you got stuck twenty points again for talking back?”

“It wasn’t fair. I didn’t talk back. I really didn’t. I just asked Mr. Havighurst if he was really sure—”

“I don’t want to get into it, Randolph. Here, let’s put this on.”

It was the green silk dress she wore at Saturday night dinners. It slipped down over my arms and shoulders and thighs like a cool breeze on a hot summer day. The skirt settled over my hips just where it was supposed to.

My arms floated in air in the wide, billowy sleeves. She began buttoning the back; I buttoned the sleeves at my wrists without waiting for her to tell me to. I fastened the leather belt against my stomach. I wiggled my hips and shoulders to make the silk brush against my body again.

“Boy, does that ever feel smooth,” I said.

“It’s silk. I’m not sure I can let you wear this. It does look nice, though. You’d have to be very careful with it.”

“You mean not get make-up on it.”

“I mean no clowning around in it, like dancing around backstage with the skirt over your head to prove you’re not really a girl. You boys think that’s very funny, but it isn’t; it’s disgusting.”

“I won’t do that any more. I promise.”

When I played Lavinia in *Androcles and the Lion* the year before, they dressed me in a white toga with a rope around the middle; I didn’t even have to practice high heels during rehearsals, because Lavinia wore sandals. All they did to make me a girl was put a wig on my head and a padded brassiere on my chest. It wasn’t anything like wearing a soft silk dress with a soft round neck that just nestled against your throat, and wide weightless sleeves that made you feel you could float through the air if you wanted to.

“If I let you wear this you’ve got to promise me you’ll be very careful with it, you understand? Especially the buttons in the back. Never try to take it off without me, you understand?”

“I’ll be careful. Can I see what I look like?”

“Oh, Randy, I’m sorry, of course you can. Here, come look.”

“Boy, do I look dumb,” I said in front of the mirror. But I didn’t feel dumb. I felt vibrant, alive, special. I wished her phone would ring and she would have to answer it and talk for a long time while I just stood there in her silk dress, the sleeves billowing around my arms, the little leather belt holding the dress tight against my stomach, the skirt shimmering along my thighs. She could be on the phone all day and I wouldn’t care; I’d be happy just standing there in her dress, as long as she wanted me to.

“I’m going to need an awful lot of padding you know where.”

“Yes, Mr. Smarty, that will all be taken care of. And a necklace, I think. Maybe Mrs. Havighurst will lend us her pearls. If I don’t tell her who they’re for, of course.”

“You think she’s mad at me too?”

“Don’t you imagine? After the way you insulted her husband?”

“I didn’t insult him. That wasn’t a fair stick. All I did was ask—”

“We’re taking this off now. You unbutton the sleeves, Randolph. Do it carefully.”

“This young man is playing a part in a school play and we need a pair of black pumps. Medium heels. Your lowest price.”

The salesman at Pollock’s looked like Peter Lorre in *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. He had pasty skin and shifty eyes, he was very short, and his name was Freddy Bourne. He leered up at me as though he were measuring the foot of the half-man half-woman from the sideshow at the Ringling Brothers circus. Mrs. Forester had brought a pair of silk stockings in her purse; I had taken off my own shoes and stockings and put her silk ones on up to my ankles. The first two pair of shoes pinched my toes, but maybe that was the way all girls’ shoes fit. Mrs. Forester asked Freddy Bourne what he thought. He smiled at her the way Uriah Heep smiled at Madge Evans in *David Copperfield* and said he didn’t know, it was the first time he’d ever tried to fit girls’ shoes on a boy. Mrs. Forester said try the next size. Freddy Bourne came back with only one pair. I walked down the aisle in them, ignoring the smirk on his face. They’re OK, I said. I sat down, gave Mrs. Forester her silk stockings back, put my own shoes and stockings back on and followed her to the sales desk. Freddy Bourne gave Mrs. Forester her change and handed the shoe box to me. “Y’all come back and see us now, y’hear?” he said, giving us another Uriah Heep as he held the door. I gave him one back that would have dropped the original Heep to his knees, added the old Italian finger behind Mrs. Forester’s back the way Ron had showed me at Christmas, then sauntered down the sidewalk at Mrs. Forester’s side.

“I want to congratulate you, Randolph,” Mrs. Forester said as we walked to her car. “I saw the way that silly man looked at you. You were a perfect gentleman through the whole thing.”

