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Opening Extract from...

A Certain Age

Written by Beatriz Williams

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A CERTAIN AGE

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To Greenwich, Connecticut, and its marvelous cast of characters for sheltering our dreams for ten years (and keeping us stuck in traffic for at least one of them) . . .

Keep striving.

The New York Herald-Times, May 29, 1922

TIT AND TATTLE, BY PATTY CAKE

At last! It's the day we've all been waiting for, dear readers: the opening of the latest and greatest Trial of the Century, and I don't mind telling you it's as hot as blazes inside this undersized Connecticut courtroom. You're much better off reading about it from the comfort of your own armchair, believe me. Oh, the suffering I endure on the sacred altar of journalism.

And now, after all these months of fuss and hysteria and delectable details—the Patent King, his beautiful heiress daughters, the downstairs tenant, the kitchen-maid-cum-tearful-Scarsdale-housewife and her munificent husband, the turret window, the missing gardener, the exact length and serration of the blade used to murder the victim—here we all sit, waving our makeshift fans before our perspiring faces, and it turns out these mythical figures are human after all! The Patent King is smaller than you'd think. He doesn't say a word, sitting stiff as a wire by the side of the defense counsel, and the daughters huddle next to each other in the front row, so pale and haggard that their much-ballyhooed beauty is, I'm afraid, purely conjecture.

A number of well-known society figures populate the benches around me. Chief among them is that perennial mainstay of the social calendar—and this column, naturally—the iridescent Mrs. Theresa Marshall of Fifth

Avenue and Southampton, Long Island, as exquisitely dressed (and as exquisitely fashioned) as ever. I've had the privilege of visiting Windermere, the Marshall family estate down there by the shore, and I admire Mrs. Marshall's fortitude in enduring this untoward inferno when she might be reclining among the dunes, or riding her famous jumper, Tiptoe, around the ring at Lake Agawam.

The reason for Mrs. Marshall's sacrifice is quite clear, however. He sits by her side, and he's a fine specimen of manhood, as judged by the expert eye of yours truly. Mr. Octavian Rofrano will soon figure as one of the key witnesses in this case, and given his newfound fame and undoubted allurements, I don't blame Mrs. Marshall in the least for her vigilant oversight of his person, though I can't help wondering what poor old Mr. Marshall thinks of all this devotion.

So much for the man on Mrs. Marshall's left side. To her right sits another well-known Manhattan Thoroughbred: none other than the lady's brother, Mr. Edmund Jay Ochsner, famed bachelor-about-town and not so far past his considerable prime to lay claim—so rumor has it, anyway—to the lesser of the two Patent Princesses. As to whether rumor has their engagement right, neither principal is talking, and I certainly don't see a ring glittering on the telltale finger. So, as always, I'll let you decide the truth for yourselves, dear ones.

As for me? Hold on to your hats. I've got the Trial of the Century to watch, if I don't melt away into the benches by the end of the morning.

CHAPTER 1

In olden times, sacrifices were made at the altar—
a practice which is still continued.

—HELEN ROWLAND

THERESA

Long Island, New York, on the second day of 1922

During the night, I dream that my husband arrives unexpectedly from Manhattan, in a plume of sultry exhaust from the engine of his Buick Battistini speedster, and let me tell you, the intrusion is most unwelcome.

To be sure, outside of feverish dreams, the possibility's remote. I have no doubt that, at the instant my dream-husband's wheels disturb the dream-gravel outside, the genuine Mr. Marshall lies in cetacean slumber on the bed of that jewel-box apartment on Sutton Place he's bought for his mistress, this being the second night of the New Year and one conveniently placed on the calendar for adulterous pursuits. In any case, he's not the sort

of man to storm down a frozen highway at dawn. Mr. Marshall's manners are impeccable.

Still, the very suggestion is enough to awaken me, lathered and breathless, from a state of abandoned repose. The room is heavy with that charcoal light that arrives just before dawn, and since it's a small room, unheated, unpainted, perched above the dusty remains of a pair of carriages made redundant by the ilk of Mr. Ford, I can't quite decide where I am, except that the place feels like home.

A mattress sags beneath my hips, and the sheet is flannel, musty, like an Adirondack cabin. I'm borne down by the weight of a thousand wool blankets, and someone is smoking a cigarette.

I roll on my side. "Boyo?"

The Boy stands by the window, matched in color to the smoke that trails from his hand. His shoulders are the exact width of the sash, and just as level, from clavicle to humerus. I have forgotten the substance of my dream, or why it terrified me; my breathing returns to normal at this indisputable proof of a male companion. Without turning, without even twitching—he is absolutely the stillest man I've ever known—he says: "I keep wondering, are you going to call me that when I'm sixty?"

