

THE ALL OF IT

A short story, by T.G. Hardy

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Eric and I rose from the picnic table on the porch and crossed Front Street to my dock on Taylor's Creek, where we climbed aloft on what we called our lookout tower, a structure I'd designed and built of reclaimed teak, so that we could do what we liked to do before turning in – finishing the wine from twenty feet above sea level, and watching the brightly lit shrimp boats file through Beaufort Inlet heading for the wholesale docks.

You climbed the wooden framework on either side of the tower, sort of like you would climb the rigging on a sailing ship; port or starboard side, and the left was mine alone because I could only hear with my right ear. No glass on the dock, so Eric wore a Basque wineskin over his shoulder containing the remains of a second bottle of Periquita. That Portuguese red had been our favorite for years now, starting the summer he graduated from Woodberry Forest, then on holidays during his five years at Purdue, and less often now that he's in naval flight training.

So there we were, granduncle and grandnephew, side by side, gazing out over the dark expanse of low-lying Carrot Island, which separates our town waterfront from the Shackleford Banks and the open Atlantic.

Feathers of breeze picked their way up the channel from the marina, bringing with them the sound of halyards tinkling against aluminum masts and the smell of salt marsh and now and then wood smoke from the open firepits allowed during the off season.

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Eric had flown one of his training squadron's jets from Naval Air Station-Kingsville, Texas to the Marine Corps Air Station at nearby Cherry Point. It was an extended solo cross-country starting with two hours of night flying and six radar controlled approaches at three airports enroute. Same sort of thing returning. He'd knock off most of his solo instrument syllabus requirements while having a bit of a boondoggle with me.

It was an easy forty-minute drive up to the Cherry Point base, and I'd gone early so I wouldn't miss his approach and landing. The red and white, high-vis markings made his training jet easy to spot. Eric flew what I thought was a smooth glide path to a touch-down right on the runway numbers, disappeared behind some hangers on rollout, then reappeared coming back toward the operations building on a taxiway. I watched as he followed hand signals to his place on the flight line and then shut down. He appeared to make some arrangements with a fuel truck crew and then walked toward the ops building with his gear bag. He scanned the chain link fence, saw me, and pointed at the building, waving me in.

When I entered the building, he was standing behind a service desk pacing back and forth holding a telephone at the full limit of its coil cord. He was clearly agitated and a young civilian female, whose desk phone it seemed to be, set aside her copy of *The Thorn Birds* and listened. Finally, he handed her the phone, and they spoke for a minute before

she went to a big white board, rubbed out a notation with the heel of her palm and wrote something different with a grease pencil. A change of plans, I thought, and tensed up.

The young lady said something to Eric, up close and touching his wrist, and he sat on the edge of her desk, looking as surprised by this small intimacy as I was. He grinned at her and pointed at me.

She gave me a smile and a little fingertip wave. My tension eased; whatever the change, it was okay for now.

Eric drove us home the back way, trimming the corners and accelerating out of them like a racing driver. He loved that Morgan + 8 Roadster; joked that he wanted it earmarked for him in my will. They're still hand-built in England, and wood-framed, but they look identical to when they were road raced in Europe in the fifties. He's not to know, but everything I have worth having is already earmarked for him.

I shouted over the wind stream. "What's with the phone call?"

"Tropical storm in the Caribbean. I have orders to get the plane back by sundown tomorrow. Sorry about the fishing. I'll pay my share."

"What did that young lady say to you?"

"More or less that she'd look after me during my layover."

"Glad I made the cut!"

"Ha! What's the plan for the day?"

“We circle the entirety of the nature preserve in the double rowing wherry, Blue Moon Bistro for oysters, triggerfish, and that Sancerre you like. Afterward, lookout duty on the tower.”

“What was on for tomorrow besides stalking False Albacore?”

“Maritime Museum, dinner on the porch, tower duty afterward. What you like to do?”

“That row appeals, and the Museum. I’d like to see what you’re working on. Then how about we keep it simple and casual – swing by Piggly Wiggly and pick up two packs of boneless chicken thighs and twice-baked potatoes?”

We did all that, and now we’re back where I started this account – the two surviving, male Bellingards up on the tower, preparing, like Basque shepherds, to nurse our wineskin in silence and listen to the night.

