

ONE



MARCH, 1918

I USED TO BE A CONDUCTOR ON THE TRAIN THAT RAN back and forth from Milwaukee to Chicago. Two or three times a year I acted in our local community theatre, playing small roles mostly, but occasionally I was given a featured role. When the Milwaukee Players were putting on a play called *A Brave Coward*, by Winslow Clarke, I was given the part of a cowardly soldier during the Civil War who chooses, for the first time, to do something heroic. This was the biggest role our director had ever given me.

Our community theatre gave only three performances

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for each of our plays, and on the last night of *A Brave Coward* I was in the men's dressing room applying some Skolgie's theatrical glue onto a moustache I'd made out of crepe hair, pressing it hard above my upper lip, when our director walked in. His name was John Freidel, but all the actors called him "sir" because we were a little afraid of him.

He walked past the other men, who were getting into costumes and going over their lines, and came up to my chair. "You're late, Peachy," he said.

"Sorry, sir, I came right from work. The train was late."

"Sir" could be very sarcastic when he was giving notes, but I hadn't heard him yell at anyone yet. He was a tall man and I thought his knee would hurt when he kneeled down next to me on the hard wooden floor, but I certainly wasn't going to interrupt him. He spoke confidentially, but he was very intense.

"You've been way too soft these last few nights, Paul. Terribly gentle and polite. A coward isn't a coward all the goddamn time, you know? You're starting to act like you're scared to death. Will you loosen up for me tonight?"

"I'll try, sir," I said.

"When the curtain goes up, forget the goddamn audience! Pretend it's just a rehearsal. Will you do that for me,

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Paul?”

“I’ll try.”

Twenty minutes later my heart was in my throat. I heard the stage manager whisper “Go!” and the curtain went up. There was silence for a moment as the audience waited, and then the first line was spoken.

Thank goodness the play went well, and I know the audience liked me because they clapped especially loud when I took my bow during the curtain calls. I looked out into the audience while I was bowing and saw our director sitting in the front row. He gave me a smile and a little nod of approval.

When the play was over I kept my moustache on, which I had purposely made the colour of my wife’s auburn hair. I kept trying to picture Elsie when she saw it. Elsie and I had only been married for four and a half years, but the romantic part of our relationship seemed to have faded away, like the yellow roses in our backyard at the end of summer. I lived with Elsie and her mother in three rooms on the second floor of a small but clean house in the German-Polish section of Milwaukee.

On the bus ride home a pretty girl and a soldier were sitting across the aisle from me, holding hands. The girl smiled at me. Without thinking, I touched my moustache and smiled back at her. Her boyfriend turned and gave

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me a hard stare. I dropped my head, pretending to be reading my theatre program.

When I got home I raced up the stairs and unlocked the kitchen door. There was a soft light coming from the half-open door of our bedroom. I stuck my head into the doorway.

“Look who’s here!” I said, as rakishly as I could. Elsie was asleep, propped up against two big pillows, her long auburn hair spread out around her. A gas lamp was burning on the nightstand. The sound of my voice woke her.

“Oh, Paul,” she said, still half asleep.

“I’m sorry, honey—I didn’t know you were sleeping. How do you feel?”

“I was waiting up, and then I just dozed off,” she said.

I made a tiny leap, trying to feature my moustache. “Look who’s here!” I said.

“What time is it?” Elsie asked, trying to see the little table clock on my side of the bed.

“It must be a little past ten,” I said. “How do you feel, Elsie?”

“Is my mother’s light out?” she asked.

There wasn’t any light coming from the adjoining bedroom.

“Yes, it’s out,” I said.

Still trying to get Elsie to notice my moustache, I made

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another little John Barrymore leap in the air and said,

“Look who’s here, Elsie.”

“Paul, if you’re going to eat something, please hurry.”

“I’m not hungry, Elsie.”

“You must be starving,” she said.

“No, I had something on the train. Honestly, I’m not hungry. How do you feel?”

“If you cared how I felt, would you have left me to-night?”

“Well . . . I did care, even though I left, so the answer must be ‘Yes.’ You look so pretty with your hair that way.”

“I don’t feel pretty.”

“Isn’t life funny, because you do look so pretty?”

“Thank you.”

I walked up and sat beside her on the bed. “I brought you something, sweetheart.”

“You didn’t bring me another pastry?” she asked. “Oh, Paul, why do you do that?”

“It must be love,” I said, taking her hand.

“You’ve still got make-up all over your face. Did you know that?”

“I must have forgotten—I was so excited after the play, and I wanted to get home before you went to sleep.”

I leaned down and kissed her, then took off my trousers

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and underwear and socks, leaving on my shirt. I turned down the lamp and got into bed.

“Don’t touch me like that, Paul.”

“Why?”

“I don’t feel like it,” she said.

“Why?”

Elsie turned away. I lay next to her for a while, until I finally fell asleep.

The next morning I was punching tickets on the ride back to Milwaukee. The car was stuffed with soldiers and their girlfriends or wives. Mostly girlfriends, I think. Standing or seated, all the couples seemed to be kissing. A few of the older men and women were trying not to look. As I walked down the aisle my attention was caught by a passenger’s newspaper.

SIX THOUSAND GERMAN GUNS OPEN FIRE AT 4:50

A.M.

2,500 BRITISH GUNS REPLY.

FRANCE WAITS FOR YANKS

GENE WILDER

After repeating "Tickets please" three times to one passionately kissing couple, I lost heart for punching tickets. When we reached the Third Street station in Milwaukee, I hopped off the passenger steps onto the station platform and helped some of the older people get off the train. Then I made my way through the crowd. Most everyone was hugging and kissing their loved ones good-bye. A little girl was clutching her mother's leg while the mother was squeezing her husband's waist as she kissed him. I stood and watched the three of them for a moment. That afternoon I wrote a letter to my wife.

Dear Elsie:

I've joined the army. I don't think you'll ever be happy with me, and I know that I'm terribly unhappy. I've left you all of the money we have in our savings account, and I've paid the next three months of rent.

Mr. Kazinsky says that you and your mother can have your old jobs back at the bakery, if you wish.

*Good-bye,
Paul*