A Fine Looking Man

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Ruthie s'est énamourée du petit ami de sa soeur, un élégant officier de l'armée canadienne durant la Deuxiène guerre mondiale. Une rencontre plusieurs années plus tard au retour de la guerre, ne correspond pas à ce qu'elle avait espéré et attendu..

"Go into the living room and talk to him," her mother whispered, hurrying to the kitchen for a pair of stockings that had been left by the stove to dry. Ruthie, who stood in the shadow of the stairway, didn't move. Supper was over, the dishes washed and put away, and she could hear the kids playing in the street outside. "Red Light, Green Light."

"You heard me!"

Ruthie eased her way into the living room. The airman was sitting at the far end of the chesterfield. This one was an officer; the others had been privates or corporals, once a sergeant.

"Sheila will be down in a minute," she said.

"That's all right," the officer smiled. "I'm in no hurry."

Ruthie perched on the arm of the chesterfield closest to the door and waited. It was always the same. She had opened the door to soldier after sailor, some of them from as far away as Saskatoon and North Bay, but none of them ever had anything to say to her, not even the one who could speak French.

The war itself was something of a disappointment to her. When it had begun—just four days before her ninth birthday, in 1939—she had thought such a momentous event would change forever the course of all their lives. But after the initial flurry of excitement, life had continued much as before. True, her father now listened to the radio for the latest news reports, and the family had switched from "The Shadow" and "Inner Sanctum" to radio plays in which hordes of German soldiers swept through towns bayoneting and raping (two functions almost indistinguishable in her mind), but announcers still advised them to brush their teeth regularly, as if life as she knew it would go on forever.

In any case, her brothers were too young to go to war, her father too old. A cousin had been killed in action, but she'd met him only once; when she tried to feel sad about his death, all she could conjure up was a memory of bushy eyebrows and large buck teeth. Jimmy, the boy next door, had died too, but Jimmy had once caught her playing doctor with several kids under a blanket; when he fell in France, taking her dark secret with him, she felt unmistakable relief. As for the stream of servicemen who escorted her sister Sheila to movies and canteen dances while the whole street watched, Ruthie first despised then dismissed them as adjuncts to her sister's life.

Ruthie could hear Sheila and her mother giggling upstairs and in some obscure way felt ashamed. The officer glanced at his watch, then looked up and smiled at her again. "You must be Ruthie," he said, as if he didn't mind that Sheila was late, as if he was glad to have this time to talk to Ruthie. "Sheila's told me a bit about you. You're eleven years old. Am I right?"

"Yes," Ruthie said.

"In grade six?"

"Grade seven," Ruthie said.

"Did you skip a grade?"

Ruthie nodded, pleased in spite of herself.

"Good for you." He paused as if to consider this. "My name's Kenneth—Kenneth Larson. I used to teach school, high school, before the war. In Edmonton."

"That's out west."

"In Alberta."

Images of dry lands and mountains popped into her head. Open spaces, blue skies.

"It's not as big as Toronto," Kenneth said. "But it's a friendly city."

She had never thought of a city being friendly, or not friendly. "Have you always lived in Edmonton?"

"All my life. I'll go back when the war's over."

Ruthie wondered how old he was. Younger than her father, certainly, but older than the others soldiers and more serious. They had seemed like silly boys. Kenneth wasn't handsome but she liked the way he looked; his eyes were clear, his skin clean and healthy, his uniform well pressed. The muscles of his thighs, she noticed, stood out against the smoothness of his trouser legs. The body of a gymnast, she thought, trying out a new word. She was just about to ask him if he would go back to being a teacher when Sheila came clattering down the stairs and burst into the room. "Sorry to keep you waiting," she apologized shyly, as if she too realized that Kenneth was special. She was wearing her hound's-tooth jacket, high and square at the shoulders, and a short, pleated skirt. She had swept her hair forward and up into a pompadour. She was a typical Irish beauty, everybody said. Still, Ruthie was glad she didn't look like her.