Eric cleared his throat, startling me a bit, since this was normally quiet time for us. “Woody,” he said, and paused, waiting for eye contact. “It embarrasses me to talk about my flying, knowing that you wanted to fly after Annapolis.”

I was certain I hadn’t told him any of that, so I was momentarily at a loss for words. “Okay, I guess I told your mom that I’d once wanted to fly. Probably when you applied for it in NROTC. I’m surprised that she’d have that mean that I’d be envious.”

“I made that leap, not her.”

“I’ve wondered recently why you seemed so reticent to talk about your exploits. I was worried maybe something about it was not going right for you in training.”

“No, everything’s fine with me. It doesn’t bother you then, my flying?”

“Not in the way you thought. Only thing that bothers me about it, Eric, is that your daily routine is dangerous.”

“You’re right about my reluctance to talk, Woody. Seems clueless of me now.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to read the mind of anyone as closed-down as I am. A clam in the mudflats is how your mother puts it.”

“Open up, then. Pick something you think I should know.”

“Since you’ve raised it, let’s begin with how I lost any prospect of becoming a naval line officer, let alone an aviator.” I took a good long squirt from the wineskin. “It was the summer before third year at the Academy. I had foolishly taken great pains to be somewhere I should never have been as an Academy midshipman that year, during wartime and in a war zone.

“The explosion happened at sunset. I was lucky to even come away alive. In fact, the young woman I was with – a woman who’d knocked me off my perch not an hour earlier – was killed. The eardrum, and the limp, were a nuisance for a few years, but I don’t remember any resentment that I’d fly a desk. The woman . . . well, that’s another story.”

I shivered, and I noticed that he noticed. “I don’t know how to relate all this without it being melodramatic. In fact, I’m pretty sure that can’t be done.” Eric watched me carefully, his look a bit wary now. I pushed on: “Later in life, on certain anniversaries, another related thing bothered me . . . being spared combat. So many others were taken so young, like your grandfather, like . . . others I knew.”

We were silent for some minutes. I wasn’t satisfied at all with my story, so I started over. “I was in Jordan to visit my folks in Amman. They lived in the Standard Oil

compound. Julien was there . . . your grandfather was in his early teens. If you know all this, stop me.”

Eric shook his head and I continued.

“About Aqaba – from the land, the city can only be approached from the harshest of deserts, and then by traversing the length of the Wadi Rum canyon. Like Lawrence of Arabia did in World War I to surprise the Turks. I had read *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and wanted to see what Colonel Lawrence described.

“So, there I was in Aqaba at a small hotel. It was cocktail hour and I had just finished a second glass of wine – this very same Periquita, it happens, my first introduction to it – and was about to sit down to dinner beachside at this same hotel. It was just then that it happened, the accident. An act of sabotage, a fusillade of rockets – the British later determined – fired from a garbage barge, probably by Vichy agents. I was taken to the British hospital and lay in a coma for four days.

“I ended up graduating with the class behind me, in '43. Since I was on light duty, and with athletics out of the question, my grades improved markedly, and the Bureau of Naval Personnel sent this sack full of snakes off to law school at Georgetown. By the time I got my JD the war was over. I served out my time, discharged two years before your granddad went to Korea.”

“You have a law degree?”

“It was useful in real estate. Look, you – you and your mom – are all I have in the way of family. You’re all I’ve ever needed, which is something maybe I haven’t come out and said strongly enough, but I better be saying it now, because life is intervening.

You've got your own life now, and it's getting chock-a-block complicated and that'll only intensify when you join the fleet."

"Sorry, Woody. I should have asked a long time ago."

"Your mom did. Many times. I wish now that I'd confided in her. You go ahead and ask. Pry, even. I want what time we'll have together, from here on out, to really count."

"Speaking of time together, if you want to come to Kingsville when I get my wings, I'd like that. First or second Tuesday in December."

I nodded, not fully trusting my voice.

He was on a roll; missed my emotion entirely. He ploughed on. "You ever regret not marrying?"

"I wasn't opposed to the idea, but a long-term contract was never an ultimatum when it might have mattered. Later I developed a taste for 'grazing,' and became skilled at making that kind of love a win-win. Essential skill, that, for a bachelor."

