

*W*e think we know the ones we love.

Our husbands, our wives. We know them—we are them, sometimes; when separated at a party we find ourselves voicing their opinions, their taste in food or books, telling an anecdote that never happened to us but happened to them. We watch their tics of conversation, of driving and dressing, how they touch a sugar cube to their coffee and stare as it turns white to brown, then drop it, satisfied, into the cup. I watched my own husband do that every morning; I was a vigilant wife.

We think we know them. We think we love them. But what we love turns out to be a poor translation, a translation we ourselves have made, from a language we barely know. We try to get past it to the original, but we never can. We have seen it all. But what have we really understood?

One morning we awaken. Beside us, that familiar sleeping body in the bed: a new kind of stranger. For me, it came in 1953. That was when I stood in my house and saw a creature merely bewitched with my husband's face.

Perhaps you cannot see a marriage. Like those giant heavenly bodies invisible to the human eye, it can only be charted by its gravity, its pull on everything around it. That is how I think of it. That I must look at everything around it, all the hidden stories, the unseen parts, so that somewhere in the middle—turning like a dark star—it will reveal itself at last.



The story of how I met my husband; even that's not simple. We met twice: once in our Kentucky hometown, and once on a beach in San Francisco. It was a joke for our whole marriage, that we were strangers twice.

I was a teenager when I fell in love with Holland Cook. We grew up in the same farming community, where there were plenty of boys to love—at that age I was like those Amazonian frogs, bright green, oozing emotion from every pore—but I caught no one's eye. Other girls had boys falling over them, and although I did my hair just like them and ripped the trim off attic dresses and sewed it on my hems, it did no good. My skin began to feel like clothing I had outgrown; I saw myself as tall and gawky; and as no one ever told me I was beautiful—neither my mother nor my disapproving father—I decided that I must be plain.

So when a boy came along who actually met my eyes, who showed up along my walk from school and got himself invited in for a slice of bread, I didn't know what to make of him. I could tell he wanted something. For some reason I thought it was help on his schoolwork, so I always went to great pains to hide my notebooks and not sit next to him in class; I wouldn't be used like a crib sheet. But of course that wasn't what he wanted; he was always good in school. He never said what he wanted, in fact, not in all the years I knew him, but you do not judge a man by what he says. You judge him by what he does, and one clear bright night in May when we walked by the strawberry patch, he held my hand all the way to Childress. That's all it took, just the briefest touch, in those days when I wore my nerves outside my skin like lace. Of course I lost my heart.

I was there with Holland in World War Two. He loved that I "talked like a book" and not like any of the other girls, and when the time finally came for him to go into the army, I watched him

step onto that bus and head to war. It was a lonely grief for a young girl.

It never occurred to me that I could leave as well, not until a government man walked up to our house and asked for me by name. I tromped down in my faded sundress to find a very ruddy and clean-shaven man wearing a lapel pin of the Statue of Liberty in gold; I coveted it terribly. His name was Mr. Pinker. He was the kind of man you were supposed to obey. He talked to me about jobs in California, how industries wanted strong women like me. His words—they were rips in a curtain, revealing a vista to a world I had never imagined before: airplanes, California; it was like agreeing to travel to another planet. After I thanked the man, he said, “Well then, as thanks you can do a favor for me.” To my young mind, it seemed like nothing special at all.

“Now that sounds like the first bright idea you *ever* had,” my father said when I mentioned leaving. I can’t find any memory in which he held my gaze as long as he did that day. I packed my bags and never saw Kentucky again.

On the bus ride to California, I studied the mountains’ ascent into a line of clouds and saw where, as if set upon those clouds, even higher mountains loomed. I had never seen a sight like that in all my life. It was as if the world had been enchanted all along and no one told me.

As for the favor the man asked of me, it was perfectly simple: he just wanted me to write letters. About the girls around me in the shipyard and the planes and conversations I overheard, everyday rituals: what we ate, what I wore, what I saw. I laughed to think what good it would do him. Now I can only laugh at myself—the government must have been looking for suspicious activities, but he didn’t tell me that. He told me to pretend I was keeping a diary. I did my duty; I did it even when I left my first job to become a WAVE—only a few other girls from a community like mine—spreading Noxzema on our pimply faces, the girls’ rears shaking to the radio, getting used to Coke instead of ra-

tioned coffee and Chinese food instead of hamburgers. I sat there every night and tried to write it all down, but I found my own life lacking; it hardly seemed worth telling. Like so many people, I was deaf to my own stories. So I made them up.

My life wasn't interesting to me, but I'd read books that were, and that is what I put down, with details stolen from Flaubert and Ford and Ferber, intrigues and sorrows and brief colorful joys: a beautiful work of fiction for my country held together with silence and lies. That is, it turns out, what holds a country together. I did my job well, in the handwriting my mother had taught me, tall and loyal and true, signed with the special slipknot *P* for Pearlie I invented at the age of nine, mailed to Mr. William Pinker, 62 Holly Street, Washington, D.C.

What did you do in the war, Grandma? I lied to my country, pretending to tattle on friends. I'm sure I was just one of thousands; I'm sure it was a clearinghouse for lonely hearts like me. Imagine the ad jingle: "Be a finker . . . for Mr. Pinker!"

Then the war ended, as did the factory work for women and our jobs as WAVEs. I had long since stopped writing my notes to Washington; there was so much else to worry about and I had my position doing piecework sewing to pay for meals. And one day, alone down by the ocean, I walked right by a sailor on a bench, sitting with his book facedown like a fig leaf on his lap, staring out to sea.

