

SOMETIME
BEFORE DAWN



1950

IT WAS THE CRYING LATE AT NIGHT, perhaps, the hysteria, and then the sobbing violently, and after it had passed away into a sighing, I could hear the husband's voice through the wall. "There, there," he would say, "there, there."

I would lie upon my back in my night bed and listen and wonder, and the calendar on my wall said August 2002. And the man and his wife, young, both about thirty, and fresh-looking, with light hair and blue eyes, but lines around their mouths, had just moved into the rooming house where I took my meals and worked as a janitor in the downtown library.

Every night and every night it would be the same thing, the wife crying, and the husband quieting her with his soft

voice beyond my wall. I would strain to hear what started it, but I could never tell. It wasn't anything he said, I was positive of this, or anything he did. I was almost certain, in fact, that it started all by itself, late at night, about two o'clock. She would wake up, I theorized, and I would hear that first terrorized shriek and then the long crying. It made me sad. As old as I am, I hate to hear a woman cry.

I remember the first night they came here, a month ago, an August evening here in this town deep in Illinois, all the houses dark and everyone on the porches licking ice-cream bars. I remember walking through the kitchen downstairs and standing in the old smells of cooking and hearing but not seeing the dog lapping water from the pan under the stove, a nocturnal sound, like water in a cave. And I walked on through to the parlor and in the dark, with his face devilish pink from exertion, Mr. Fiske, the landlord, was fretting over the air conditioner, which, damned thing, refused to work. Finally in the hot night he wandered outside onto the mosquito porch—it was made for mosquitoes only, Mr. Fiske averred, but went there anyway.

I went out onto the porch and sat down and unwrapped a cigar to fire away my own special mosquitoes, and there were Grandma Fiske and Alice Fiske and Henry Fiske and Joseph Fiske and Bill Fiske and six other boarders and roomers, all unwrapping Eskimo pies.

It was then that the man and his wife, as suddenly as if they had sprung up out of the wet dark grass, appeared at the bot-

tom of the steps, looking up at us like the spectators in a summer night circus. They had no luggage. I always remembered that. They had no luggage. And their clothes did not seem to fit them.

"Is there a place for food and sleep?" said the man, in a halting voice.

Everyone was startled. Perhaps I was the one who saw them first, then Mrs. Fiske smiled and got out of her wicker chair and came forward. "Yes, we have rooms."

"How much is the money?" asked the man in the broiling dark.

"Twenty dollars a day, with meals."

They did not seem to understand. They looked at each other.

"Twenty dollars," said Grandma.

"We'll move into here," said the man.

"Don't you want to look first?" asked Mrs. Fiske.

They came up the steps, looking back, as if someone was following them.

That was the first night of the crying.



BREAKFAST WAS SERVED EVERY MORNING at seven-thirty, large, toppling stacks of pancakes, huge jugs of syrup, islands of butter, toast, many pots of coffee, and cereal if you wished. I was working on my cereal when the new couple came down the stairs, slowly. They did not come into the dining room im-

mediately, but I had a sense they were just looking at everything. Since Mrs. Fiske was busy I went in to fetch them, and there they were, the man and wife, just looking out the front window, looking and looking at the green grass and the big elm trees and the blue sky. Almost as if they had never seen them before.

"Good morning," I said.

They ran their fingers over antimacassars or through the bead-curtain-rain that hung in the dining room doorway. Once I thought I saw them both smile very broadly at some secret thing. I asked them their name. At first they puzzled over this but then said,

"Smith."

I introduced them around to everyone eating and they sat and looked at the food and at last began to eat.

They spoke very little, and only when spoken to, and I had an opportunity to remark the beauty in their faces, for they had fine and graceful bone structures in their chins and cheeks and brows, good straight noses, and clear eyes, but always that tiredness about the mouths.

Half through the breakfast, an event occurred to which I must call special attention. Mr. Britz, the garage mechanic, said, "Well, the president has been out fund-raising again today, I see by the paper."