Yes, the room is dark and cold, and the blankets are heavy, and underneath those blankets I'm as naked as an innocent babe, though the resemblance to both babes and innocence ends there. I sit up anyway and hold out my arms. "You'll always be my Boyo. My lovely laddie."

He steps to the bed and sits down on the edge, entering obediently into my embrace. His skin is icy, the flesh underneath

as hot as blazes. "There's a car outside," he says, after kissing me, as if this piece of information is of no consequence whatever.

I sort of startle. The Boy's arms, which are planted on either side of my hips, prevent me from startling too much.

"A *car*?"

"Yes."

"What make?"

"Can't tell. It's too dark." He picks up my arm and kisses the skin of my inner elbow.

"Saloon or coupé?"

"Coupé. Sit still, will you?"

I struggle to drag my arm away from his lips, and he won't let me. "For God's sake, Boyo, have you gone loony in the night? Where are my clothes?"

"Why? He's not getting out."

I swear. The Boy, who doesn't like me to take the name of his Lord in vain, applies the pad of his thumb to the center of my lips. I open my mouth and bite him.

"Ouch!"

"It's Sylvo. It's got to be Sylvo."

"So what?"

"So *what*? My husband's at the door, and you have to ask?"

"He's not at the door, Theresa. He's sitting in the car. Smoking a cigarette. Probably lit."

"But he's going to come out eventually."

"Maybe." The Boy shrugs. "No need to rush him, though."

There is little purpose to stirring up the Boy when he won't be stirred. His cold nerves kept him alive in France, and I guess

they'll keep him alive now. It's Sylvester I'm worried about now. I sink back into the pillows. The Boy follows me. "You have to hide in the cupboard when he makes up his mind," I tell him.

"I'm not hiding in any cupboard."

"Yes, you are. I don't want a scene, Boyo."

The Boy finishes the cigarette at his leisure, exhaling the smoke directly from his mouth into mine, and crushes out the stub in the sardine tin on the floor next to the bed. (The Boy is awfully clever at improvising ashtrays from the raw materials at hand.) He knows exactly where the target lies, and his gaze remains on my face throughout this little operation. I think that's one of the little tricks that drew me in, all those months ago: his concentration. His refusal to be hurried. "There's only one reason your husband's here," he says, "and that's because he knows *I'm* here. So there's no point hiding in cupboards, even if we had a cupboard, and even if I were inclined to hide. Which I'm not."

"Why do you want to make things difficult for me?"

"Why do you make things hard for *me*?" He takes a piece of my hair between his thumb and forefinger, rubs it once or twice, and curls it tidily behind my ear. "I play by your rules, don't I? I do what you want."

"Most of the time."

"All right, then. So let me handle this one."

He lowers his head to my neck. I place my two hands on his shoulders and push, without much result. "How can you kiss me at a time like this?"

"Because I'm your Boy, aren't I? You're my baby. Kissing

you is what I do, after a hard day's work. It's what makes me tick. It's who I am."

The Boy is built like a reed, or maybe a rope—that's it—coiled neat and tight into a knot you can't break. If he wants to sit here kissing me, I'm not going to stop him, at least not by force. You can't force the Boy into anything, you have to uncoil him first. Only his lips are soft.

It's who I am, he says. But who *are* you, Boyo? I've been puzzling that for a year and a half, and I could go on forever, at this rate.

So I think of something. "I'm no baby. When you're sixty, I'll be eighty-two."

"Well, now. Here's what I figure. As long as I'm your Boy, you're my baby."

As long as he's my Boy. But then who am *I,* Boyo? What am I doing here, puzzling over you? How did I—Mrs. Theresa Marshall of Fifth Avenue, Manhattan—become one half of you-and-me?

I don't think I know the answer. Something is lost. Something has gone missing inside that you-and-me, and I suspect it's me.

HE IS TWENTY-TWO YEARS OLD, my Boy, and therefore a man, in the eyes of his almighty Lord God and of the law. He *looks* like a man, all the more now than when I first saw him. That was the summer of 1920, a year and a half ago, and he was a man in a boy's skin, let me tell you, a perfect pink-cheeked Boyo, young lips and old eyes. How he fastened on me. It's a heady thing, you know. And it was July, a late-night Long

Island Fourth of July party, warm and slow and syncopated, dark and dreamlike, the sweat melting off the highball glasses and entering your palms. Someone told me he flew airplanes in France, had only just returned, the sole man in his squadron to survive, but then they always say that, don't they? *The only man in his squadron to come home alive!* He's never one of three survivors, or ten. All the other poor sons of bitches have to die, in order to render the cocktail conversation more breathless, the chitchat tip-top, the midsummer ennui less oppressive.