I didn’t answer. I was imagining what it would be like if I were Mrs. Forester’s daughter instead of just a boy in a play at school. Freddy Bourne would have treated me with deference, smiling instead of smirking, happy to kneel down to feel my toe in the shoe. We’d have made him bring out dozens of pairs before deciding, and afterwards we’d have gone into

Eckerd's for a chocolate marshmallow sundae instead of just heading back to the car. Mrs. Forester would have been holding my hand as we walked in, the way mothers always hold their daughters' hands when they take them shopping, pulling them along behind them to the next rack or counter. We would have sat in a booth and put our packages down beside us and let our coats slide off our shoulders behind us while we looked at the list. We would have stayed an hour at least, talking about movies and clothes, and gossiping about the masters' wives at the Academy. On the way out we'd have bought Silver Screen magazine and I'd be reading juicy bits to her about Norma Shearer and Robert Taylor in the car now on the way home. What a wonderful life it would be to be Mrs. Forester's daughter, I thought, until it occurred to me that if I were Mrs. Forester's daughter, Mr. Forester would be my father, at which point my reverie spiralled toward earth like a German Fokker in *Dawn Patrol*, smoke pouring from its tail, blood trickling out the side of its doomed pilot's mouth.

"How did you and Mr. Forester meet?" I asked as we drove back to school. "He's not from Tremont."

"Dorothy introduced us. She had a boyfriend who went to Clemson, and he invited her for homecoming, and she said how about arranging a date for my baby sister."

"And your date turned out to be Mr. Forester."

"Oh no, Pug would never have had a blind date. He was the big man on the campus. My date turned out to be a very nice freshman who started to write to me after, and then the next spring invited me to the prom. I accepted, and that's when I met Pug, at the prom."

"What happened to the fellow who invited you the first time? The one who wrote to you."

"I don't know. I'm sure he found another girl. He was very nice."

"Maybe he died of a broken heart."

"There wouldn't be somebody in this car making fun of me, would there?"

"I'm not making fun. That's what I would have done."

She looked over at me. I looked down at my hands. "Why, thank you, Randolph, I take that as a real sincere compliment. Thank you very much."

After a moment I said, "Do you think Mr. Potter will ever get married?"

"I don't know, what do you think?"

"I'm surprised some girl hasn't snagged him already, he's such a good dresser. And tennis player."

"Yes, I'm surprised too. He's certainly very handsome, don't you think?"

"I suppose. Except he doesn't have a very good build. Of course you wouldn't know that, but we see him in the shower every morning, and—"

"That will do, Randolph," she said sternly. We drove in silence for a few minutes; then she looked over at me and shook her head. "You really are a caution today, Randy. I can't imagine what's got into you."

Toward the end of the winter term it seemed to me Mrs. Forester was getting reckless. She began going into Mr. Potter's room, coming out of her apartment right onto our floor to leave a note on his desk, or return a book of his she'd borrowed, or drop off a plate of sugar cookies. Once she surprised Conner and MacLean with no clothes on; they had to go tearing into the nearest room and close the door until she had passed, then run back to their own rooms before she came back. Practically every time she spotted Mr. Potter she'd act as though she'd just thought of something she needed to tell him. "Oh, Henry," she'd say, and call him over to her, or go over to where he was. It was getting to the point where the poor man couldn't go anywhere without her swooping down on him to ask him a question, or walk along with him to Mayberry or the post office. I couldn't stand it; she was making a fool of herself. I asked Bill Batty if he ever noticed how Mrs. Forester was always saying, "Oh, Henry." Batty said yes, he did notice it.

Batty's room was three down the hall from mine, and he was one of the stage hands for *Whistling in the Dark*. We started looking at each other and rolling our eyes every time we heard Mrs. Forester say "Oh, Henry." The week of dress rehearsal we happened to be two of the eight third-formers assigned to the Foresters' table. Dress rehearsal was to be Friday night, school performance Saturday night. On Tuesday we were getting up from our chairs after lunch when Mrs. Forester called, "Oh, Henry." We rolled our eyes and walked down to the canteen together. In addition to my usual ice cream sandwich, I bought an Oh Henry bar.

Batty caught on right away. "Where you going to put it?"

"Under her napkin at dinner," I said.

"What, her napkin sitting on top of an Oh Henry bar when she walks in? It'll be too obvious. Everyone will see it."

