

High Life

When Reed McCullough, a young man of twenty-six, received an invitation for dinner from the George Provosts so soon after making their daughter's acquaintance, he accepted with reserved pride, conscious of the compliment being paid him. On the afternoon of the appointed day, a Saturday in the early autumn of 1946, he set off on foot in plenty of time to arrive punctually at the Linden avenue address given him. Linden avenue was long and the address lay well beyond the neighborhoods Reed was familiar with, but he felt finding the right number on a single street, however long that street might be, would not be a problem.

Despite the extreme heat of the day and the long walk ahead of him, Reed had dressed for the occasion in a suit jacket and his best trousers. The city streets were hot. When he came to Linden avenue, he welcomed the shady coverage of the adjacent park and the company of the famous Linden avenue wall that bounded it. He maintained friendly contact with that impressive structure by pounding its massive stones lightly with the heel of his fist from time to time as he moved along.

It was a grand wall and a grand day. He was twenty-six and an engineer. He had seen war, landing at Normandy a month after D-Day to spend one year keeping peace in France and another keeping peace in Germany. Hiroshima had wiped out the chilling prospect he had faced of being shipped to the Pacific, and it was all done now. He, twenty-six, an engineer, and a victor, had his whole life ahead of him. He was employed with better prospects than even his parents had hoped for him. He was a very attractive prospect altogether, and the George Provosts who lived somewhere on Linden avenue recognized that.

He passed busy streets and pretty side roads. Soon he had put whole neighborhoods behind him, and still his destination remained some unknown distance ahead of him. The quality of the homes that lined the opposite side of the street facing the park kept getting better. With each mile they looked a little neater and were

spaced a little further apart. The atmosphere became greener until the houses petered out altogether replaced by a massive, shoulder-high, black stone wall that matched the one Reed had been following for so long. Traffic, which had grown lighter all this time, stopped altogether, which left just the heat hovering over the dead avenue, Reed trudging through it, the large, old trees of Frick park the walls held back on either side, and the walls themselves rolling along beside him like an inky fluid.

It had been quite a while since he had seen a house. No car had passed by in the last twenty minutes. Yet his confidence and spirits remained high. He had plenty of time. The ever changing shape of the bounding wall's lightly dimpled, uneven surface pleased him. He watched for the sunny patches where the sun managed to splash through the foliage of the large trees onto the stone. At those spots the dark stone glistened as if sprinkled with sugar. At one such sun-paled patch, Reed stopped, placed his hand on it, and watched the dappled pattern cast by the sun play across his skin. He rubbed his hand lightly against the wall's gritty surface. Grains loosened and fell away. He moved on. Soon he would come to the end of the wall and the end of the park and pass into the adjoining neighborhood where he would find the address he sought. But instead, after laboring along for another half hour, the friendly bounding walls curved around before him and met to form a very abrupt and convincing dead end with gates barring passage to one and all. Beyond the ironwork of the gates, a gravel driveway bordered by gardens swept away in a gentle curve and disappeared into wooded grounds. No house was in sight. No houses at all were in sight. The long avenue was at an end, Reed had gone way off course, and now, he realized with a sudden flash of heat in his face, he was going to be late.

After a brief search, Reed found a number etched in the stone wall. He stood stock still staring at it. He took out the paper marked with Gertrude's clear looping handwriting which he had kept neatly folded in his suit jacket pocket and stared at it, but it didn't help. The two numbers matched. Reed was stuck. He wasn't about to trespass just to ask if a Gertrude Provost lived there. Of course a Gertrude Provost didn't live there. It was as likely that she lived in the White House. He would promptly be turned out. Yet it

was just as unlikely that the Provost girl would make a mistake writing down her own address. Reed knew he was on the right street. Could there be two houses with the same number? Perhaps there was a plywood shack in the back gardens where the Provosts lived as groundskeepers. Reed shook the nonsense out of his head as he considered what to do.

Irresistibly his gaze wandered beyond the gate railings to the gravel driveway and dwelled on its soft peat borders. It was that peat which had been on Gertrude's shoe that evening in the drugstore, irritating him no end, partly because she had been so inconsiderate as to track it into the drugstore in the first place and partly because he had been afraid she would get it on his trouser cuff as they sat together in a booth over black cows. As she swung her foot out and back, out and back, he had been very aware of the bits of hairy dirt clinging to her shoe while the scoops of vanilla ice cream melted into their root beer drinks, sweetening and thickening them. Beyond those gates was in fact the home of the careless Gertrude Provost, Reed realized with an odd pang, and suddenly attributing carelessness to her seemed altogether wrong. Obviously she wasn't careless, she was something else, although Reed did not know what that something else might be.

On pushing at the narrow gate meant for pedestrian passage, it did not surprise Reed to find it open. What surprised him was finding himself confidently shutting it behind him and entering the vast wooded grounds on the inside of the bounding walls. The whispering of the giant trees hooding his passage made his head spin. Yet, the walk through the grounds was a little too long for comfort. As soon as the black stone wall surrounding the estate disappeared from view, he began to feel mistaken again. Then, on rounding yet another curve in the footpath, he caught sight of a large, square residence set on a gentle rise of ground still some distance away composed of the same black stone as the wall. For all its massive walls and castellated silhouette, the house appeared neat and tidy amidst the ancient trees whose tips were lost to view. He increased his pace, any desire to keep cool forgotten, the resonance in his already reverberating senses reaching a strange pitch as he spied Gertrude sitting on the veranda waving to him. She hopped down the steps and came down the path to greet him, careful to

avoid, Reed noticed, walking on the gravel by tip-toeing along the soft peat strip bordering the rose beds and scattering the peat untidily behind her. Instead of disapproving of the way she dirtied her shoes and messed the neat peat strip, he found himself fascinated by this peculiarity of the lovely, yet quirky dark-haired, young woman.

“Hello,” she said simply, smiling. “I should have sat outside, probably, but I was too lazy. Normally people ring and we send someone to pick them up.”

“Not at all,” Reed replied, clearing his throat. “I had the address.”