He was standing near the swimming pool. I thought he was much too young for me, but maybe that was why I was interested. As I waded through the air in his general direction, I became conscious of his puncturing gaze, and the wavelets glimmering on the skin of his face, the exact size and shape of a leopard's spots. This general impression—the Boy as predatory cat—aroused all my early interaction with him, and it was not until much later that I realized just how wrong I was.

By then, of course, it was far too late.

HE DOES HAVE A WAY of making me forget things, important things, like the fact that a man sits in an automobile outside our window, smoking a cigarette, possibly drunk, and that this man is very likely my husband. Or maybe it's part of the thrill, this terror of imminent discovery? Maybe I've been wanting a showdown like this all along, ever since I transformed that boy by the swimming pool into a fully grown lover, and I stopped sleeping with anyone else, including my own husband.

When my baby smiles at me, he croons.

"You're a terrible singer."

"That's why I only sing for you."

"Sweet boy, I want you to be *serious*."

"I *am* serious. I only sing for you, Theresa, and you only sing for me. I think maybe it's time Mr. Marshall understands that."

Oh yes. He'll say things like that, my Boy, from time to time: statements of permanence that no civilized lover is supposed to make. Permanence is not what lovers are for, is it? But the Boy never does anything the way the others do. He packs more intention into a single word than the president drizzles into an entire inaugural address, and that's what snaps my bones when he enters a room, or a bed, or a car headed across the Queensboro Bridge at midnight. I stare a moment into those steady eyes and think about all those airplanes he must've shot down, the ones he never talks about. I think about a pile of lumber and shredded white fabric, smoking softly atop a frozen brown field, and the Boy's eyes looking down, circling, taking the whole mess in.

"I won't have you making scenes, Boyo, do you hear me? No scenes."

"I'm not going to hurt him. I'm just going to explain things."

"Explain what, exactly? He's my husband. He's got a right."

The Boy seizes my face in his hands. "He's got no right. How does a man keep a mistress, from the day he's married, and still call himself a husband? He's got no right at all." A soft bang rattles the window sash, but the Boy doesn't stop. He's got something to say to me. His thumbs make dents in the apples of my cheeks. "*I'm* the one who sleeps with you. *I'm* the one who dies in your bed at night."

"Did you hear that?"

"It was nothing."

I push the Boy away from my breast and leap out of bed. "He's coming in!"

"Let him come."

My dress lies on the floor by the door, my slip by the bed, my brassiere draped over a bedpost. I gather up these items while the Boy sits on the edge of the bed, hands braced on either side of his naked thighs, watching me like a Sopwith watches a Fokker. "What do you want me to do, Boyo? Get a divorce?"

"You know what I want."

"I'm not divorcing Sylvester."

"Why not?"

"There's no need."

"If we have a baby, there is."

My trembling hands will not operate the fastenings of my dress. I present my back to the Boy and say, "We are not having a baby."

"We might."

"I'm too old. Too old for a baby, too old for you."

He finishes fastening the dress and slides his hands around my middle. "Not true."

The Boy wants me to have his baby. He thinks a baby will solve all our problems. I don't happen to think we have any problems, other than the fact that I've got a desperate, bone-snapping crush on a boy two and a quarter decades younger than me, but the Boy has something against adultery and wants us to get married. He wants us to get married and live together

in some rinky-dink apartment on Second Avenue (he doesn't come into his trifling inheritance until he's twenty-five, poor thing, and I'm afraid a junior bond salesman is paid at the mercy of the partners he serves) and then somehow make miraculous new babies, one after another, while the snow sifts down like sugar outside our window. Like one of those O. Henry stories. Love and candlelight. Except I'm forty-four years old and have already borne three healthy, legitimate, bawling children, the last of whom departed for Philips Exeter just as the war was staggering to its sepia end, and I'm about as suited to caring for a newborn now as I am for tending a rinky-dink apartment on Second Avenue.

No, our present arrangement suits me just fine: trysts every Monday and Thursday, when I'm supposed to be playing bridge, at the Boy's shabbily immaculate place in the Village, perched on the fourth floor of a building smack between an aromatic Italian grocery and a well-stocked speakeasy, so that a lady and a boy can enjoy a little hooch and a dance on the sly, before retiring upstairs to bed. During the summer months, we shack up here in the old carriage house, because while Sylvester and I have always occupied separate bedrooms here at the estate on Long Island, we do maintain a certain informal code about receiving lovers directly under the matrimonial roof. Mutual respect is the foundation of a solid marriage, after all.