"Just the wrapper, underneath. No one will see it except her."

"Do you think she'll get the message?"

"She'd better get it," I said.

I got to the dining hall early for dinner. There was a five-minute buzzer and a one-minute buzzer. I walked casually toward the Foresters' table after the first buzzer. I looked around; nobody was paying any attention to me. I slipped the candy wrapper under Mrs. Forester's napkin, then strolled idly over to the wall and studied the photo of the 1912 football team behind Dean Coughlan's table until the one-minute buzzer rang and everyone started filing in.

We all bowed our heads while the Dean said grace. After grace I looked at Bill Batty, sitting two seats to the left of Mr. Forester. Batty rolled his eyes expectantly. Mrs. Forester was sitting on Mr. Forester's right. I was four seats away from her, almost in the middle of the table. The waiters started coming out of the kitchen with soup tureens on their trays. The Foresters' waiter put a tureen with a ladle and ten soup plates in front of Mr. Forester. He picked up his napkin. We all picked up our napkins. I saw the Oh Henry wrapper fall into Mrs. Forester's lap. She picked it up and looked at it for a moment, smiling expectantly, like a little girl finding a party surprise. I suddenly felt sick. I looked at Batty; he was staring at Mrs. Forester, his mouth open. I looked back at Mrs. Forester; she was showing the wrapper to her husband, her face still so innocent of its malevolent mission I wanted to cry. Mr. Forester put the soup ladle down and took the candy wrapper from her.

"What's this?"

"It was under my napkin."

Mr. Forester studied the wrapper for a second, then crushed it angrily in his hand and put it in his pocket. He started ladling the soup, passing the first plate to her. She looked at me and smiled. I smiled weakly back, my cheeks on fire, then sat riveted in despair as she read in my guilty countenance the message the wrapper was meant to convey and the identity of the person who sent it. *You?* her stricken eyes asked, *you of all people?* I

wanted to look away, but her gaze held me. Finally she had to pass some soup. I found a spot just past Pug's left shoulder and stared at it. I could see Batty giving me the eye; I ignored it. All I could think of was ways to die. I saw myself hanging by the neck from a rafter. I saw myself leaping off the railroad trestle. I imagined myself in the electric chair, hood over my face, Pat O'Brien reading the last rites, executioner's hand on the switch. Hurry, I begged, please hurry and throw the switch. But there was no switch; dinner went on and on. When the bell finally rang I was the first person in the dining hall on my feet.

"Wait, Randolph."

She said it in a normal tone of voice while one hundred and fifty boys were standing up and pushing their chairs back into place; she could have whispered it and I would still have heard it.

Mr. Forester stood up. She remained seated. "I'm going for a walk," he said.

She didn't look at him. "Fine," she said.

Mr. Forester stared at her for a moment, then turned and walked stiffly toward the door. Mrs. Forester motioned to me to come to her.

"We're going to my apartment, Randolph. I want to try on your dress for the play again."

"What about study hall?"

"I'll see that you get a late slip. Come with me."

We walked wordlessly up the stairs to her apartment. She led me into her bedroom.

"Take your clothes off," she said.

I stripped to my shorts.

"Raise your arms," she said.

It was the brown wool dress.

"I'm not wearing the green one?"

"It's too delicate. You might tear it."

"I wouldn't tear it. I'd be very, very careful. I promise."

"This is a better dress for the part. Here, let me button the throat. Turn around. It fits you absolutely perfectly."

"I hate this dress. It's too tight. It scratches my neck. Why can't I wear the other one?"

"Because I've decided you're wearing this one."

“Does it have to be so tight at the neck? Can’t I leave the top button unfastened?”

“No you may not. It isn’t that tight. Don’t be such a complainer.”

“I hate this dress.” I began to cry. “I hate you.”

“Yes, I know you do. You proved that tonight.”

“For God’s sake, Gwen, have you got that boy in a dress again?” It was Pug from the living room.

“I thought you were going for a walk,” she said. “Write Randolph a late slip for study hall, will you?”

I started pulling the dress over my head. “All right, Randolph, don’t rip it. Another ten seconds won’t kill you.”

“What’s the matter,” Pug called, “you girls having a spat?”

“Everything’s fine. Randolph just had a little temper tantrum is all.”

“I didn’t have a temper tantrum.”

She closed the bedroom door. “You’re talking back, Randolph. Do you want to get stuck twenty points?”

