

On the Way to California · *Kent Nelson*

IT'S BEEN A WEEK. Priester's been gone a week, and the baby cries for him. Melissa doesn't know she's crying for him, but when the time comes in the evening for Priester to feed her, he isn't there. And in the night, when she wakes, she thinks it will be Priester who's coming to comfort her. Instead she hears my voice, feels the lighter weight of my hand on her back. She wishes it were his hand, his voice. He calms her. He cajoles her, sings to her ponderous songs like "The Volga Boatman" and "It's Dark as a Dungeon Way Down in the Mine." Listening at the door, I'm astonished his off-key renditions soothe her. What does she understand of these words "Yo ho, heave ho" or "Tote that barge, lift that bale?" But she sleeps.

We all drank too much that night. It wasn't the first time: something about the Yellow Man inspires us to ignore health and safety. Perhaps it's the battle he and Gwen wage in public; or maybe it's the absurd paintings which litter their tiny studio—trout and atomic bombs exploding and prisms of color. What made that night so different? We had dinner downstairs and left our door open to listen for Melissa if she cried. We drank wine, celebrating the sale of Iwamasa's used car. (The week before it had been the finding of my earring.) What I remember is Priester at the open window watching the wind shake the trees across the street.

"It's going to be severe," he said. "That's what they predict on the radio. There's a warning."

The window had no curtain or shade to let in every ounce of daytime light for Iwamasa's painting. But it seemed that night to be a huge space, as big as the night itself.

"We could turn on the TV," Gwen said.

"No, let's see it live." Priester smiled just as the first lightning crackled over the houses in the distance.

The mountains west of Denver had disappeared early into the clouds and darkness, and an eerie glow of neon glimmered in the low overcast. The moving air through the window cooled the room.

Thunder banked against the walls, and two lamps flickered off and then on again. I wondered whether Melissa would waken.

Iwamasa got up and rummaged through a drawer for some candles.

"Gwen used to like to make love by candlelight," he said. "She thought it made me look bronzed."

"It made him look like Frankenstein," Gwen said.

Iwamasa liked to be called The Yellow Man or General Hirohito. He was tall for a Japanese, five-ten and sturdy, and he wore his straight black hair shoulder length, longer than Gwen's blond curls. He'd been dressed that night in a uniform, in junk culled from military surplus and thrift stores. He had on maroon trousers from a band uniform, a khaki army shirt, and a gray Civil War jacket with epaulets. He even wore a saber.

"Little Hiro," Iwamasa said. "That's what we're going to name our child. The American Hiro. We'll wrap him in the flag of the Rising Sun."

"What if it's a girl?" I asked.

"Who would have a child with you?" Gwen asked. "That'd be signing my own commitment papers. Goddamn, look at this place. Where would we put a crib? And you don't even have a job."

"I have work," Iwamasa said. "That's better than a job."

"Work?"

"You don't think this is work?" The Yellow Man gestured around the single room. "You think I do this for my health?"

"This is bullshit," Gwen said. "This stuff is perverse. What do you think, Ellie? Is this art-as-excuse or what?"

"I'm not getting into this," I said.

The Yellow Man leaped up and started toward his easel over by the window.

Priester paid no attention to this. He sat by the window and stared out at the night. This was no different from usual. The Yellow Man might rave and prowl and howl at the moon and spill out paint on canvas like blood in the street, but Priester would remain serene. He was secretive and wistful. Or maybe it was the talk of children that unnerved him. He loved Melissa, of course. But there was something about having her that troubled him. He'd not been consulted. (Not true.) He'd not been certain he could adjust. (How can anyone be certain about what hadn't happened?) What if something went wrong? (Melissa is healthy.)

Iwamasa stood at the easel for a moment and then turned to Priester. "What do you think?" he asked.

"It's a good night for photographs," Priester said.

"What?"

"Time lapse. Slow everything down."