Sometimes, for a special treat, the Boy and I will meet out of town at this lovely grand hotel by the sea, one that won't blink an eye at a boy and a well-preserved lady of a certain age checking into the honeymoon suite as a married couple. (The Boy always writes our names in large, neat letters in the

register—*Mr. and Mrs. Octavian Rofrano, Junior*—and insists on paying the bill from his own pocket, the dear.) We stay for two or three nights, ordering room service and drinking poisonous gin and skinny-dipping in the ocean at two o'clock in the morning, sleeping and waking and sleeping, and most of all fucking. Sweaty, glorious, tireless, honeymoon fucking. Fucking two or three times a day, sometimes even four or five when the Boy is fresh and hasn't drunk too much gin. We haven't done that in a while, not since the end of summer. Autumn's such a busy time, after all. But my God, when we do, I feel like a new woman. I feel irresistible. As we drive back to the city, my skin glows like a debutante's.

So really, taken all together, Village and carriage house and naughty hotels, it's been most satisfactory, this past year and a half: the Year of the Boy, and then some.

Until now. I don't know what possessed us to jump into the Boy's Model T and head out into the tundra last night. Maybe it was the endless racket of Christmas parties and New Year dos, maybe it was the champagne. Maybe our little affair has settled too comfortably into routine, and we need a taste of excitement. "Let's go somewhere we can be alone," said the Boy, leaning back against the headboard, and I lifted my head and said that we *were* alone, silly, and he said he wanted to be *more* alone: he wanted to go out to Long Island and breathe in a little clean air, you know, just make a little New Year whoopee without all the lights and people and sirens and smoke, just sunshine and frozen air and me. So what am I supposed to say to that? I said all right.

And now look. Mr. Marshall has gone and followed us all

the way here, has taken the trouble to track down Mrs. Marshall and her Boyo to a little love nest above a carriage house a hundred miles from the city, an act of jealous possession that was entirely out of character, made no sense at all, unless—

"The children!" I exclaim, and run to the window.

The Boy's eyes must be better than mine, or maybe it's youth. Under the trees below, I can just discern a shadow that might or might not be a car, and when I press my fingertips against the old glass and narrow my eyes to a painful focus, I see something more: a masculine figure leaning against the hood, possibly smoking a cigarette.

Behind me, the Boy is making noises. "Can you see him?" he asks.

"He's out of the car now. I think he's smoking. Oh God." I turn around. "Where's my coat?"

The Boy is dressing himself, rapid and efficient. "You're not going out there. It's too cold."

"Oh yes I am."

"The kids are fine, Theresa."

"How do you know?"

He takes my shoulders. "Because he would have gone straight in if something was wrong, wouldn't he? Let me handle this."

"No, please. Please. Go in the cupboard."

"There *is* no cupboard, remember?"

"Under the bed. Let me—"

A knock sounds on the wood below.

The Boy's eyebrows lift a little. "That's polite of him."

It has taken me decades of marriage to learn the sangfroid

the Boy acquired in his paltry few months in France—or maybe he always had sangfroid, maybe he came out of the womb a cool, collected infant—and I'm still not as serene as I'd have you believe. My insides are all flighty, all riddled with fear and instinct. *The children!* Once you bring forth a baby into this world, God help you, the terror instinct takes up residence in your blood, like a chronic disease, and never leaves. When my Tommy quit Princeton to join the army in the spring of 1917 and had the nerve to turn up on Fifth Avenue a fait accompli in his second lieutenant's uniform, I nearly vomited into a Ming vase. Nearly. But I didn't! I held out my hand and shook his, and said he had better get a valet to look after those shiny buttons, and he laughed and promised to maintain his buttons as the shiniest in the service. Which was all our fond little Fifth Avenue way of saying how much we adored each other.

So I am more than capable, despite my shredded interior, of maintaining a purposeful calm as I pluck my lover's hands from my shoulders while my husband pounds and pounds on the door downstairs. "Get under the bed, Boyo," I say. "Now. And stay there."

His eyebrows are still up, and the brain behind them turns furiously, like an engine running fast under a placid hood. You can't see the color of his eyes, the air is too dark, but let me assure you they are a most engaging shade of pale blue-green, equally capable—depending on the light and his mood—of Mediterranean warmth or arctic frigidity. I can imagine which climate prevails now.

The pounding stops, the doorknob rattles—it isn't locked—and the hinges release a long and cantankerous squeak.