"The woman you introduced me to in the lot at Piggly Wiggly? Nice looking, bright eyes and an easy smile. Not beholden to you, but affectionate. That a grazing, win-win?"

"Most assuredly."

"You consider her family?"

"Like Thanksgiving dinner and all?" I thought for several beats. "I suppose. Never thought about that. Your acceptance would be key to such a concept . . . you and your mom both. You even remember her name?"

"Bonnie Sozio. Aerobics instructor, retired therapist."

"Well, who would have thought ---"

“I surprise myself sometimes.”

“Is your mom going to your winging ceremony?”

“I think she might if you’d offer to come with her.”

“When does she step down at William & Mary?”

“Farewell dinner on Boxing Day. I think she picked that day so that it would be lightly attended.”

“You going?”

“Can’t. You should go.”

“When does she start as ambassador?”

“February in San José. Starts out with five weeks of indoctrination at State.”

“Are you concerned that your squadron skipper, maybe even your air wing commander, will be wary your mother possibly outranks them?”

“A bit, yes. Though they’d not consider her in-the-arena, not ours anyway. Course I don’t know who these men will be, but it’s a sure bet they’d like her. James Baker, Bush’s choice for Secretary of State, has said that she might be more uniquely qualified for Costa Rica than anyone with an American passport. But she’s a political appointee, so, unfortunately, those are the optics.”

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Tonight, two weeks later, I wrote Eric this letter:



11/14/1988

*Dear Eric,*

*We seemed to put the envy issue to bed the other night and thank God for that!*

*I told a fuller version of that evening to Bonnie after you returned to Texas. Her reaction was that my chief issue from that experience was grieving the loss of the young woman, however unlikely anything would have come of it.*

*Last week – at her suggestion – I spent most of several nights recalling, writing, digging deeper, and editing an account of the night of my accident. (Bonnie, who was a counselor for PTSD sufferers at Bethesda in Maryland before she retired, guided me through the process). She wanted me to record what happened live-action and in-scene, as she put it, with dialogue, mood, and descriptions laid down with such detail that the reading of it – out loud – she insisted – took the reader there, and tapped every bit of emotional heat I might have felt (the gut-wrenching, but also, especially, the joyful). I'm not certain of the accuracy of the dialogue, of course, but lots more certain than I thought I'd be. What I came away with was a scene that struck me as joyful right up until it ended. We were spared the gore, both of us. So, the enclosed is my entire memory of Noor and that evening, and it gives me comfort that it was probably, without any afterward to deal with, an even better denouement for her.*

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29 August 1941. Aqaba, British Protectorate of Transjordan.

“*Allô*,” she said and sat uninvited on the chaise next to mine. She carried cigarettes, matches, a tube of Bain de Soleil in her hat, and a net bag with clothing and towels.

“Madame.”

“Either your French is not so good,” she said, “or your intention is to insult me, addressing me thus, and not as Mademoiselle. I am not so much older than you, also born under the sign of Aries.”

“Are you not the proprietress, a person of importance, to be addressed as such?”

“Your French is not so bad, probably because your surname is Bellingard, but let us speak English. My name is Noor. My father is the owner, but he is a mariner and spends much time embarked, so . . . yes, I am usually in charge here.”

She would have noted my age and birth sign from examining my passport at the front desk. Yes, she was in charge. And I was a step behind, already feeling winded.

I had watched her with interest as she came from the water and toweled off, silhouetted against the orange glare of the late sun over the Gulf of Aqaba. She walked across the sand in her skimpy top and long gauzy skirt, her gait athletic, torso erect, all movement from the waist down. Her face was handsome, patrician, and confident. I pictured her in a horse-jumping outfit, but her demi-cup top had my attention – the *balconette* style. This was a bit of fashion knowledge I had learned my plebe year from

the lingerie clerk at Weinberger's while selecting a gift for a weekend visitor. I had thought of it as a bra, not a bathing top, but I took to the new usage in a heartbeat.

She continued. "How did you know I was the proprietress?"

"The waiter." He also told me she was Madame Lemarchand, a refugee from the Vichy French Mandate of Lebanon, and a Christian – the latter with a wink.

