

They say she's gaga. That's the word she's heard them whispering. *Gaga*. It sounds like something a baby would say.

She knows she's in Paris, city of dreams. Her companion in the shadowy room, who kisses her forehead, who strokes her hands, keeps telling her that she has a duty not to die, not now, not *yet*. 'Wallisse . . .' murmurs this person, who smells like a woman with peppermint breath, but whose cheeks are hard as a man's. 'Wallisse . . . I shall not let you die until you remember.'

Remember what? There are plenty of questions Wallis would like to ask, but she can't get them out. What a bitch. Words compose themselves in her mind. They're in the proper order, usually. Except she can hardly ever say them. Her throat has a disease. What comes out of her mouth is dribble. Dribble and some droll, incomprehensible language. Afrikaans?

The woman-man companion lifts her up in the wide bed, cradles her against her anatomy, which is bulky-thick, like a bale of packed cotton, and begins brushing her hair. 'Beautiful . . .' whispers the bulk as she brushes. And

Wallis tries to say: ‘Oh yes, it was always *very* becoming. In fact, it was my best feature, dark and sleek as a Shanghai girl’s. It transfigured me. It sprang from blood. Not *my* blood. From the tumbler of raw-steak blood I was made to drink every day after school, to ward off TB, and my mother would say: “Drink it down, Bessiewallis. Make your tresses shine.”’

But her sentences turn to goo. The stench of lilies is on the pillow. And the room is so damn dark – with just these thin movements in it, these shadows she can’t make out – it’s mortifying, like she’s watching some old flickering TV picture, or even not watching, but trapped *inside* an old TV, a ghost made out of light, longing to join the world beyond the screen, the world of the TV watchers, pink as candy, warm and rounded, with their haunches nudging up close to each other on their chintzy divan. How comely these brightly coloured people seem! As if nothing cold would ever touch them. As if they would rise up in a line and dance a conga, hands-to-ass, hands-to-ass, swaying along, in and out of the furniture, singing sharp, singing flat, not caring a dime, untouched by tomorrow, heading pell-mell into the hall, waking the servants, opening the door and shimmying out under the summer moon.

Out where?

The companion has said in her strange, difficult-to-understand English: ‘Wallisse, for you, this state of forgetting is a mortal sin. *A mortal sin!* Do you want to die with this stain of sin on your soul?’

‘Stain of sin’. No, sure she doesn’t want to die with this on her. It sounds revolting. But just what is it a girl’s supposed to remember? She tries to say: ‘I remember Baltimore in spring. Is that it?’ But the companion never

answers. And now she's gone out the door, closing it, locking it, leaving Wallis alone, a prisoner. And the sound of that key turning, that's the loneliest sound in the world, the one that can bring the Nightmare on . . .

Wallis clutches the bed sheet. Once, she hid her too-large hands in white gloves; now, her hands are small, like the claws of a marmoset – another mystery. She calls out: 'Don't leave me alone!' But she hears the sound she makes. Not proper words, just an oddball noise. Nobody's going to answer an animal noise. They'll assume wolves have come back to the Bois de Boulogne. The door remains tight shut.

And here comes the Nightmare. Always the same scene. Florida palms. A bright white glare on the edge of the veranda. And Wallis sits in a wickerwork chair, waiting. 6 Admiralty Row, Pensacola. Waiting for her husband to come home. 1916. Waiting with her arms folded, woollen dress neat, slip one inch and a half shorter than the dress, tortoiseshell barrette holding back the soft waves of her long lovely hair . . .

Waiting with such pride! Waiting to see his shadow moving ahead of him down Admiralty Row, moving towards her, she bandbox-smart as a US Navy wife should always be. When she met him, she cabled her mother in Baltimore: *Last night, I danced with the world's most fascinating aviator.* Poor schoolmates, poor debutantes of Baltimore, poor Mother, poor American girls everywhere, who'd never known the embrace of Earl Winfield Spencer Jr. And now he was hers, her husband, and any moment she would see him: gold stripes on his shoulder boards, dark moustache, sunburned skin. He would smile as he caught sight of her, his bride, his Wallis, who was teaching herself

to cook from *Fannie Farmer's Boston Cooking School Cook Book*, who already knew how to season Campbell's soup and make a gravy without lumps, and who was progressing to omelettes and fruit pie.

But then. The bright glare of the sun on the veranda is gone. The sun's going down over the bay. The houses on the other side of Admiralty Row are already in deep shadow. The air is cooling. It's wintertime. And Fannie Farmer's perfect gravy can't be made yet because the fascinating aviator hasn't come home.

At Pensacola Naval Air Station there is a gong which sounds whenever a plane goes down. A gong. As though a motion picture were about to begin, except there were no motion pictures then. But the base goes silent, and the wives put their arms round each other and you can smell their fear even through talcum powder, and all you can do is hold on, all you young wives together, with your hearts beating. Hold on until you know. And the wind blows. It seems always to be blowing sand in your eyes and you can hear it in the high palms: death trying to flirt with the leaves.

But the gong doesn't sound that evening. It gets dark and Wallis goes inside and takes the joint of beef out of the oven and stares at it, the yellow fat turned brown, blood in the pan. She doesn't know what to do to prevent it from spoiling, so she places it on the draining board. And then she realises she is cold, the night is cold, and she goes towards the bedroom to find a shawl, a white one, which will complement her beige-and-brown dress.

She never reaches the bedroom because Win is at the front door. She can hear him jabbing at the lock with his key and she knows what this means.