"Photographs, when there's this?" Iwamasa grabbed his painting.

"I sold my camera," Priester said. "You're safe."

Iwamasa turned the painting toward us. It was of a rainbow trout rising to the surface of a pool in which was reflected a mushroom cloud. I thought it was full of passion, drama, color, but there was something not quite right about it.

"Like, look at the bomb," Gwen said. "Is that heavy?"

"That's the message," Iwamasa said. "That's the consequence for mankind."

"But not original," Gwen said. "Not *new*."

A gust of wind whined under the eaves and in the loose wires of the apartment house. The window panes clattered and shrank back to silence. Then a bolt of lightning struck close by, and thunder reverberated through the room. Melissa cried.

Priester volunteered to go upstairs, and when he left the room Iwamasa closed the window. The room was quieter. Gwen and the Yellow Man struck a truce for the time being.

We could hear Priester upstairs speaking in his soft voice to Melissa. "Would you like a story?" he asked. "A song?" as if Melissa could understand words.

But she wasn't crying anymore.

Then he sang.

I'll tell of a hunter whose life was undone
By the cruel hand of evil at the setting of the sun.
His arrow was loosed and it flew through the dark
And his true love was slain when the shaft found its mark.

She had her apron wrapped about her and he took her for a swan.
But oh, no, alas, it was she, Polly Von.

"Why does he sing that?" Gwen said. "What happened to 'When I Wish Upon a Star?'"

"God if I know," I said.

"I can see how it would be unsettling," said Iwamasa.

"What would?"

Iwamasa listened to part of the next verse about telling the father. Then he looked at me. "You know what I mean."

Gwen drank the rest of her wine. "Don't be inscrutable," she said. "Tell Ellie what you mean."

"I don't mean—"

"I keep thinking Hiro will change," Gwen said. "He's young. But Priester is old, isn't he? How old is Priester?"

"Forty. Almost."

"Forty," Iwamasa said. "That's past the mid-life crisis. He's in afterlife."

"Fill my glass," Gwen said. "Stop saying such stupid things."

"Me? I'm not the one going to California."

"Who is going to California?" I asked.

"No one," Iwamasa said. "It's an illusion."

"Allusion, my ass," Gwen said. "He means Priester said something to him."

"What did Priester say?" I asked.

"Nothing."

Upstairs Priester started on a distorted version of "Summertime." He was off-key, but I could imagine Melissa's eyes blinking closed.

We had more wine. We toasted good riddance to the Yellow Man's orange Hornet which had cost \$600 in repairs in the last year and which netted exactly \$75. We nearly emptied the half-gallon.

In a while Priester came back downstairs. He paused in the doorway as if he noticed something new about the room. He was tall and his bristly blond hair stuck up all over his head as if he'd been asleep. He seemed wraithlike, arms and legs hollow. "Who shut out the storm?" he asked.

"The Yellow Man," I said. "He thought it would rain."

"Of course it'll rain," Priester said. But he didn't move. He gazed at me with what I took to be a guilty expression, like a criminal who, after taking up a new life in a quiet neighborhood, has been found out. "So what did the Yellow Man say?" he asked.

"I'm innocent," Iwamasa said.

"He said you were going to California," said Gwen. "Is that a lie? He tells lies all the time. It's his way of being kind."

A tremor passed across Priester's face. He looked at me, and I started to cry. I don't know why. I didn't mean to. I said, "Priester has left three other women before me."

“Three?”

“It’s not as though I’m unprepared.”

Outside the thunder rippled around us, as if it were a hand shaking the house.

“That was years ago,” Iwamasa said. “What happened before has nothing to do with now.”

“It has everything to do with it,” I said.

“Why California?” Gwen asked. “That state is the pits.”

Priester didn’t answer. He went into the kitchen and came back with a bottle of tequila and sat down in the white, halo-backed wicker chair which, in lighter moments, Iwamasa called his throne.