She smiled. "You came down on the Standard Oil truck, riding all the way in the back . . . like a camel train urchin, even though your father is someone of importance. You stood, face in the wind stream for the entire passage through the Wadi Rum." She shook her head. "It is beautiful, no?"

"Breathtaking. The truck driver," I joked, "he is an intelligence agent for you?"

"There are no secrets in Aqaba, not when it comes to available and *cosmopolite* young men. The driver stays at the Star of Wonder brothel near the quay. He is romantically involved with one of my housekeepers." A gust rattled the palms, and she pulled the top to her skirt from the net bag and draped it over her shoulders like a shawl. "The ship your driver is meeting is delayed in Port Said, in the queue for Suez. You will not return to Amman tomorrow. Probably it will be Thursday. I have extended your reservation."

"What makes you think that I wouldn't seek alternative transportation?"

"The way you watched me crossing the sand. You are hungry, that is plain to see, but you are also a romantic, traversing the Wadi Rum as you did, and . . . as I now wish to." She laughed softly and helped herself to my cigarettes. I reached to give her a light. She took the Zippo and examined the crest.

“Your hair, your posture and fitness. You are military?”

“I’m entering my last year at our naval academy . . . on leave for two weeks after my summer cruise.”

“How chic – a cruise . . . and while Europe is at war. What were your ports of call?”

“Rosneath Bay in the west of Scotland: 67 days, mostly submerged just offshore, sometimes nested with another submarine in the bay, but never allowed ashore.”

“And what did you learn, cadet?”

“Midshipman, if you please.”

“Ah yes, my father has the Hornblower books. What is it that you learned on this voyage, young Horatio?”

“That I don’t want to be a submariner.”

“And what is it that you want to be?”

“An aviator.”

“In the naval service? *Bonne chance.*”

We were silent for a moment. I poured another glass of wine and sipped it tentatively. She took the glass from me, swirled the wine, then nosed it.

“Do you like this wine?”

“I don’t know wine really, but yes, I do.”

“Periquita from Portugal. My father’s ship originates from Lisbon, a neutral port.”

“It calls here I take it?”

“Yes, this is the final stop on the outbound itinerary.”

“Have you taken this voyage?”

“Many times, though I don’t go now, with the war. I think I know every port in the Mediterranean. But I was always happy to return here. I suspect we will have to quit Aqaba soon, hide from the Vichy and Boche in Portugal.”

An elderly couple, dressed formally, passed, wishing her a good evening. I noticed that four tables were set, candles lit. “What is your father’s job on the ship?”

“He is captain.” Her gaze tracked the older couple. In her expression I read kindness, wistfulness, maybe even sadness. Then, as if startled, she turned back to me in full radiance and continued: “But tonight I am the captain here, and you . . . you are to eat at the captain’s table.”

“I should dress for dinner. I have only my safari jacket, khaki trousers, desert boots.”

She reached to brush between my eyebrows with the back of her fingertips, her touch like a feather, but the effect left me reeling. She took my hand, as if to steady me. Just a hint of a smile then, meant to soothe, but I think my mind was blank anyway. We sat that way for some time, for a long time, until she gave my hand a hard squeeze, signaling a scene change. “No need to dress for dinner,” she said matter-of-factly. “But you must promise to send me a photograph of you in your formal dress blue uniform, all gold buttons and braid with the high, tight-fitting collar. No, we will dine alone, together, just as we are attired.” She nodded in the direction of a table set apart. “That is,” she continued, “if you approve of my ensemble.”

“Oh yes,” I said, all in a rush. “*Ineffable, capitaine.*”

Her eyes were locked on mine, but they seemed to dance like candle flames. She shifted her weight to stand. I followed the movement of her breasts, loose in the black

cups of her bathing top, pale as scallop flesh below the line of her brown matte tan. She turned away slightly, and I looked up to see her eyes still locked on mine.

“Come,” she said. “The waiter will bring the wine.”

And then there was a blinding flash, and a rubbery screeching sound like a balloon makes resisting the effort of your first blow to inflate it. Not sure. Then silence, for sure.

“Come. The waiter will bring the wine.” The last words of Mlle. Noor Lemarchand.