“Go ahead and stick me twenty points. Stick me forty points. Stick me four hundred points. I didn’t have a temper tantrum.”

“Watch your tone, Randolph, or you’re going to find yourself in real trouble. Now put your clothes on and go to study hall.”

I put my clothes on. She opened the bedroom door and closed it behind me. I started down the stairs.

“Wait a minute, Jeffries, you’ve forgotten your late slip,” Pug said. I turned around. Pug handed me the late slip, then pulled the crumpled Oh Henry wrapper from his pocket and put it in my hand.

“Now listen to me, son. It’s time you stopped acting like a little kid. You’re not Ron Jeffries’s baby brother any more. You’re going to be a fourth-former in a few months. Start acting like it.”

I went down the stairs and started down the path to Mayberry. Four more days, I told myself: I had to let her put her ugly wool dress on me for dress rehearsal Friday night and the school performance Saturday night. After that I’d never play a girl’s part again for the rest of my life. She’d never catch me looking at her in the dining room again for the rest of my life either.

Mom decided I shouldn't come to Chicago for the ten-day spring break the second week of April because things were a little hard for my step-father right now and it was an awful lot of money to spend on train fare for just a few days at home. I didn't mind; Ron wasn't going home for the break at Carolina, and it wasn't any fun at home anymore without Ron. Several other kids were also staying: Diggory Penn from England, Miguel Quesada from Cuba, the Baxter brothers, who were on scholarship and whose folks everybody knew were poor, and three seniors who were having trouble with their grades and were getting special tutoring during the break. Most of the married faculty stayed; most of the bachelors, like Mr. Potter, went home.

With only three tables in the dining room, Mrs. Forester and I were often at the same table. It wasn't a problem; we had been unfailingly if stiffly courteous to one another since the play, which everybody said had been brilliantly acted. Mr. Potter told me I had done an outstanding job. Mrs. Forester also complimented me; on both nights, as she was helping me get out of her dress, she said, "You were excellent, Randolph. I'm proud of you." The way she said it I knew it was Randolph Jeffries the actor she was complimenting, not Randolph Jeffries the human being. I said thank you very much, Mrs. Forester, in a voice just as mechanical as hers had been, thanking Mrs. Forester the theater critic, not the Mrs. Forester I had once loved.

On the Monday afternoon before the Wednesday morning school started again, I was practicing fast starts and stops on my roller skates on the cement walk near the entrance to the Foresters' apartment, when I saw her watching me through the glass in the ground-floor door. I sat down on the walk and pretended to adjust the straps on my skates. She opened the door and came out.

"Hi, Randy."

"Hi."

"You didn't feel like going on Pug's hike today?"

"I felt like skating."

"Isn't it lonesome, skating all by yourself?"

"I'm not lonesome. I'm practicing starts and stops."

"You want to come for tea and cookies this afternoon? Just you and me?"

"What time?"

“When you finish practicing.”

“I’m finished now.”

“All right, come now then.”

I took off my skates and started up the stairs after her. Halfway up the first flight she turned and put out her hand. I took it, and she led me by the hand up the remaining flight-and-a-half to her apartment. It was all I could do not to jump on the stairs and shout, so much happiness suddenly erupted inside me. At the top I left my skates on the landing and followed her into her kitchen.

“You clear the coffee table in the living room, Randy. The cups and saucers are in that cabinet. The sugar bowl’s over there. There’s cream in the little pitcher in the icebox. Use the tray on the counter.”

I arranged everything neatly on the coffee table. Going back to the kitchen I paused at the bedroom door, leaned the tray against the wall, tiptoed in, and opened the door to her closet. Her green dress was there, on the end, next to the wall.

“Oh, Randy.” She was watching me from the bedroom door. “It was mean of me not to let you wear it.”

“It’s all right. What I did was mean too.”

“Do you want to put it on again?”

“You mean now?”

“If you want to.”

“For tea?”

“Of course, for tea. We’ll pretend you’re Toby VanBuren come for tea. It’ll be our own private play.”

I stripped to my shorts and raised my arms. She let the cool soft silk shimmer across my shoulders and down my arms and thighs. I buttoned the sleeves. She started buttoning the back.

“I sure could use some padding you know where.”

“You want a padded bra?”

“Go all the way over to the wardrobe?”

“No, silly, I have one here.”

