Love is so short, forgetting is so long.

Pablo Neruda

They say she's gaga. That's the word she's heard them whispering. *Gaga.* It sounds like something a baby would say.

She knows she's in Paris, city of dreams. Her companion in the shadowy room, who kisses her forehead, who strokes her hands, keeps telling her that she has a duty not to die, not now, not *yet.* 'Wallisse . . .' murmurs this person, who smells like a woman with peppermint breath, but whose cheeks are hard as a man's. 'Wallisse . . . I shall not let you die until you remember.'

Remember what? There are plenty of questions Wallis would like to ask, but she can't get them out. What a bitch. Words compose themselves in her mind. They're in the proper order, usually. Except she can hardly ever say them. Her throat has a disease. What comes out of her mouth is dribble. Dribble and some droll, incomprehensible language. Afrikaans?

The woman-man companion lifts her up in the wide bed, cradles her against her anatomy, which is bulky-thick, like a bale of packed cotton, and begins brushing her hair. 'Beautiful . . .' whispers the bulk as she brushes. And

Wallis tries to say: 'Oh yes, it was always *very* becoming. In fact, it was my best feature, dark and sleek as a Shanghai girl's. It transfigured me. It sprang from blood. Not *my* blood. From the tumbler of raw-steak blood I was made to drink every day after school, to ward off TB, and my mother would say: "Drink it down, Bessiewallis. Make your tresses shine."'

But her sentences turn to goo. The stench of lilies is on the pillow. And the room is so damn dark – with just these thin movements in it, these shadows she can't make out – it's mortifying, like she's watching some old flickering TV picture, or even not watching, but trapped *inside* an old TV, a ghost made out of light, longing to join the world beyond the screen, the world of the TV watchers, pink as candy, warm and rounded, with their haunches nudging up close to each other on their chintzy divan. How comely these brightly coloured people seem! As if nothing cold would ever touch them. As if they would rise up in a line and dance a conga, hands-to-ass, hands-to-ass, swaying along, in and out of the furniture, singing sharp, singing flat, not caring a dime, untouched by tomorrow, heading pell-mell into the hall, waking the servants, opening the door and shimmying out under the summer moon.

Out where?

The companion has said in her strange, difficult-to-understand English: 'Wallisse, for you, this state of forgetting is a mortal sin. *A mortal sin*! Do you want to die with this stain of sin on your soul?'

'Stain of sin'. No, sure she doesn't want to die with this on her. It sounds revolting. But just what is it a girl's supposed to remember? She tries to say: 'I remember Baltimore in spring. Is that it?' But the companion never

answers. And now she's gone out the door, closing it, locking it, leaving Wallis alone, a prisoner. And the sound of that key turning, that's the lonesomest sound in the world, the one that can bring the Nightmare on . . .

Wallis clutches the bed sheet. Once, she hid her too-large hands in white gloves; now, her hands are small, like the claws of a marmoset – another mystery. She calls out: 'Don't leave me alone!' But she hears the sound she makes. Not proper words, just an oddball noise. Nobody's going to answer an animal noise. They'll assume wolves have come back to the Bois de Boulogne. The door remains tight shut.

And here comes the Nightmare. Always the same scene. Florida palms. A bright white glare on the edge of the veranda. And Wallis sits in a wickerwork chair, waiting. 6 Admiralty Row, Pensacola. Waiting for her husband to come home. 1916. Waiting with her arms folded, woollen dress neat, slip one inch and a half shorter than the dress, tortoiseshell barrette holding back the soft waves of her long lovely hair . . .

Waiting with such pride! Waiting to see his shadow moving ahead of him down Admiralty Row, moving towards her, she bandbox-smart as a US Navy wife should always be. When she met him, she cabled her mother in Baltimore: *Last night, I danced with the world's most fascinating aviator.* Poor schoolmates, poor debutantes of Baltimore, poor Mother, poor American girls everywhere, who'd never known the embrace of Earl Winfield Spencer Jr. And now he was hers, her husband, and any moment she would see him: gold stripes on his shoulder boards, dark moustache, sunburned skin. He would smile as he caught sight of her, his bride, his Wallis, who was teaching herself

to cook from *Fannie Farmer's Boston Cooking School Cook Book*, who already knew how to season Campbell's soup and make a gravy without lumps, and who was progressing to omelettes and fruit pie.