Sheila was her mother's favourite. She had quit school as soon as she turned sixteen to work as a stenographer in a munitions plant. Every Friday she handed over most of her paycheque to her mother. "I don't know what I'd do without her," her mother would sigh, in a way that made Ruthie feel she herself should never have been born. It was to Sheila that her mother confided all her troubles: her worried about the boys, their father's drinking, her constant fear of bailiffs and truant officers. Her fear, it seemed to Ruthie, of anyone outside their little house. "Answer the door," she'd whisper when the bill collector came. "I want you to go to the corner and telephone the landlord," she'd say, or "Give this note to the grocery man." As if these were acts she couldn't perform herself.

Ruthie had heard her mother say more than once that she hoped her children would be as happy in the future as she had been in the past, before she met their father. The only time she was happy now, it seemed to Ruthie, was when she talked to Sheila at the end of the day over a final cup of tea in the kitchen. They seemed more like sisters or girlfriends than mother and daughter: Sheila would tell her mother where she'd been, what she'd done, whether or not the soldier had tried to kiss her; her mother would reminisce about the men she could have married when she was Sheila's age. "You wouldn't know it now, but I was a very pretty girl," she'd smile, pausing as if trying to remember where she'd put something. "I could have married any number of young men—men who are doctors now, or lawyers. Substantial men." She never said why she'd married their father instead.

Ruthie often wondered what her own life would have been like if her mother had married a substantial man. Like Dr. Hancock, who lived in a big house and, as far as she knew, never touched a drop. Maybe he would have made her mother happy. Her father was a handsome man, but a drinker. When he wasn't out drinking, he was out selling things. Someone had said he could sell anything—car, refrigerator, washing machine—over the telephone, sight unseen. When he was at home, he seemed like an angry stranger, not part of the family at all. Sometimes Ruthie would wake in the night and hear them fighting. She'd lie in bed in the room she shared with Sheila and her younger sister Norma waiting for something really awful to happen. From time to time the neighbours pounded on the wall and once the police came to the door.

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Ruthie's brothers slept in the room next to her parents. With so many brothers and sisters, she shouldn't have felt lonely but she did. She figured this was because she'd been born across the border in the United States and was therefore different from the rest of her family. She took a secret pride in this; she had taught herself all the words to "The Star Spangled Banner" and remained firmly silent whenever "God Save the King" was sung. Although now that Canada was at war she felt a bit guilty about this.

"Well, what did you think of him," her mother prodded, turning from the window where she stood to watch Kenneth and Sheila leave.

"He's all right, I guess," Ruthie said.

"He's a fine looking man," her mother said.

"He's a fine looking man," the neighbours hurried over to agree. "Every inch an officer."

Ruthie waited to see if he would call again. When he did, she kept him company without being told. Again he asked her about school, what things she liked to do best, questions no one had ever asked her, questions she had never asked herself. Social studies, she supposed, reading about other people, other places. She no longer complained when asked to run upstairs for a forgotten pair of stockings or a fallen bobby-pin; the concerns of Sheila and her mother seemed more acceptable now that they had found a worthier object. Her parents' fighting, her father's drinking, although worse than ever, were less

threatening; the thought of Kenneth made her feel safer, more at home.

On weekends, when he was on leave, Kenneth came to Sunday dinner. He sat at the head of the table in her father's place and carved the roast while her brothers questioned him about the dangers of flying and her younger sister giggled and smiled, trying to get his attention. This annoyed Ruthie a little but she knew instinctively that she was Kenneth's favourite. Sometimes he'd bring along two fellow officers—one tall and skinny with a big moustache, the other short and fat with pale blue eyes and thin blonde hair. They told jokes all through dinner and afterwards sang two verses of "I Will Sing of My Redeemer" in two-part falsetto harmony, and then the last verse of "Sweet Violets" which had a double meaning. Her mother would cover her mouth with her hand, pretending to be shocked, flushing with guilty pleasure. Kenneth smiled but he never sang along with them or told jokes himself. Ruthie was secretly glad of this.

