After the Ball

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Somewhere above the building whose flake-painted sign read MYRON'S BALLROOM the lights flickered as if to go out and a small orchestra of truly fragile size played "Good Night Ladies," and there was a murmur of regret and then a chorus of conversation and the rustle of bodies and shuffle of feet as shadows moved toward exits and the orchestra stopped and half the lights blinked and went out completely.

After a moment a side door opened below and the five—or was it six?—musicians emerged carrying their now-heavy instruments and loped to the only visible cars as if to avoid the larger flood of people talking and laughing, coming down the main staircase to the pavement. By the time the ballroom dancers, for that is what they were, touched ground by the dozens, and finally a hundred in all—sixty old women and an almost similar number of old men—the musicians' cars had long

since sped off into a night with high fog above and a low fog coming in from the sea.

Roughly thirty of the celebrants lined up on the south side of the street awaiting rides on the inbound electric trolley, while the rest, somehow much louder and more jolly, waited across for the larger big train-size trolley that would charge and bang them off toward the Pacific Ocean shore.

Lined up and beginning to shiver in the late-night always-familiar California air (it had been 85 degrees at noon), the men cursed while the ladies in flower-print evening gowns peered down the tracks imbedded in asphalt as if staring would bring locomotion.

Which, miraculously, it did.

"There, see!" cried the ladies.

"I'll be damned," said the men.

And all the while, not looking at each other, even when the huge cross-country-size double car train pulled up in sparks and brake steam, the men in their perspiration-crumpled tuxes helped the evening-dressed women up the iron steps without glancing at their faces.

"Upsy-daisy."

"There we go."

"Atsa girl."

And the men clambered on like castaways, at the last moment leaping aboard.

With a clang of bell and a horn blow, the huge

cross-continental train, only going to Venice, thirty miles away, cast all adrift and bucketed toward a one-o'clock-in-the-morning perdition.

To the clamoring delight of ladies exhausted with inexpensive joy, and men longing to dislodge the stiff white shirtfronts and unstrangle their ties.

"It's hot, throw the windows up!"

"It's cold, put the windows down!"

And then, with equal parts arctic and equal parts equatorial, the old children of late Saturday plunged toward a sea with no icebergs, a shore with wild hopes.

In the first car, a man and woman sat just behind a motorman deeply influenced by orchestra conductor's baton gymnastics, as he rapped the brass handles left, right, between, and glared out at a fog without cars, from which at any moment some wreck might fully wreck itself.

Steel on steel, the train thundered them safely off from Myron's toward Neptune's.

For a long while the couple sat silently swaying until at last, watching the motorman's acrobatics, the woman of some years said, "Let me sit by the window, do you mind?"

"No, no, please, I was going to suggest that."

She slid in along the hard wooden bench and gazed out the window at the dark buildings passing and the night trees, and only a few stars, and barely a sliver moon this night, this month.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

The shadows passed, the shadows passed, the shadows passed.

"You ever think," she said, quietly, half-seeing her silhouette, also a shadow, on the window glass, "my land, being in a rickety old wreck of a train like this, making such a racket on the track, is like being a kind of traveler, I mean in time, we're going back, not ahead."

"I never thought that," he said, trying to crane around so he could see her clearly, but her head was pretty well turned to the window, which seemed like a TV window with stations coming and going, unfocused, channels changing every second. He looked down at his white-gloved hands. "Never thought."

"Well, think it," she murmured.

"What?"

"Think it," she said, more clearly.

"And another thing," she said, just as quietly, watching the passing night TV stations on their own quick circuits, come and gone. "This isn't only a time-and-place means of transportation. I feel something else."

"What?"

"Feel like I'm sort of melting away, I don't know, kind of losing weight, the more we move, the further we go, I feel lighter, down some pounds and then more, isn't that strange. You feel that?"

"I don't think so."

"Go ahead, feel it, take your time. Relax. Doesn't it sort of just come up out of your feet, your ankles, get to your knees, so you feel, I don't know, let loose? You kind of hang inside your clothes."

He puzzled for a long moment, tried to look over her shoulder again, but all he saw in the colorless window glass was the silhouette, a face with no visible features.

"Go ahead," she murmured. "Relax. Let yourself go. Take it easy. Well?"

"I sort of feel it." He sat back, head down, examining his knees and the shirt cuffs half shot out of his coat sleeves.

"Don't talk about it, just, nice and easy, do it," she said, not turning.

"Yeah," he said, turning his gloved hands over and then back down on his knees, massaging. "Almost."

"Don't lie."

"No, no," he insisted quickly. "Why would I lie?"

"Men always do. They're good at it. Put in a lifetime at it. Get good by now."

"No, no," he said. "I feel it."

"Good boy," she said. "Keep quiet now and feel it more. There. There. You see?"

He nodded rather than reply. The big red car

trolley train rocketed out of one small area of houses and buildings into and through an open field and then a few more nurseries, and then empty land moving toward yet another small community near the sea.

"You're pretty good," he said admiringly.

"Shh," she hissed.

"No, but I mean," he whispered, "you'd be the life of the party, telling people things, giving them ideas, half putting them to sleep, saying 'do this,' 'do that,' and they do it. I'm losing weight, like you said."