“I used to live in Gardenia,” Iwamasa said. “It was the poker capital of the world.”

“We don’t care about you,” Gwen said. “We want to know about the other women.”

“I’m interested in other women, too,” Iwamasa said. He poured the jug of wine empty into his glass and started to get up when lightning shot down from the sky and thunder exploded on top of us.

Priester got up and opened the window. There was no wind or rain. The neighborhood was quiet, dark even though the street lamps were still on. You could feel the tension of the air.

Priester waited at the window. I looked at him and then at Gwen, not knowing to whom to talk. “It’s not that I want a promise of anything,” I said. “Who can promise to love anyone forever? But I’d like to know why he doesn’t speak to me. Why doesn’t he tell *me*?”

“What’s to tell?” Iwamasa asked.

“Oh, shut up,” Gwen said.

Iwamasa got up and found a new bottle of wine and brought a corkscrew to open it. “California has good wines,” he said. “Let’s try this.” He set the wine on the table.

“Don’t you have any feelings?” Gwen said.

“So he wants to go to California,” Iwamasa said. “So what?” He looked up at Priester. “Driving or flying?”

“Driving,” Priester said.

“You admit it?” Gwen said. “You bastard.”

“I’ll admit what’s true,” Priester said.

“If you flew you could be back here in a couple of days,” said Iwamasa.

The rain started. We could hear it on the side of the house and in the leaves outside the window, little snaps.

"Who were the other women?" Gwen asked. "Do you know?"

"I know a little," I said.

"He's not serious," Iwamasa said. "Can't you see?"

"Why isn't he serious?" Gwen asked.

"He has a child. He can't leave."

"Oh God, save us," Gwen said. "No man ever left a child."

"We still have Angie's hairbrush," I said, "and some of her records, and her European typewriter with the accent marks on it."

"God damn," Gwen said. "Who was Angie?"

"Angie was the one in Kansas City," I said, looking to Priester for confirmation. Priester drank tequila from the bottle.

"And what happened to her?"

"She got transferred to St. Louis. She worked for Burroughs, and Priester wouldn't go with her. Isn't that right, Priester? You refused?"

"Yes."

"And the one before that?" Gwen asked.

"Let's see. The names don't come to me right away. Priester told me about them years ago. I've never been jealous. They were inventions to me, like characters in a book. I didn't hold them against him."

"But you could have been wrong," Gwen said.

"There was one in Harrisburg—Kate, I think—and one in Boston. Who was she?" I looked at Priester.

"Helene."

"Kate left us some souvenirs, too. That miniature TV set and some towels. You can't just throw the stuff away because it has another woman's fingerprints on it."

"It wouldn't be fingerprints that would bother me," Gwen said.

"You started out in Boston?" asked Iwamasa.

"Boston," Priester said vaguely. "Yes." But he was concentrating on the storm. The rain had started to come harder, splashing in on the windowsill. The black panes above the opening shimmered with the gusts of wind.

"Who was Helene?" Gwen asked.

A car passed in the street, its tires hissing on the wet pavement. A sliver of light knifed down, and then thunder, and the lights went out. It rained

harder. Priestster closed the window and we all listened for a moment to the smooth rush of water on glass. Then Melissa shrieked.

Iwamasa lighted the two candles, which guttered in the air.

"Isn't there a flashlight?" Gwen said.

"Whoever heard of making love by flashlight?" Iwamasa said.

"We might as well," Gwen said. "It only lasts thirty seconds."

Another barrage of lightning hit nearby. Priestster got up to go to Melissa.

"I'll go," I said. "If I can't quiet her, I'll bring her down."

I took one of the candles and held my palm up to shield it as I climbed the stairs.

Melissa was hungry. I heated milk on the gas stove and gave her a bottle. That was what she wanted. I had never breast-fed her because I wanted Priestster to take part, but holding her, listening to the rain on the roof, I felt how it had all been a trick I had tried on him. It hadn't worked.