She took a padded bra out of the dresser, unbuttoned my back, slipped my arms in the bra, fastened it and began rebuttoning the dress.

“Why have you got a padded bra? You don’t need a padded bra.”

“If you don’t mind, Mr. Jeffries, there are some questions gentlemen

don't ask ladies. Now look at yourself. Aren't you beautiful?"

"I need a wig. And high-heel shoes."

"Shall we get in the car and go see your friend at Pollock's?"

"Peter Lorre? Thanks just the same. Can I stay barefoot?"

"Yes, leave those dirty shoes off. And I've got an idea, too." She took her hairbrush and brushed my hair into bangs across my forehead. "Wait," she said, "don't move." She took a pink ribbon from a drawer and tied it into a bow in the middle of my head. "Now what do you say?"

I looked into the mirror; Gwen Forester and a girl with a boy's haircut looked back at me. We were exactly the same height.

"Boy, this sure is a beautiful dress."

"Yes, it's my favorite too."

"You know what I like? When you wear it on Saturday nights with the scarf around your shoulders."

She laughed. "Oh? So you want the scarf too?"

"No, I was just saying—"

"Never mind, it's right here. How do you prefer to wear it, Miss Van-Buren, over one shoulder? Over both?"

She draped the scarf over my shoulders and tied it in front. She held me at arms length for a moment before letting me go.

"My goodness, you really do look scrumptious, Randolph," she said wistfully. "Now, shall we have our tea?"

This must be what they mean when they ask in chapel if you're at peace with your maker, I thought: I had never been so at peace as I was now, sitting next to her on the couch, breathing air scented by her skin and her hair, my skirt touching hers, our bodies separated by two scant millimeters of cloth. We talked about *Whistling in the Dark*; about the commencement play, *Leave It to Psmith*, which I wouldn't be in; about my mother, and how she liked Chicago; about my chances of making the junior basketball team next year.

"Next year you'll be playing men's roles."

"No kidding! Did Mr. Potter say so?"

"No, but I can tell."

"How can you tell?"

"You'll be too big for my dresses next year."

"I could wear Mrs. Havighurst's dresses. She's as big as a house."

“No, when you’re too big for my dresses, Randy, you’ll be too big for dresses altogether. Do you understand?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Do you really, Randy?”

I knew what she meant: she meant it was time to stop acting like a little kid, time to grow up. I knew it was time. She didn’t have to tell me.

“Sure,” I said again, and then suddenly jumped to my feet, just as she did, at the sound of the ground-floor door opening below.

“Oh my god,” she gasped. She ran through the kitchen and shouted down the stairway. “Pug! You’re back so early. Is something wrong?”

“Tim Baxter—sprained ankle—”

Even before I heard Pug’s answering voice I had run into the bedroom, thrown her scarf on the bed, unbuttoned the sleeves of her dress and was reaching behind me for the buttons in the back. I got the top two. The third one tore. The fourth one tore. It was hopeless: I could never do it in time. I scooped up my clothes and shoes, ran through the living room, unlocked the door to the hall, closed it behind me, turned immediately into my room and closed the door. I heard the Foresters’ door open again. With my clothes and shoes still in my arms I stepped into my closet, closed the door and sat on the floor. The door to my room opened; my roller skates dropped on the floor. My door closed and the Foresters’ door opened and closed. Then their voices through the wall:

“Who was that? Who just went out that door?”

“What are you talking about?”

“For Christ’s sake, Gwen, somebody just went out that door. Who was it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Nobody went out the door.”

“Teacups? Cookies? All by yourself?”

I heard their door open, then Pug running down the hall toward Mr. Potter’s room, then her voice, now in the hall outside the door to their apartment:

“Don’t be an idiot, Pug. He’s in Ohio. He won’t be back until tomorrow.”

Doors opened and closed at the end of the hall; Pug’s footsteps crossed the hall into the can, then headed back toward the apartment. Mrs. Forester’s footsteps turned back into the apartment. Pug’s footsteps followed

her, their door closed, the lock turned.

“Would you listen to me for a minute?” Her voice, soft.

“Somebody was here, damn it.”

“Betty Gilkey was here. She came for a chat after lunch. We had some tea. She left an hour ago, Pug, an hour ago.” How simple, I thought. Mrs. Gilkey was one of Mrs. Forester’s friends from town. All she had to do was call her later and tell her what to say in case Pug ever asked. We were saved.