"Good," she said. "Shh."

He glanced around uneasily at all the night celebrants, swaying in the motion of the train, traveling a long way in a short distance.

"You ever notice," he tried, "every single person, every one, every woman, every man this evening is wearing white gloves. You, me, everyone."

"I wonder why?" she said, turned away.

"You got me."

The train plummeted on into gathering mist and then wisps of fog, and he sat rocking back and forth with the sway of the big wooden-floored car and looked at the back of her neck where the tender dark curls gathered and at last said: "Your name. Out on the dance floor, you said, but the band played so loud—"

Her lips moved.

"Beg pardon?" he said.

Her lips moved again and then a final time.

"Here we are," she said.

"My name, now," he said, "is—"

"Here we are," she said, and brushed past him and was half up the aisle to the door before he sensed she was gone and the train was slowing. He saw a few lights outside, and the door hissed open before he could precede her and help her down into the dark. But at last he stood beside her as the great night train pulled away with a bell and horn and he looked to see her standing motionless, looking up at the sky.

"We'd better not stand here in the middle of the street," he said. "Traffic."

"There are no cars," she responded, calmly, and began to walk.

She was half across the street before he caught up.

"I was just saying," he said.

"A night with no moon, that makes me glad. There's true romance for you. A night with no moon."

"I thought moons and moonlight were—"

But she cut him off. "No moon, no light. The best."

And she was up over the curb and along the walk and turning in at her place, which was upstairs, one fourth of a fourplex.

"Quiet as a mouse," she murmured.

"Yes!"

"Keep your voice down."

"Yes," he whispered, and they were inside at the staircase and he saw that she was removing her shoes and glancing at him, so he did the same. She moved up to the first tread, soundless, and looked to see he was carrying her shoes, nodded and repeated, "Like mice."

And she ascended in a soundless glide with him fumbling after. When he got to the top she was already in her apartment, a large parlor with a double bed in its middle, and beyond, a small dining room and a kitchen. The door closed on the bathroom, soundless.

After a moment she called out, very quietly, "Don't stand there," which he interpreted as meaning off with the tuxedo coat and after some hesitation the white shirtfront and collar and after another long while, unlatching his suspenders and folding them and his pants over a chair that he found in the shadowed room, lit only by a small nightlight and a lamp on the far side of the bed. Standing there in a half shirt and his black socks and underwear, he wavered and dodged about going in one direction, then the other, moving toward the bed and backing away, with no map, no guide, no late-night instructions.

"Are you where you're supposed to be?" she asked quietly behind the door. He gazed at the bed.

"Are you?" she prompted, almost inaudibly.

He went to the bed and said, "I think so," and got in and one of the wire springs sang softly.

"You are," she said.

The bathroom door opened. A tall silhouette was there. Before he could see her clearly, the light went out and a shadow crossed the room.

"Eyes shut?"

He nodded, numbly. He felt her weight upon the bed and heard the sheets part and whisper as she drifted in.

"Open your eyes."

He opened them but it was the same as on the train, where, turned away, he saw only a silhouette cutout, and here, though she faced toward him, she blocked the lamp so the lamp made her a hillock of shadow with no features. He tried to find her face, he knew it was there, but his eyes wouldn't focus.

"Good evening," she said.

"Evening."

And after a moment as she gained her breath and he did the same, she said, "My, that was a long trip."

"Too long. I could hardly wait—"

"Don't say," she said.

He looked at the long shadow and the pale face with dim outlines of features.

"But . . ."

"Don't say," she said.

He held his breath for he knew she would go on in a moment. She did.

"Teachers say if you write a story you must never name what you're trying to write. Just do it. When it's over you'll know what you've done. So . . . don't say."

It was the most she had said all evening. Now she fell silent, a shadow against the light. And now the lamp went dark without, it seemed, her turning to touch it. He saw the merest gesture in the shadows. Something soft fell to the floor. It was a moment before he realized it was her gloves. She had taken off her gloves.

Surprised, he sensed that the only thing that he still wore was his gloves. But when he tried to work them off he found that he had already tossed them aside in the dark. Now his hands were revealed and vulnerable. He pulled back.

He opened his mouth but she stopped him. "Don't say anything."

He felt her move a small move, toward him.

"Say only one thing."

He nodded, wondering what it would be.

"Tell me," she said very quietly. He could not make out her face, it was still like the face in the window glass on the night train, traveling from station to station, a dark silhouette fixed between late-night TV channels, and pale and hidden.

"Tell me," she said. He nodded. "How *old* are you?"

His mouth gaped. He felt his eyes panic in his head. She repeated the question, implying the answer. Suddenly he absolutely knew the right and amazing truth. He shut his eyes, cleared his throat, and at last let his tongue move.

"I'm . . ." he said.

"Yes?"

"I'm eighteen, nineteen in August, five feet eight, one hundred fifty pounds, brown hair, blue eyes. Unattached."

He imagined he heard her very softly echo every word that he had said.

He felt her shift, weightless, closer and still closer.

"Say that again," she whispered.