I point to the bed. "*Now,* Boyo." Or we're through. (I don't actually say those last three words, of course—no one likes an ultimatum, least of all the Boy—but you can feel them there, sharp-edged, dangling off the end of the sentence.)

The Boy shrugs his long, ropy shoulders and turns away. "If that's what you want," he says.

And that sound you hear, beneath the ponderous rhythm of a man climbing a set of high wooden stairs, is the hairline cracking of my heart, straight through the calcified left ventricle.

BUT THE MAN STANDING IN the doorway isn't Theodore Sylvester Marshall, after all, enraged or otherwise.

"*Ox*?" I exclaim. "What on earth are *you* doing here?"

My brother strides up to me, takes me by the shoulders, and kisses both cheeks. "Happy New Year, Sisser! Look at you. Haven't aged a minute."

"Oh, stop." I shove him away. "You gave me such a fright."

He steps back obediently, casts his eyes along the walls, and sends forth a slow whistle. "Sylvo said I might find you here."

"He did, did he?"

"I thought he was crazy. What are you, hibernating?"

"Well. Perhaps it's time for a little chat with my husband."

"Something like that."

"This place have a lamp or something? I can't see a thing. And boy, is it frosty."

I turn to the sole piece of furniture in the room, other than the bed: a beaten-up pine dresser wedged between the window and a diagonal roof beam. The matchbook lies next to the base of the kerosene lamp. "I thought you said I hadn't aged a minute."

"What's that?"

"Well, how could you tell a thing like that if you can't see?" I set the dome back on the lamp, and the room illuminates slowly, chasing out the frozen dawn by concentric degrees. The smell of burning kerosene enters the air, and it makes me yearn for the Boy's nakedness, his coiled-rope muscle under my hands, lit by an oil lamp.

"All right, now, Theresa. Lay off a fella. How are you? What the devil are you doing in this old shack? You gone crackers or something?" He frowns. "Say, you're not here with some sheik, are you?"

"Of course not."

"Yeah, I guess not. Old Sylvo wouldn't stand for it."

He's such a dunce, my brother. A sleek, good-looking, bachelor dunce.

"Of course he wouldn't. I'm just hibernating, as you say. Taking the edge off the New Year with a little simple living."

"Simple's right." He cast another look, shivered, and burrowed deeper into his overcoat. "Think of lighting that old stove, maybe?"

"It *is* lit." I push away from the dresser and make my way to the ancient cast-iron stove in the room's final corner, the relic of some long-gone coachman. A few small lumps lie overlooked in the scuttle, and I lift the stove's lid and drop them in. "I just forgot to bring in more coal, that's all."

Ox doesn't reply, and I rub my hands inside the feeble bubble of heat rising from the top of the stove, until his silence begins to unnerve me. I turn my head. "What is it?"

"You," he says. "You've been acting strange for a while now.

Haven't seen you out much. When I do, you're not yourself. And now here you are, freezing to death in a shack in the wilderness—"

"Hardly that. I just wanted a little peace and quiet."

"You can have peace and quiet and central heating, too. What are you doing for food?"

"I've got a little something tucked away."

He shakes his head. "Sisser, Sisser. Let's drive into town and have breakfast. Ham and eggs and hot coffee."

"No, I'll stay here, thank you. I'm not hungry."

"But I've got something to tell you, and I don't want to do it on an empty stomach."

"Yours or mine?"

He grins a wolfish, ecru-toothed grin. "Both."

We are not entirely unprepared, the Boy and I, despite appearances. In the picnic basket next to the dresser, there are a dozen dinner rolls tied up in a napkin, a large flask of gin, a hunk of cheddar cheese, half an apple pie, two oranges, and a sandwich made of thick slices of leftover Christmas ham. Everything you need to shack up for the night in a Long Island attic, except the coal to keep you warm, and really, who needs coal when you have a magnificent self-heating Boy occupying your bed? I bend over and untie the napkin and toss my brother a dinner roll, which he catches adroitly. "Bon appetit. Try not to drop any crumbs on my nice clean floor, will you?"

"This is stale."

There's also a shawl in the basket, the lovely thick crimson shawl of India cashmere that the Boy gave me for Christmas. I settle it over my shoulders and step back to the stove, missing

the roof beam by a slim quarter inch. "Tell me why you're here, Ox, and it had better be good."

My brother bites his roll, chews, swallows, and smiles, and when he parts his lips to speak, he says the last thing I'd ever expect to hear from the mouth of Mr. Edmund Jay Ochsner, confirmed and eminently successful bachelor.

"I'm getting married, sis."