The stranger, Mr. Smith, snorted angrily. "That terrible man! I've always hated Westercott."

Everyone looked at him. I stopped eating.

Mrs. Smith frowned at her husband. He coughed slightly and went on eating.

Mr. Britz scowled momentarily, and then we all finished breakfast, but I remember it now. What Mr. Smith had said was, "That terrible man! I've always hated Westercott."

I never forgot.



THAT NIGHT SHE CRIED AGAIN, as if she was lost in the woods, and I stayed awake for an hour, thinking.

There were so many things I suddenly wanted to ask them. And yet it was almost impossible to see them, for they stayed locked in the room constantly.

The next day, however, was Saturday. I caught them momentarily in the garden looking at the pink roses, just standing and looking, not touching, and I said, "A fine day!"

"A wonderful, wonderful day!" they both cried, almost in unison, and then laughed embarrassedly.

"Oh, it can't be *that* good." I smiled.

"You don't know how good it is, you don't know how wonderful it is—you can't possibly guess," she said, and then quite suddenly there were tears in her eyes.

I stood bewildered. "I'm sorry," I said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes." She blew her nose and went off a distance to pick a few flowers. I stood looking at the apple tree hung with red fruit, and at last I got the courage to inquire, "May I ask where you're from, Mr. Smith?"

"The United States," he said slowly, as if piecing the words together.

"Oh, I was rather under the impression that—"

"We were from another country?"

"Yes."

"We are from the United States."

"What's your business, Mr. Smith?"

"I *think*."

"I see," I said, for all the answers were less than satisfactory. "Oh, by the way, what's Westercott's first name?"

"Lionel," said Mr. Smith, and then stared at me. The color left his face. He turned in a panic. "Please," he cried, softly. "Why do you ask these questions?" They hurried into the house before I could apologize. From the stair window they looked out at me as if I were the spy of the world. I felt contemptible and ashamed.



ON SUNDAY MORNING I helped clean the house. Tapping on the Smiths' door I received no answer. Listening, for the first time, I heard the tickings, the little clicks and murmurs of numerous clocks working away quietly in the room. I stood entranced. Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick! Two, no, *three* clocks. When I opened their door to fetch their wastepaper basket, I saw the clocks, arrayed, on the bureau, on the windowsill, and by the nightstand, small and large clocks, all set to this hour of the late morning, ticking like a roomful of insects.

So *many* clocks. But why? I wondered. Mr. Smith had *said* he was a *thinker*.

I took the wastebasket down to the incinerator. Inside the basket, as I was dumping it, I found one of her handkerchiefs. I fondled it for a moment, smelling the flower fragrance. Then I tossed it onto the fire.

It did not burn.

I poked at it and pushed it far back in the fire.

But the handkerchief would not burn.

In my room I took out my cigar lighter and touched it to the handkerchief. It would not burn, nor could I tear it.

And then I considered their clothing. I realized why it had seemed peculiar. The cut was regular for men and women in this season, but in their coats and shirts and dresses and shoes, there was not one blessed seam anywhere!

They came back out later that afternoon to walk in the garden. Peering from my high window I saw them standing together, holding hands, talking earnestly.

It was then that the terrifying thing happened.

A roar filled the sky. The woman looked into the sky, screamed, put her hands to her face, and collapsed. The man's face turned white, he stared blindly at the sun, and he fell to his knees calling to his wife to get up, get up, but she lay there, hysterically.

By the time I got downstairs to help, they had vanished. They had evidently run around one side of the house while I had gone around the other. The sky was empty, the roar had dwindled.

Why, I thought, should a simple, ordinary sound of a plane flying unseen in the sky cause such terror?

The airplane flew back a minute later and on the wings it said: COUNTY FAIR! ATTEND! RACING! FUN!

That's nothing to be afraid of, I thought.