But then. The bright glare of the sun on the veranda is gone. The sun's going down over the bay. The houses on the other side of Admiralty Row are already in deep shadow. The air is cooling. It's wintertime. And Fannie Farmer's perfect gravy can't be made yet because the fascinating aviator hasn't come home.

At Pensacola Naval Air Station there is a gong which sounds whenever a plane goes down. A gong. As though a motion picture were about to begin, except there were no motion pictures then. But the base goes silent, and the wives put their arms round each other and you can smell their fear even through talcum powder, and all you can do is hold on, all you young wives together, with your hearts beating. Hold on until you know. And the wind blows. It seems always to be blowing sand in your eyes and you can hear it in the high palms: death trying to flirt with the leaves.

But the gong doesn't sound that evening. It gets dark and Wallis goes inside and takes the joint of beef out of the oven and stares at it, the yellow fat turned brown, blood in the pan. She doesn't know what to do to prevent it from spoiling, so she places it on the draining board. And then she realises she is cold, the night is cold, and she goes towards the bedroom to find a shawl, a white one, which will complement her beige-and-brown dress.

She never reaches the bedroom because Win is at the front door. She can hear him jabbing at the lock with his key and she knows what this means.

When they checked in at the Greenbrier Hotel, White Sulphur Springs, on the first night of their marriage, Win ordered whiskey to be sent to the room, but the desk clerk said: 'I'm sorry, sir, but West Virginia is a dry county.' And Win cursed, he cursed like the devil. He said: 'Imagine this happening to a man on his honeymoon!' and took out of his suitcase a silver flask and sank into an armchair and drank, drank every drop in the flask, and Wallis tried to protest: 'Win, you're hurting a girl's feelings kissin' that ole flask when you could be kissin' your bride . . .' And he told her: 'Don't you dare. Don't you *ever* tell a man what he should or should not be doing.'

Win's breath is fiery and scorches her face, but the rest of her is shivering.

Why didn't she get the shawl from the closet? Because she ran to the door, to open it for Win, to say: 'Oh, Win, I pictured you dead! I was listening out for the gong.'

His white uniform is stained yellow down the front. His eyes are huge and wild. 'Listening out for the gong? Guess you want me dead then? Bet you darn well do.'

'Oh, don't say that . . .'

'Might as well be dead as live with you. Frigid bitch.'

He shoulders her aside and goes to the kitchen and she follows and he opens the refrigerator and takes out a jug of milk and begins drinking from the jug. Then he sees the meat on the draining board and says: 'What's that hunk of excrement?'

'Win,' she says, 'that's our dinner. I'm going to make a gravy . . .'

'Past tense,' he says. 'I'm not eating that.' And he takes up the joint, dripping with its half-cold fat, and hurls it at her. She ducks, but it slams into her head, bruising her ear,

spoiling her carefully arranged hair. And this makes her mad. Mad at him for not seeing what a good wife she's trying to be – with her cooking, with her neat appearance, not to mention doing *that* for him when all it does is burn her, burn her inside – and so she flies at him and beats on his chest with her fists. He's her husband and he never treats her like a wife and this makes her so mad, so mad and sad. But he's a strong man. He grabs her arms. He twists them round, like he's trying to snap them, her thin arms in the wool dress. She begins screaming, but it doesn't move him. He pushes her forward, kicking her legs, making her walk.

His hand, which stinks of something bitter, is now over her mouth. Within the cage of his reeking hand, her screams die. How could marriage be *this*? She'd worn a gown of white panne velvet with a bodice embroidered with pearls and a petticoat of heirloom lace. A long court train had fallen from her shoulders. A coronet of orange blossoms had circled her lovely hair . . .