"The Three Musketeers" as her mother called them, took Ruthie as well as Sheila to the movies, once to the museum, and twice to Centre Island. One evening the tall one said Ruthie was old enough to learn to dance the Shag and the short one told Sheila to dress her up so they could take her with them to the Officers' Club.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Kenneth protested.

"Oh, what harm can it do?" her mother said.

Ruthie sensed her mother could hardly wait for her to be old enough to go out with servicemen. She herself felt much too giddy from all the excitement and attention to know what she wanted to do. But as soon as they arrived at the canteen, she wished she'd stayed home. The room was hot and smoky, the close, looming presence of so many uniformed bodies made her feel sick. She told Sheila she thought she had better go to the ladies' room, and threw up. Kenneth called for a taxi to take her home.

"It's just something she ate," her mother said, but Kenneth said, "No, we'd better call a doctor."

When Dr. Hancock arrived, Kenneth and the others waited below while he examined Ruthie upstairs. He pressed her stomach, low down on the right side. "Does that hurt?" It did. "It's her appendix," he told her mother. "Nothing to worry about as long as you're careful." He held up his little finger. "This is what your appendix looks like when it's healthy," he told Ruthie. "But if you're not careful," his thumb moved ominously, "the appendix will grow and eventually have to come out." He rummaged in his bag, then handed a bottle of mineral oil to her mother with instructions that she was to give Ruthie one tablespoon every morning.

As soon as Dr. Hancock had left, Kenneth and the others came upstairs. Kenneth sat on the edge of the bed and put his hand on Ruthie's forehead to see if she had a fever.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Fine," Ruthie said. She had never felt so important in her life.

The next morning a bouquet of flowers arrived. Her mother handed them to Ruthie without a word. On the card, Kenneth had written, "To my best girl." In that moment, Ruthie would gladly have died for him, but after her mother gave her a tablespoon of oil, she said she thought she felt well enough to get up. Neither she nor her mother ever mentioned the oil again.

One morning as Ruthie was leaving for school her mother told her that Kenneth had been posted overseas. He was being sent to Halifax for three weeks of special training before going overseas. Although Sheila was not yet eighteen, he wanted to marry her before he sailed. To her way of thinking, there was much to be said for this, aside from the excitement of a wedding. As an officer's wife, Sheila would receive a monthly allowance that would put an end to their financial worries, and when he returned, Kenneth proposed to take Ruthie as well as Sheila to live with him in Edmonton. "He says you're an intelligent girl and deserve a good education."

Intelligent … a good education … Edmonton! Ruthie was stunned. She looked at her mother as if she had already left her far behind.

But her father objected when he heard about Kenneth's proposal. "Sheila's much too young to be thinking about getting married," he said. "There'll be time enough for that when he comes back."

"Don't listen to him," her mother told Sheila.

"She'll have to listen to me, she can't get married without my consent."

"Why you've never been a father to Sheila, to any of them!"

"They're here, aren't they?" he said, banging out of the house.

But in the end he gave his consent. Kenneth and Sheila were married in the living room before a few aunts and uncles, officers and friends, by a minister none of them had ever seen before. After the ceremony Ruthie heard her mother whisper to her Aunt Alice, "Wouldn't you know, Sheila got her period today."

Ruthie had known for quite a while how and why babies are born. Her mother had explained all this to her in preparation for her own first period. She kept this knowledge resolutely apart from her thoughts about Kenneth and Sheila. It could have nothing to do with them, or their plans to honeymoon all the way to Halifax in an upper berth. Sheila wrote from Halifax that she and Kenneth had drunk a flask of whisky their first night together in the upper berth, but there could be nothing in that, Ruthie was sure, to make her mother smile in that peculiar way, there just couldn't be. And Kenneth could have nothing to do with the desires and fantasies that waited to possess her, those first few moments of darkness, alone in bed, no matter how late she read into the night. By day she walked with her arms crossed to hide her growing breasts. It was all she could do.

