

## 7:10 to Detroit

He could not feel his toes. He was afraid to take his shoes off to massage the circulation back into his feet for fear the stiff laces would cut into the frozen flesh on his fingers. Pulling a small box of kitchen matches from his coat pocket, he carefully removed one of the precious sticks. When he dragged it along the striking board, it slipped out of his grasp and rolled away. It was no use: his fingers were too numb, and the twigs and leaves he had scavenged from the corners of the boxcar for the fire were dancing away, cycloned about by the frigid air jetting in through the cracks in the sidewalls and doors.

Leaning back against the icy walls of his refuge, Alva Carter felt the bone-jarring cold penetrating every part of his body. He pulled his peacoat tighter, shivering and fighting the sleep reaching up to pull him down despite the grinding noise of the train's wheels beneath him and the unceasing roar of the passing winds. He peered through a crack and saw nothing but white.

He knew the blizzard was coming, a once-in-a-century storm rolling in off Lake Michigan, snapping trees and power lines as it passed. He had warning that the temperature was going to drop below zero, that no one could survive out in the open.

He should have worn a sweater and he had forgotten his gloves, but nothing mattered anymore. Not now. Not since his return to Muskegon from the waters off the war-ravaged coast of France....

The snow was falling much heavier now, and Alva Carter was huddled in the frigid darkness on the front porch swing, smoking a Lucky Strike and humming 'Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy.' He had only been home for an hour and still wore his Navy dress blues and peacoat against the cold. Edith disapproved of him smoking in the house and she was already giving him orders again, bossing him around just as if he had never left.

He crushed the butt with his shoe, then picked up the remains and walked inside. It seemed as if every light in the old, ramshackle two-story house was on, but he hadn't the heart to complain. Seventeen months and twenty-one days in the cramped and dim quarters of a navy destroyer had intensified his need for all the light and space his boyhood home had to offer.

“Billy, round up the kids while I finish my make-up,” Edith said. “We have to get going. If we're late for dinner, I'll never hear the end of it from Mother.”

“Yes, dear.”

Alva resented being called Billy; it was a boy's name. His middle name was William, an age-old and honorable name, after his father and his grandfather, both Alvas as well. He had asked her several times over the years not to call him by that name, and he was sure she went on calling him that just to irritate him.

The three boys were wrestling on the living room rug, getting rougher with each other by the moment. In the corner at a small table set with miniature teacups and saucers, little Tess smiled delightedly as she served tea to her older sister.

“Wayne, knock it off,” he said. “You and your brothers get your coats on and get in the car. Carrie, get Tess buttoned-up good, then put her in the front seat between you and your mother. Don't forget her teddy bear—and be careful of the ice!”

\* \* \*

The dinner went well and the roast beef and potatoes were perfect, as usual. Mr. and Mrs. Dalton and the kids waved from the front porch as he and Edith drove away down a slush covered stretch of city street.

When they arrived home, Edith flashed a mischievous smile as she kissed him at the front door. Alva looked at her vacantly: he had not been with his wife since before he went off to sea and the war, not that he wasn't ready.

“What do you think? Tall, dark and handsome,” she said. “We're all alone.”

“Well, blondie. I'm thinking I need a shot of bourbon and a smoke,” he said, just then realizing the house was empty of voices.

Their marriage had lasted fifteen years, and at times he still felt like a beginner around her. She was an attractive woman, beautiful by anyone's standards and had kept her figure, even after five children. Both were twenty-two when they married and he was very much in love with her. He had often wondered, though, why she had chosen him when she could have had the pick of the litter. He knew it, and she knew it and reminded him of it whenever she was angry or felt she was losing control over him.

Later, Alva Carter stood in the dark by the partially open bedroom window in his undershirt and boxers, sneaking a smoke and looking at her in the moonlight as she slept, the blanket draped over the soft curves of her bare back like a banner. She had always seemed more sophisticated in bed than he, and her desires often went far beyond his own.

She rolled over and sighed. “Come back to bed, sweetie. I need you to check my oil again.”

“I'll be back in a few minutes, honey,” he said, slipping on his navy jumper and scarf, then fastening the thirteen buttons on his pants and tying his shoes. “I'm going to walk down to Jerry's for a pack of smokes and a beer.”

Standing on the icy sidewalk in front of Jerry's Groceries with the collar turned up on his peacoat against the cold, Alva Carter removed the silvered paper tab from the pack of Luckies, then tapped one out, struck a kitchen match and lit it. Taking a drag then a sip from his beer, he looked over the collection of announcements tacked to the bulletin board hanging next to the phone booth, and was struck by the banality of his life and of the lives of the people who shared his world.

Old man Bragg had one up for his blueberry farm, "Pick-Ur-Own," it read, "Five cents a quart." One of his boyhood pals, Buzzy Randall, had a card up, trying to unload his beat-up model T Ford. The old truck had no intake manifold, no battery and two flat tires. Another note offered Benny Goodman