Win picks her up now, as they go into the bathroom. He dumps her in the cold white tub. There's pain in her spine. She's crying and pleading: 'I'm your wife . . . I'm your wife . . .' He holds her body down in the tub with one foot, his shoe heavy on her stomach. He unbuttons his fly. She screams louder, covers her face. His burning urine drenches her. She gags. She's the wife of an animal. But how can this be, when, at the altar, he'd looked so much like a handsome man, when, as she moved down the aisle towards this smart and upright groom, she'd carried a bouquet of white orchids and lily of the valley, tied with white silk ribbons . . .? She cries without ceasing. She thinks she'll never stop crying as long as she lives . . .

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Then comes the night. Lying in the bathroom in her soaking dress. Sick and shivering. Alone. Alone as she has never been. Alone in the dark, because Win tore out the bulb from the light, grabbed the key, turned it in the lock. Alone for ever? For why should a man who could do this to her ever come back to rescue her?

He took away the towels. She can't dry herself, can't wrap her body in anything. She removes her dress and her underwear (which she washes every day in soap flakes, to make sure that a young bride is always clean and fragrant), runs hot water and climbs back into the tub and lies without moving, feeling warmth returning. But the water cools. She runs more. This cools in its turn. Wallis gets out and lies down on the bath mat, tries to wrap herself in the mat, which is worn and grey. She's twenty-one years old. Far away in Europe, men are dying in a war that seems to have no end. She wishes that Winfield Spencer would fly there and crash his plane into the snow and that bits of his body would be scattered in pools of blood over the hard crust of northern France.

Her Nightmare's like a war. It has no end. It's followed her through all her years since 1916. As though this was what she *deserved*, as though society had decreed: Bessiewallis, née Warfield, daughter of lovely Alice Montague and poor sickly Teackle Warfield who died of a consumption before his daughter could say his peculiar name, this pretty Bessie with her violet eyes, this girl with a cow's name is going to be cowed with shame. Men will spit on her. And worse. And at the end of it all, she'll be quite alone.

Wallis longs to sleep. Though the bedclothes weigh her down, because she's barely made of soft flesh any more, just sinew and bone, Wallis can sometimes drift off to sleep on some comforting tide of thought. And here comes one: she's in Baltimore, in the yard of her grandmother's house, 34 East Preston Street. She's fourteen or fifteen. She wears a bright ribbon in her dark hair. (Her Uncle Sol calls her 'Minnehaha'.) She's helping Ruby, the coloured maid, to hang up sheets in a salt wind, in that wind from the sea which is so beneficial to the lungs, which should be breathed ninety-nine times a day to keep away the Disease that must not be named any more.

Obediently, she's breathing. The wind moves in the big linden tree, with its dear little buds of leaves not open yet. Gulls swoop round, up there in the blue Baltimore sky. The linen sheets on the line keep blowing against Wallis's body, like a touch from someone else, and this is so nice, it's almost wonderful. You could write a poem about this feeling, if you could make the words say what you felt.

At lunch, she asks her grandmother: 'Could I write a poem, Grandma?'

'Sit up, Bessiewallis,' her grandmother replies. Then, after some time and with a sniff, she declares: 'Writing is very bad for the deportment. Luckily, not many women do it. In America, we leave poetry to the men.'

Grandmother Anna Emory Warfield holds herself so ramrod straight in her chair that not one inch of her spine touches the chair back. And she wants Bessiewallis to follow her example, to respect her Southern heritage, to remember she's a lady, to try never to be dull, to strive to be witty, yet to watch others, learn from them, listen to them, draw them into conversation: 'That way, you will be

a good hostess one day, dear, and preside over a dazzling table.'

A dazzling table? Bessiewallis imagines a million twinkling and flickering candles; yellow flames licking the glassware, wax pooling and dripping and falling into the soup, the tablecloth catching fire . . .

'Where will this dazzling table be?' she enquires. And sees a rare smile cross the face of Anna Emory Warfield.

'Where will it be? Why, I couldn't tell, dear. Except it will surely be in the South. It would never do to marry a Yankee.'