After Sheila returned form Halifax, Kenneth's friends came to dinner a few times, but it wasn't the same, and soon they in turn were posted overseas. Kenneth wrote twice a week without fail, but Sheila read his letters (the kind of letters a school teacher would write to a pupil, her mother said) alone in her room. When her mother called her down for a cup of tea, her eyes were usually swollen from crying. "Leave her in peace," her mother cautioned the others. With her first allowance, Sheila bought a few things for around the house—a pair of floral prints for over the chesterfield and four good china cups and saucers because, she said, her mother had never had anything nice.

Ruthie began to worry the evening she and Sheila went skating. It was a cold night and the rink was almost deserted. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a show-off in earmuffs swooped down on them shouting things like, "Hey, your lace is undone!" and "Look at the way she takes those corners!"

At first Ruthie thought he was talking to her, but when he eased alongside them, she realized with a jolt that he was flirting with Sheila. He can't be more than eighteen, she thought indignantly and waited for Sheila to flash her wedding ring and tell him to buzz off. But Sheila merely smiled. He skated round to Ruthie's side.

"What's your sister's name?" he whispered—as if he knew he could count on her help.

Ruthie's heart sank. "Sheila," she said.

"Sheila what?"

Ruthie glanced at Sheila.

"Just Sheila," Sheila replied, looking Ruthie straight in the eye.

He skated with them all that evening and although Sheila wouldn't let him walk her home, she said he could buy them both a cup of coffee. She must have slipped her wedding ring into her pocket while they were taking off their skates. Ruthie was shocked.

"How could you!" she said, as soon as they were alone.

"How could I what?" Sheila said evenly.

From that moment, Ruthie watched Sheila like a hawk, trotting along beside her to see *Mrs. Miniver* for the third and fourth times, sensing Sheila's restlessness grow. One evening Sheila announced that Ruthie could wear one of her skirts and sweaters, and while they waited for a bus, told her she wanted to drop into the Masonic Temple on their way to the movie, to see an old friend. The Masonic Temple which had long since lost its original purpose, was the most popular dance-hall in town. Sheila couldn't find her friend and when a soldier asked if he would do instead, she agreed to "just one dance."

After that, on Wednesday and Friday evenings, Ruthie sat on the sidelines drinking coke, while Sheila danced. She hated to think what Kenneth would think of her being there. Still, as long as she was there, nothing very serious could happen. After all, her mother herself had said that a girl Sheila's age could not be expected to sit at home night after night.

One evening a soldier sitting next to Ruthie asked her to dance. She said she didn't really know how; he said that didn't matter. He held her so close she could feel the heat of his body, and he whispered in her ear that he could feel her heart beating. Ruthie marveled at this simple union, but when she told Sheila about it, Sheila decided in a voice that sounded more like her mother's than her own that it was time to go home. From then on, she went out alone.

One night Sheila didn't come home at all. Nobody said a word about it, but shortly after that Sheila told Ruthie that they would not be going to live with Kenneth in Edmonton.

"But why not?"

"Because I don't love him."

"You don't have to love someone to live with him," Ruthie argued.

"No, but you do have to love someone to sleep with him." Sheila did not look at Ruthie when she said this.

Ruthie was outraged.

"I'm sure Kenneth wouldn't insist on that," she said coldly; but she knew in her heart it was all up.

Two months later, Sheila was pregnant; it was someone at the office. Her father banged out of the house, saying, "Well, she's made her bed, she'll have to lie in it," but when he came home later he offered to arrange an abortion. Her mother screamed, "What sort of a man are you?" Sheila replied more calmly, "I just couldn't do that."A few days later she went to live with the man in a flat he had found for them on the other side of town. And all that remained to Ruthie of her love for Kenneth and her dreams of Edmonton was the stitch that occasionally pulled at her side. Her appendix side.