“Well, why didn’t you say so for Christ’s sake?”

“How could I say anything with you acting like a madman? Thank god the boys are on vacation—you’d have made fools out of us forever.”

“You’ve already done that, Gwen. Just thank your lucky stars Prissy Pants wasn’t there. I’d have made something worse than a fool out of him.”

Pug’s footsteps receded toward the bedroom, followed by the faint sounds of Mrs. Forester taking away the tea things. Still sitting in the dark on the floor of my closet, I cautiously began to unbutton the back of her dress, wincing as my fingers reminded me of the two torn buttons. I undid the final two buttons without tearing anything, then stood up and pulled the dress over my head. Everything was quiet in the Foresters’ apartment. I unsnapped the padded bra, opened my clothes hamper and stuffed the dress and bra underneath the shirts and underwear and socks already in it. Then I opened the closet door, picked up my clothes and shoes, sat on my bed and started to get dressed. Her scarf was tangled up in my shoes. I went back to the closet and stuffed the scarf underneath everything else in the hamper. I looked at my watch: it was four o’clock, two hours till dinner. I finished dressing, picked up my roller skates, opened my door and walked quietly down the hall to the can. There, in the mirror, I saw a boy with roller skates slung over his shoulder and a pink ribbon in his hair. I snatched the ribbon off, stuffed it into my pocket, pushed my hair back off my forehead, took a leak, went down the stairs, put on my skates, and coasted down the walk toward Mayberry Hall.

Mr. Forester came to dinner alone that night. He sat at the same table I was at. Everybody was talking about Tim Baxter’s accident. They asked me why I hadn’t gone on the hike; I said it was because I was skating. After supper I played ping-pong in the seniors’ rec room in Hamilton Hall. It was quiet in the Foresters’ apartment when I got back to my room. I looked in my clothes hamper. Her dress and scarf and bra were gone. That was

why she hadn't come to dinner. I thought of her coming into my room looking for her dress and finding it stuffed in the hamper under my dirty clothes, all wrinkled, two buttons in the back torn loose, her beautiful pink scarf streaked with dirt from my shoes. She must have wanted to weep. I wanted to run to her, weep with her, beg her forgiveness, tell her how much I loved her. I had ripped the buttons of her beautiful dress, just like she was afraid I would. I had put my dirty shoes all over her beautiful scarf. I lay down on the bed and buried my face in the pillow. It was after midnight when I finally undressed, got under the covers and went to sleep.

She didn't come for lunch on Tuesday but she came for dinner Tuesday night, the last night before school started again. She and Pug came in with the Havighursts and sat with the Butterfields and Butlers. I could smell the sherry on their breaths all the way over at my table. I sat with the flunking seniors and the Baxter brothers and Mr. York. I could see her from where I sat, but I carefully didn't look at her until I accidentally raised my eyes while passing Jamie Baxter the white sauce for the brown betty; she was looking directly at me. She smiled, and I smiled back, but they weren't like the simple little smiles we used to give each other.

I'm sorry about your dress, my smile said.

It wasn't your fault, her smile said.

I love you, my smile said.

I love you too, her smile said, but we mustn't see each other again.

I know, my smile said, and we both looked away.

Gwen Forester and I never spent another moment alone together during my three remaining years at Tremont. I wasn't in another play until fifth form, when I played male roles in *Libel* and *R.U.R.* In sixth form Mr. Potter cast me in the leading role of Teddy Deakin in *The Ghost Train*, for which I won the award for the best performance of the year. But although we were never again alone together, there were countless times—in the dining hall, in chapel, in the stands at a game—when our eyes would meet and linger for a moment, until she smiled, and I smiled, and we turned to look at someone else. One of the first times that happened was on a Saturday evening in May, about a month after our tea party, when she came to dinner in the dining hall wearing her green silk dress, her pale pink scarf draped over her shoulders, and a pink ribbon in her hair. Three boys at her table scuffled to hold her chair, but Pug pushed them away and held it for

her himself. I saw her eyes searching the room to see what table I was at the moment grace had been said, and when she found me she gave me a really big smile that anyone could have seen, and then looked away quickly before I could give her one back. The pink ribbon in her hair reminded me that I had never returned the one that was in my hair the day I ran from her apartment. I still have that ribbon today somewhere, in with the cups, plaques, yearbooks, and other stuff one saves from school.