But my mind slipped away to other thoughts. It was not as though we argued. Not like Iwamasa and Gwen. We got along like most couples, disagreeing now and then, spelling out our boundaries in silence. We quarreled, but that was no cause to leave.

Yet I had seen his expression in the doorway. I had read his face at the window—that longing which was somehow caused by me and yet, at the same time, unrelated to me. I had heard him sing his songs to Melissa.

I lingered after I put Melissa back in bed, watched the rain fall into the darkness. On a whim—only I knew it wasn't a whim—I found two portfolios on the shelf in the closet and, carrying them under my arm, I descended the stairs with the candle.

Priester was still at the window where I'd left him. The other candle on the coffee table cast the room into shadows. Gwen looked drawn and weary. The Yellow Man had taken out his saber and was waving it wildly in the air.

"Put the sword away," Gwen said. "What are you, some kind of samovar?"

"A samurai," Iwamasa bellowed. He clanked the sword on the leg of his easel. "You're lucky I don't take this blade to you."

"Unlucky," Gwen said. She turned to me. "How's the baby?"

"Asleep."

Outside it was still raining hard. A torrent was coming down. Wind

raked the trees. Far away a siren squealed in the darkness. Lightning flashed again, illuminating for an instant Priester's face at the window and the gray-green trees thrashing in the wind.

He did not look at me. He tilted the bottle of tequila to his lips.

"I brought these to entertain us," I said, handing the two portfolios to Gwen. I set my candle on the edge of the table and moved the other one beside it. Both flames swirled and held. Gwen laid the books down.

Iwamasa sheathed the sword and came over. "What are they?"

"These are Priester's," I said.

Priester looked around and saw what I was doing. "You can't show those," he said.

"Why not?"

"They're mine."

"They're ours," I said.

Gwen turned the first page before Priester moved.

The woman in the photograph was backlit so the curve of her naked body was a black line shading toward light. Her hair was short and dark, her lips full, her eyes pockets of shadow.

Gwen turned another page. It was the same woman lying on a wooden floor with her back to the camera.

"Don't," Priester said. He stepped forward and stopped, trying to keep his tenuous balance. But it was already too late.

Iwamasa pressed closer. "Finally we get to issues," he said. "Who is that?"

"That's Angie."

"Jesus," Iwamasa said. "And you left her?"

"Shut up," said Gwen.

Priester's face was blank, wide-eyed drunk. He wavered a moment, maybe thinking of stopping me, but then he sank down into the white wicker chair.

Iwamasa squeezed in beside me on the sofa and turned the next several pages. I was not upset. Pictures were not threats. The women were beautiful because Priester's photographs made them that way.

When Iwamasa turned to another woman, he stopped. The woman had long curly dark hair and was sitting on the edge of a straight-backed chair. Her back was arced like a swan's. Iwamasa whistled and turned to me.

"Kate," I said. "Her hair is red. I still find some of them in the rug in

our bedroom." I turned to Priester who was staring at the bottle of tequila in his hand. "Tell the Yellow Man about Kate."

Priester coughed and blinked. "She was a weaver," he said. "I met her when I was a bartender in the airport in Harrisburg. After eight months on the job, one day Kate comes in. That's all. Ellie makes it sound as though I plotted something."

"Did you?" Gwen asked.

"I planned to leave Harrisburg when I got some money."

I nodded and smiled. "That's how he does it. He sits back and waits. You know how it works—one person has to go first. It's never Priester who takes a risk."

"It's always me," Priester said.

"What happened to Kate?" Iwamasa asked.

Priester shook his head.

The rain slacked to a drizzle, and we could hear the thunder moving off to the east, past our street, beyond our neighborhood. The lights came on suddenly, filling the room.

Iwamasa turned the pages slowly, dwelling on each picture.

"There's another book," I said.

"Let's not hurry," Iwamasa said. "Let's look carefully and make certain we understand."