"Really?" I fold my arms. "Who's the lucky broodmare?"

"Not *mare,* sis. Filly. Such a gorgeous, fine-limbed, Thoroughbred filly. The prettiest girl you ever saw. I'm in love, Theresa. I am one hundred percent, head over heels, goofy in love."

"I see." A craving for tobacco strikes my brain, but the cigarettes lie on the floor next to the bed, an inch or two from the sardine-tin ashtray and from the Boy's head resting on the floorboards, and I can't risk drawing Ox's attention in that direction. "Can I assume the poor child feels the same way about you?"

"I hope so. I've asked her father for permission, and he said yes."

"But the *girl,* Ox. What does the girl say? It's more or less the crux of the whole business, isn't it?"

"Well, I haven't asked her yet. But I think she'll agree." He gnaws another chunk from his bread. "I'm *sure* she'll agree. She's the sweetest thing, sis."

"And blind, obviously."

"Now, sis—"

"And rich. She's got to be rich."

"Sis."

From the downcasting of his eyelashes, I can see I've hit the nail straight on its bent old head. I say tenderly, "She's got to be rich, hasn't she, or you'd just do what you always do, when the love beetle nibbles."

"No, no. This time I really mean it."

"Of course you do. I'm sure she's a sweet, lovely girl, and her money has nothing to do with it." I pause. "How much has she got?"

"I don't know, exactly." He leans against the wall, on the other side of the roof beam that slopes away from the dresser.

"Oh yes you do. Down to the plug nickel, I'll bet."

The coals have begun to catch on, and the stove is getting hot, though not so much that my icy bones are inclined to step away. Ox is examining the floor now, and his arms are folded, the way he used to look when we were children and he'd been caught in some kind of mischief. The slope of his shoulders suggests confession. "Her father's got a patent on something or other, something that speeds up the manufacture of industrial . . . industrial . . ." He screws up his eyes.

"Don't hurt yourself. I've got the general idea. How much are we talking about? Thousands?"

He looks up, and his eyes are a little sparky. "Millions."

"What?"

"He licenses the design out, you know, and the revenue from that alone is one and a half million dollars a year, give or take a hundred thousand—"

I clutch the roof beam.

"—which is pure profit, you know, because he doesn't have to make the—the thingamajig himself. They just pay him for

the design. It's *patented*." He pronounces the word *patented* with triumphant emphasis, as he might say *gold-plated.*

"Yes, Ox, darling. I understand what a patent is." In the midst of my beam-clutching shock, the shawl has sagged away from my shoulders. I resume both balance and composure and tuck myself back in while these extraordinary numbers harden into round marbles and roll, glimmering, back and forth across the surface of my mind. How could a man invent a single object and then vault—vault with such marvelous, casual ease!—over the accumulated wealth of no less than Mr. Thomas Sylvester Marshall of Fifth Avenue, whose father once supplied the entire Union Army with canned ham? A wealth that had dazzled me at seventeen. The company had naturally been sold in the seventies—canned ham being incompatible with the social aspirations of so keenly ambitious a woman as Mrs. Thomas Sylvester Marshall, my mother-in-law—and the proceeds invested in such a manner that a passive two hundred thousand dollars—give or take ten thousand—still drift gently into the Marshall coffers each year, enough to keep us all in silks and horses and ennui. But two hundred thousand is not one million five hundred thousand. A patent: well, that's a different kind of capital altogether. A patent suggests activity. Suggests having actually *earned* something.

I take the soft fringe of the shawl and rub it between my thumb and forefinger, in much the same way that the Boy caresses my hair. "Gracious me. She's quite a catch, then. Pretty and sweet and loaded. Does she have anyone to share all this lovely money with?"

"An older sister. Virginia. She's already married."

"I see. And how old is your little darling?"

He hesitates. "Nineteen."

"Oh, Ox. She's just a girl!"

"She's a very *old* nineteen," he says. "And you were married at eighteen."

"So I was."

"And Sylvo was thirty-six at the time, wasn't he?"

"So he was."

"Well, there you are." He nods and pulls a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of his overcoat. "Smoke?"

"Thanks."

I accept the cigarette gratefully and allow him to light me up. He starts his own smoke from the same match, shakes out the flame just as it reaches the intersection of his finger and thumb. Like me, he closes his eyes as the virgin draft fills his lungs, and I am reminded of the first time we shared a smoke together, after the bon voyage party (if that's the term) that Sylvo and I threw for Tommy. *You look like you could use a smoke,* he said, upon finding me alone on the terrace, staring across the dark wilderness of Central Park, and I agreed that I did, and we stood there smoking together at three o'clock in the morning, not saying a word, until I tossed my stub over the ledge onto Fifth Avenue and turned to him. *This is our little secret, Ox,* I warned him, and bless the idiot, he's kept it ever since.