Marriage. It's the word on everybody's mind. And time is flying, swooping like the gulls. That's what the grown-ups keep implying. Not a moment to spare for poetry. No time for playing 'catch' with Ruby, in and out of the sheets on the drying line. No time for play of any kind. Her paper dolls, 'Mrs Astor' and 'Mrs Vanderbilt', with their paper wardrobe of cocktail gowns, are back in the dark and dust of her closet, together with all the other bits and pieces of her childhood. She thinks sadly of them sometimes, Mrs A and Mrs V, so lonely, without any soirées to attend. But still time keeps accelerating along, like the new motor cars on Preston Street. In three years, Wallis is going to be a debutante. She is going to wear a lace gown and dance at the Bachelors' Cotillion. And out of the crowd of tail-coated young bachelors, with their white ties and their nervous smiles and their hair sleek with pomade, there she will find him, the One and Only.

Lunch is over and now, as Bessiewallis steps out into the Baltimore sun, going to Richmond Market with her grandmother, morning arrives in Paris, first as a grey presence in the room, a thing which has barely decided to

stay, and then as a shaft of light, gold and soft at the window, where the heavy drapes are drawn back an inch or two. Wallis looks at this shaft. She's slept and not dreamed. She feels a bit better. She can see the damned window perfectly clearly. She thinks she may be able to say a few words today, in sensible American.

The companion is there. Her skin's pale brown, freckled in places, and stretched taut and hard over her skull. She lifts Wallis up in the bed. Pulls up her nightdress. Some aproned and uniformed girl Wallis can't remember seeing before shoves a pan under her. '*Fais pipi, ma Duchesse*,' says the companion. '*Fais un petit pipi pour moi*.'

Oh, Gawd. French.

As though speaking weren't hard enough. Speaking American. As though this weren't taxing already.

'Speak English,' commands Wallis. And yeah, her voice is OK today. The woman-man smiles in surprise.

'Good,' she says. (She is a 'she', is she? Or a man in a costume? A man with a big chest?) 'I see my *Duchesse* is feeling herself again. Bravo. Very good. So now do your little tinkle, my dear, and then I 'ave some things to show you. Things to help you remember. Today, I think, is going to be the day when you understand again.'

Wallis stares at the companion. ('Never stare, Bessiewallis,' advises Grandma Anna. 'Because it's a low-down thing to do. If you wish to make some internal interrogation, just hold a face fleetingly with your eyes.' But what the hell. She's long dead, Anna Emory Warfield. Baltimore changed. From brown to grey. The linden tree was felled. Why not stare at everything that remains?) The companion's hair is short and thick and grey. Her hands look tough.

The aproned girl is going round the room, tidying what already looks tidy enough. She, at least, thinks Wallis, has the decency not to stare at me while I'm trying to piss. The companion is shameless, though. She's stroking my hand, kissing my hair, and all while I'm sitting on the fucking pan.

'Go away,' she says.

The woman-man looks so hurt for a moment, it's like something stabbed her in the heart. But she doesn't back off, just carries on with her stroking and kissing and now more French: '*Oui, ma Duchesse, oui, oui. Mais tu sais que tu ne comprends rien. Je suis la seule qui est là pour toi . . .*'

'Oh for Christ's sake!' says Wallis, trying to push the companion away.

But she's too weak to push her away and now the man-woman is furious. 'Don't say that!' she snaps. Then grabs Wallis's hand and slaps it. A nasty little stinging slap, like you might give to a dog. 'Or I'll take the pan away and you can lie in a wet bed. Do you want to lie in a wet bed?'

Kissing her one minute, hitting her the next. A person out of a nightmare. There's no talking to such a creature. Wallis can say words today, but why should she? Why should she waste her precious breath talking to this hag?

She turns her face away. Sees the girl in the apron staring at her with such a sad pitying look, it makes her weep. Fuck all these people. Piss in the damned pan and be done with them. Have them draw the curtains again. Go back to darkness.

She empties her bladder. Tells them she's done. Between them, the girl and the companion lift her again and the companion, not the girl, presses a tissue between