I passed their room at nine-thirty and the door was open. On the walls I saw three calendars lined up with the date August 18, 2035, prominently circled.

"Good evening," I said pleasantly. "Say, you have a lot of nice calendars there. Come in mighty handy."

"Yes," they said.

I went on to my room and stood in the dark before turning on the light and wondered why they should need three calendars, all with the year 2035. It was crazy, but *they* were not. Everything about them was crazy except themselves, they were clean, rational people with beautiful faces, but it began to move in my mind, the calendars, the clocks, the wristwatches they wore, worth a thousand dollars each if I ever saw a wristwatch, and they, themselves, constantly looking at the time. I thought of the handkerchief that wouldn't burn and the seamless clothing, and the sentence "I've always hated Westercott."

I've always hated Westercott.

Lionel Westercott. There wouldn't be two people in the world with an unusual name like that. Lionel Westercott. I said it softly to myself in the summer night. It was a warm evening, with moths dancing softly, in velvet touches, on my screen. I slept fitfully, thinking of my comfortable job, this good little

town, everything peaceful, everyone happy, and these two people in the next room, the only people in the town, in the world, it seemed, who were not happy. Their tired mouths haunted me. And sometimes the tired eyes, too tired for ones so young.

I must have slept a bit, for at two o'clock, as usual, I was wakened by her crying, but this time I heard her call out, "Where are we, where are we, how did we get here, where are we?" And his voice, "Hush, hush, now, please," and he soothed her.

"Are we safe, are we safe, are we safe?"

"Yes, yes, dear, yes."

And then the sobbing.

Perhaps I could have thought a lot of things. Most minds would turn to murder, fugitives from justice. My mind did not turn that way. Instead I lay in the dark, listening to her cry, and it broke my heart, it moved in my veins and my head and I was so unbearably touched by her sadness and loneliness that I got up and dressed and left the house. I walked down the street and before I knew it I was on the hill over the lake and there was the library, dark and immense, and I had my janitor's key in my hand. Without thinking why, I entered the big silent place at two in the morning and walked through the empty rooms and down the aisles, turning on a few lights. And then I got a couple of big books out and began tracing some paragraphs and lines down and down, page after page, for about an hour in the early, early dark morning. I drew up a chair and sat

down. I fetched some more books. I sent my eye searching. I grew tired. But then at last my hand paused on a name, "William Westercott, politician, New York City. Married to Aimee Ralph on January 1998. One child, Lionel, born February 2000."

I shut the book and locked myself out of the library and walked home, cold, through the summer morning with the stars bright in the black sky.

I stood for a moment in front of the sleeping house with the empty porch and the curtains in every room fluttering with the warm August wind, and I held my cigar in my hand but did not light it. I listened, and there above me, like the cry of some night bird, was the sound of the lonely woman, crying. She had had another nightmare, and, I thought, nightmares are memory, they are based on things remembered, things remembered vividly and horridly and with too much detail, and she had had another of her nightmares and she was afraid.

I looked at the town all around me, the little houses, the houses with people in them, and the country beyond the houses, ten thousand miles of meadow and farm and river and lake, highways and hills and mountains and cities all sizes sleeping in the time before dawn, so quietly, and the streetlights going out now when there was no use for them at this nocturnal hour. And I thought of all the people in the whole land and the years to come, and all of us with good jobs and happy in this year.

Then I went upstairs past their door and went to bed and

listened and there, behind the wall, the woman was saying over and over again, "I'm afraid, I'm afraid," faintly, crying.

And lying there I was as cold as an ancient piece of ice placed between the blankets, and I was trembling, though I knew nothing, I knew everything, for now I knew where these travelers were from and what her nightmares were and what she was afraid of, and what they were running away from.

I figured it just before I went to sleep, with her crying faintly in my ears. Lionel Westercott, I thought, will be old enough to be president of the United States in the year 2035.

Somehow, I did not want the sun to rise in the morning.