"It's not just the lettuce, though," he says now. "I was falling for her already, before I found out about that."

I reflect for an instant on my brother's extraordinary capability for self-delusion. "No doubt," I say.

"Wait until you meet her, sis."

"Oh, I can't wait. When are you proposing? I'll have to consult my calendar and throw you two lovebirds a smashing little engagement party."

"But, sis, that's why I came. Don't you remember?"

"Remember what?"

He looks around for an ashtray, and his gaze finally alights on the little oblong tin on the floor. I watch him step confidently to the bed and bend over. He's not quite the agile young sportsman he was in earlier days—everything takes its toll, and Ox has imbibed plenty of what constitutes everything—but he's still bendable enough, under that fat Chesterfield overcoat, and his glossy blond hair picks up flashes of light as he moves.

"Well, *well*." As if he's just discovered a second Sphinx hidden between the floorboards. "Hel*lo,* Sisser. Looks as if someone's been a little naughty."

I choke back a cough. "What's that?"

Ox straightens and holds out the sardine tin in my direction. "Eight smokes already? That's some hibernation."

"Give me that." I snatch the tin and set it on the dresser, under the shelter of the lamp. "Now, then. You were talking about asking your young filly to marry you."

Ox follows the ashtray and leans against the edge of the dresser, nice and close, so I can examine the dark smudges under his eyes and the chapped skin of his lips, which are bent into a familiar self-assured smile. Underneath the Chesterfield, he's wearing evening dress, which shouldn't really surprise me. Nor, for that matter, that he stinks of moonshine.

"*I'm* not the one who asks her," he says. "Don't you remember?"

"I don't remember a thing. I hope you don't think *I'm* going to pop the question for you. I wrote all your college papers; isn't that enough?"

"The *ring,* Sisser. Don't you remember?"

"What ring? I haven't the slightest—oh!" I spit out the cigarette. "*Mama's* ring? The *rose* ring?"

Ox pats my hand on the dresser. "That's right. The old family tradition. I had it sent to the jeweler for a good polish, and now all that *remains,* all I *need,* which is why, of course, I came to *you,* Sisser—"

"Oh, for God's sake, Ox. You can't be serious."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Because it's a farce. A medieval farce. Who sends a proxy to propose for him these days? Chivalry went out with the Armistice, Ox, didn't you know? Chivalry went out when the Lewis gun and the chlorine gas and Picasso came in. This shiny modern world hasn't got any knights left in it."

"It's not a farce, sis. It's a fine old family tradition. A cavalier presents the august family ring to the lady of one's choice, the lady who will one day become the next Mrs. Ochsner, ruler of all New York—"

"Darling, the Ochsners haven't ruled anything for years, not since Mamie Fish took over from Lina Astor. And now it's just anarchy. Actresses and artists and writers, God help us. The present Mrs. Ochsner commands a crumbling house on Thirty-Fourth Street and nothing else to speak of."

"Not true. Mama has *pedigree,* Theresa, she has *history,* which is more than you can say of some ink-stained penny

novelist." He pauses grandly, flicks his ash into the tin. "Anyway, I need a cavalier. A ring bearer."

I laugh. "Oh, Ox. Only you."

"I'm serious, sis. How about one of your boys?"

"Absolutely not. They haven't got a knightly bone in their bodies. Unless it's a football you want delivered, they're not interested." I stub out the cigarette.

"One of their friends?"

"What about *your* friends?"

"My friends are all married. Or else lecherous old bachelors like me."

"You know what it is, Ox? You don't give a fig for family tradition. You just want someone to do your dirty work for you. You don't want to face the girl herself and ask her to marry you. After all, what if she does the sensible thing and says no?"

He drops his cigarette in the tin and turns to the bed. "She won't say no."

"You don't sound very confident."

"She won't say no. I'm sure of it. Her father's on my side, and she—well, she's a good girl, Sisser."

"Does as she's told?"

"Exactly. And she likes me, she really does. I pulled out all the stops for her, sis. Charmed her silly. She likes horses, I took her riding. She likes books, I . . . well, I—"

"Pretended to like books?"

"You know what I mean. I dazzled her! I took her into our library on Thirty-Fourth Street, Papa's old library, and you should have seen the lust in her face."

"So she's marrying you for your strapping great *library*?"

He turns back, smiling, and flourishes an illustrative hand along his body, from brilliantine helmet to bunion toes. "And my own irresistible figure, of course."