Gwen blew out the candles, and Priester, resigned, got up again. He was nervous, I could tell. He wanted to say something. But I don't think he knew what to say or how. He crossed the room and stood in front of the Yellow Man's painting of the trout. He held one hand over his eye and stepped back.

"Why trout?" he asked. "Why not birds?"

Iwamasa looked up. "Fish are the life of water, and trout are the life of moving fresh water."

"I love air," Priester said.

I turned several pages at once to speed things along and laid out the photograph I liked best. It was a black and white of a tall, thin, dark-skinned woman partially covered with loose blossoms. Her black hair played out behind her head on the grass, and shadows of tree limbs and tiny leaves and blossoms criss-crossed her skin.

"Don't tell me," Gwen said. "That's Helene."

"She was the first," I said. "Isn't that right, Priester? The first one? Tell us about her. Tell the story."

"I don't know the story," he said.

"Helene was a street kid," I said. "She jimmied coin boxes in laundromats and arcades."

"She doesn't look like a street kid," Iwamasa said.

"It's hard to tell without clothes," said Gwen.

"That's the point," I said. "Priester makes them all look like goddesses."

"Or whores," said Gwen.

Iwamasa reached for the wine. "How long were you with her?"

"Year and a half." Priester stumbled away from the easel to the middle of the room.

"And then what?"

"Then nothing."

Iwamasa poured more wine for himself and me, and then got up from the sofa. "That's no answer," he said. "That's not the answer we want."

Priester tilted his head as though he were listening to the last of the storm drifting out over the plains. He drank from his bottle. "East," he said, "the storm is going east."

I closed the portfolio and pulled the other one on top. "Look at these now," I said. "Come on back, General. These are the ones that matter. Look here."

I opened the second book somewhere in the middle.

The photograph was of hills stretching one after another, defined by shadow and distance and by clouds rising. The hills were glossy with short grass, though in the swales were patches of broom grass and weeds where water had lingered. The colors were beige and tan, bleak as the land had made them. Iwamasa came over behind the sofa.

I paged to another photograph—a single stunted tree with its leaves dying or dead on the branches, thirsted or starved, it wasn't clear which, on an empty slope.

More: bleak barns of gray wood and sunburned board, houses falling in, roofs torn open by wind and weather, windmills dead in the sky. I kept turning the pages.

Gwen said nothing. Iwamasa finally edged away from the sofa and moved to the easel where he drew his saber again. "You," he said. "You." He slashed the canvas in the center, then leveled the blade at Priester.

Priester shook his head. Thunder sounded far, far away, but you had to listen for it.

“California,” Priester said. “All my possessions were in the car . . .”

“Speak up,” Gwen said. “Why spare our feelings now?”

“All my possessions . . .”

“You were going to sneak out,” Iwamasa said, raising the sword. “The silent exit.”

“Let him talk,” Gwen said. “Let him finish.”

Priester smiled grimly. “Omissions, you see. Things left out. When I got to California, I was supposed to write.”

“Helene?” Iwamasa asked.

Priester said nothing for a moment. I watched a drop of water caught in the silver of the street lamp run crookedly down the windowpane.

“You were supposed to write Helene when you got to California?” Iwamasa said. “Is that it? And she was going to meet you?”

“That was years ago,” Gwen said.

“I’ve taken my time,” said Priester. “The car broke down. I ran out of money several times. I had to work.”

“Not to mention Kate and Angie and Ellie.”

“And Melissa,” Gwen said.

Priester looked at me. “She was never going to come,” he said. “I knew that.” His voice was quiet, the words slurred with tequila, but I could feel time stop for an instant and then start moving again in a new direction away from me. I thought of Melissa who would not remember “The Volga Boatman” and “Old Man River.” Priester was already gone. He was on his way to California and I saw the long nights ahead when Melissa and I would wake in the dark and listen to the storms pass by.