I knew very little about men, so I was startled to see such despair on his square handsome face. I knew him. The boy who'd held my hand all the way to Childress, whose heart I had, at least briefly, possessed. Holland Cook.

I said hello.

"Well hi there, Sarah, how's the dog?" he said amiably. The wind stopped, as if, like Holland, it did not recognize me. Sarah was not my name.

We stayed there for a moment in the oyster-colored air, with his smile slowly sagging, my hand holding the flap of my coat to my throat, my bright kerchief tugging in the wind, and a sickness

building in my stomach. I could have moved on; merely walked away so he would never know who I was. Just some strange girl fading into the fog.

But instead I said my name.

Then you recognized me, didn't you, Holland? Your childhood sweetheart. Pearlie who'd read poetry to you, who'd taken piano lessons from your mother; that was the second time we met. A sudden memory of home, opening like a pop-up book. He chatted with me, he even made me laugh a little, and when I said I had no escort to the movies that Friday and asked if he would come, he paused a while before looking at me, saying quietly, "All right."

I was shocked when he turned up at my rooming house. The low-watt bulbs revealed a weary man, hat in his hands, his skin a little ashen, his elegant necktie loosely knotted. He claimed, years later, that he couldn't even remember what he or I wore that night: "Was it the green dress?" No, Holland; it was black roses on white; its pattern is framed and hung in my memory alongside our honeymoon wallpaper (pale green garlands). I thought he might be drunk; I was afraid he might collapse, but he smiled and offered his arm and after the film took me to a nice restaurant out in North Beach. At dinner, he hardly ate or spoke. He barely looked at me, or noticed the stares we got from other patrons; his own gaze was fixed on two cast-iron dogs that sat before the unlit fireplace. So after we had taken the streetcar to my corner, and it was time to say good night, I was surprised when he turned very quickly and kissed me on the mouth. An electric jolt of happiness passed through me. He stepped back, breathing quickly and buttoned his jacket to go. "I have to see a friend," he told me sharply.

"Holland," I said. He looked back at me as if I had jerked a string. "Holland," I repeated. He waited. And then I said the right thing. It was the only time I ever did: "Let me take care of you."

His deep eyes awakened. Did he think I meant to remind him of our time back in Kentucky, that I offered the soft threat of the past? A dark line appeared between his eyebrows.

He said, “You don’t know me, not really.”

I told him that didn’t matter, but what I meant was that he was wrong; I knew him, of course I knew all about him from that time in our constricting little hometown: the grass behind the schoolyard we used to poke with a stick, the path from Franklin to Childress cluttered with witch hazel and touch-me-nots and railroad vine, the ice shivering in a summer pitcher of his mother’s lemonade—the lost world that only I remembered. For here we were so far from home. The one we could never regain. Who could know him better than I?

I acted instinctively. All I wanted was to keep him there on the shining streetcar tracks. “Let me take care of you again.”

“You serious?” he asked.

“You know, Holland, I’ve never been kissed by any boy but you.”

“That ain’t true, it’s been years, Pearl. So much has changed.”

“I haven’t changed.”

Immediately he took my shoulder and pressed his lips to mine.

Two months later, by those same cable-car tracks, he whispered: “Pearlie, I need you to marry me.” He told me that I didn’t really know his life, and of course he was right. Yet I married him. He was too beautiful a man to lose and I loved him.



The first thing people noticed in my husband was his looks. Tall, dark, with a comforting smile that seemed to hide nothing: the kind of effortless beauty that cannot be marred by strain or illness, like something beaten out of gold, so that even if you bent it or melted it down it would always be a pure, beautiful thing. That’s how I saw him, ever since I was a girl staring at him in our classroom. But I was not alone; it was how everybody saw him.

Beauty is a warping lens. He had the kind of looks that are al-

ways greeted by grins and handshakes, extra glances, stares held for a moment longer than usual; a smile and a face not easily forgotten. Even the way he held a cigarette, or leaned over to tie his shoe, had a certain masculine grace that made you want to sketch him. What a distorted, confusing way to live. To be offered jobs and rides and free drinks—"It's on the house, sweetie"—to sense a room changing as you move through it. Watched everywhere you go. To be someone people long to possess, and to be used to this feeling; to be wanted so immediately, so often, that you have never known yourself what you might want.

And he was mine, of all incredible things.

What would I have told you about my husband, in those young days of our marriage? Just that he had a lovely baritone. And liked his whiskey neat. That he would lend a stranger twenty dollars if he seemed like the right sort of fellow; and later, when we had a son, he carefully tracked his health, and called the doctor whenever we were worried, and tenderly soaped Sonny's legs in the bathtub as if everything were good. Always well dressed and smelling of leather and wood, like a favorite coat or a fine piece of furniture. He liked to smoke but hated to be seen doing it—a holdover from his soldier days—and I would come upon him, in our married home, leaning against the frame of the patio door with a lonely expression, right hand dangling emptily inside, left hand trailing smoke: exactly the position of California leaning against the Pacific. He kissed me goodbye every morning at eight and hello every evening at six; he worked hard to provide for us all; he had nearly lost his life for his country. Loyal, decent, a soldier: American virtues. All that is true, of course, though it gets no closer to the real man. They are simply the things one would set upon a tombstone. They have, in fact, been set upon the tombstone of Holland Cook.