As I said. Delusional.

I reach inside his overcoat pocket and draw out the cigarette case. There's only one left. I rattle it around and consult my conscience. "Of course, Ox. You're just as perfectly handsome as you were at twenty-two. In fact, I can hardly tell the difference."

Ox picks the gasper out of the case and hands it to me. "Go ahead. Take it. And in return, you're going to find me my ring bearer, aren't you?"

"Maybe."

"Sweet old sis. Always count on you to help a fellow out in a pinch."

"Indeed you do." I strike a match and hold it to the end of the cigarette. My brother watches me anxiously. The light's a little better now, the sun is rising, and the lines around his eyes grow deeper as the reality of daylight takes hold of them. The slack quality of his skin becomes more evident. And I think, *Is this how I look, too?* Despite the creams and unguents, the potions and elixirs with which I drench myself daily, has my face grown as shopworn as his?

When we'd been married a year or two, and Tommy was still a baby, my husband commissioned Sargent to paint my portrait. It's a gorgeous old thing, full-length, framed in thick gilt wood. It hangs in the middle of the gallery of our apartment on Fifth Avenue, the place of honor, where it's illuminated by

a pair of electrified sconces and gazes down from the heights to a certain point in the marble center of the hall, the exact position where any human being would naturally come to a halt and gaze upward to pay worship.

Because—forgive me, let's be honest—the creature depicted in that portrait is a goddess. She is as beautiful and self-assured as they come. She's wearing a dress of pale pink gossamer that hugs her tiny waist—giving birth at eighteen has its advantages—and a diamond necklace arranged like a chandelier upon her sculpted white bosom. Her dark hair is piled in loose curls on her head; her eyebrows soar confidently above her opaque almond eyes. The smile that curls the perfect bow of her mouth proclaims such an extraordinary volume of youthful self-satisfaction you're inclined to smack her.

In fact, go ahead. I wouldn't blame you, really.

On the other hand, who can blame *her* for her satisfaction? My God, the world's at her feet. At the age of twenty, she's succeeded brilliantly in the one great career open to her. She married one of the wealthiest and most eligible bachelors in New York; she has already given him a son and heir. She's rich and beautiful and clever. The newspapers adore her. In fact, not a single genuine setback has ever dared to obstruct the ascendant path of her life.

And on the face of that young woman there hangs not the slightest doubt that she will remain ascendant forever. A world doesn't exist in which she will have to fight for her beauty, to guard against the slow thievery of time.

She doesn't know, poor thing, that in less than a year, she will discover that her husband keeps a mistress, and that this

mistress has also borne him a child—a small and perfect daughter—only two months after the birth of the Marshalls' own firstborn son. By then, of course, the portrait's subject will be several months into her second pregnancy, and she will face an important decision, the most vital choice of her life, and one on which all her future happiness depends.

Did she make the right one?

Well, I'm here, aren't I? I stand right here in the shabby attic of an old carriage house, as rich as ever, mother of three cherished sons, wife of a generous and well-respected husband, passionately in love with a young and brilliant man—a man to whom I have no earthly right, a man who returns my passion with bone-snapping physical ardor—who at this very moment has flattened himself into the dust beneath the bed for my sake.

What more could a woman ask for, at my age?

I'm halfway through the cigarette before I address the question warping the eyebrows of the brother who stands before me. I wave away a curl of smoke, which has been illuminated into a kind of celestial spirit by the sunshine that now refracts through the window's ancient glass. The luminous new morning of the second of January. Remember that.

"Do you happen to know the young lady's name?" I ask.

My brother says eagerly, "Sophie. Sophie Fortescue. She's a good girl, Theresa. Quiet as a mouse. The sweetest girl in the world. Wouldn't say boo to a goose."

I hand him the cigarette—he looks as if he needs a smoke more than I do—and he sucks it in like oxygen. I look past his elbow at the bed in the corner, and the dozen or so mildewed

horse blankets that the Boy gathered up to cover me last night. I objected to the smell, and he said a little mustiness was better than freezing to death, and anyway I'd get used to it. Human beings can get used to anything, he told me. It's how we survive.

And he was right. All I remember of last night, other than the terror of my dream, is the smell of the Boy's warm skin.

I return my gaze to the pasty and anxious ruins of my brother's face. "In that case, I can't begin to imagine what she sees in you, Ox, though I frankly *can* imagine why your courage failed you, in the face of all that virtue."

He begins to object, and I hold up my hand.

"Nonetheless, and to your great and undeserved fortune," I continue, "I happen to know *just* the boy to get the job done."