That spring the pain grew suddenly worse, until there was hardly a moment when Ruthie didn't feel it—walking to the corner store, running up and down the stairs, lying in bed reading. The sharpness of it frightened her a little, and there were moments when she was afraid she would gasp and betray it, but silently, secretly, she welcomed its presence.

One morning at school she was sick again. She lied that she hadn't had any breakfast and was given a carton of milk to drink. When that didn't help, she was sent home. The house was empty when she got there; the other kids were at school, her mother had gone downtown shopping. That was fine. She went upstairs and crawled into the bed that used to be Sheila's. When the pain became unbearable, she fixed herself a hot water bottle, as her mother had taught her to do to ease her monthly cramps, and crawled back into bed. She felt as if her body was floating up towards the ceiling, as if she might glide out the window.

"What are you doing in bed?"

Ruthie opened her eyes. Her mother was standing in the doorway, wearing the hat and coat she always wore downtown. Ruthie could hear the kids shouting outside and realized she must have fallen asleep. Minutes later it seemed, the doctor was there, saying they had better call an ambulance. "I'm afraid we're going to have to operate."

When Ruthie woke up from the operation, a young nurse was standing at the foot of the hospital bed watching.

"I'm going to die, aren't I?" Ruthie said.

"Of course not!" the nurse scolded. "Don't you ever let me hear you say a thing like that again!"

Later a young intern came to examine her. He told her that her appendix had ruptured and had to be removed. She'd be on special medicine for a while. He asked if she had had any other serious illnesses.

"Chicken pox, scarlet fever, polio?"

"No," Ruthie said.

He wrote that down.

"Have you begun to menstruate?"

"Yes," Ruthie said, her voice almost inaudible.

"Any problems?"

She shook her head.

"Good."

He asked her to open the front of her gown and he put his stethoscope against her breast so he could listen to her heartbeat. Ruthie turned her face to the wall so he wouldn't see her crying.

"There's a visitor here to see you," she heard the nurse saying.

Ruthie turned her head hopefully towards the door.

It was her mother, carrying a small bouquet of flowers. "They're from your father," she said.

Ruthie took the flowers, even though she knew her mother was lying.

When the war was over, Kenneth wrote that he would be stopping off in Toronto on his way to Edmonton and asked that someone meet him in Union Station with the small suitcase of belongings he had left with Sheila. Sheila was pregnant again so she couldn't go. Her father wouldn't go. Her mother decided to send Ruthie because, as she explained to Ruthie, "Kenneth always liked you."

Union Station was crowded with returning servicemen and their families when she took up her position under the clock. She was afraid Kenneth might miss her. There was so much she wanted to say to him. She wanted to tell him that she had tried to keep Sheila faithful, that she herself had not betrayed him. She wanted…

Then she saw him walking towards her. He was with a woman in uniform—a pretty woman—who stopped at a magazine stand while Kenneth hurried toward her.

"Ruthie…" he said, catching sight ofthe suitcase at her feet. "You brought it Thank you."

"It was no trouble." She wondered if he noticed how much she had grown, how much she had changed.

He bent forward and picked it up the suitcase weighing it in his hand. "I hope it wasn't too heavy," he said. "There are a lot of things in here I wouldn't want to lose."

Ruth waited. She wanted to tell him that she was head of her class, that her teacher had written on her report card that she was "university caliber."

"Well," Kenneth said, glancing in the direction of his friend, "I guess I'd better be going."

Ruthie blushed. He's embarrassed, she thought. He has nothing to say to me, nothing at all.

Patricia Watson is a prize-winning screenwriter and film director. Her credits include works for the NFB, CBC, and TVO as well as independent producers. She is also a successful artist, and the recently published author of My Husband's Wedding*, a book of stories (Inanna Publications, 2004).*