

Ann Beattie

The French Officer

“I don’t know,” Janet said. “Maybe Abe’s another Truman Capote and we’re grist for the mill.”

“Right. And we’re in La Cote Basque,” Iris said wryly.

That was the thing about friendship: they could speak almost in code and understand each other. They were in an inexpensive Italian restaurant near New York University Hospital, on their way to visit their friend Peggy. A while ago, Abe had excused himself and left the table. He had been kind enough to drive them from Connecticut to New York because two days before Janet had turned her ankle, and Iris had never learned to drive. The ankle was swollen; she could feel it throbbing beneath the elastic bandage.

Iris was spending June back in the U.S. It was her husband’s last year with the Navy. He would retire with a good pension. It was his plan to open a water sports business in Key West.

Janet thought, sometimes, that life could be thought of as one long round of being served in restaurants. Why didn’t someone write a novel about that? Real life was lived waiting on barstools and showing off your pretty legs in stockings you took care not to snag; re-applying make-up in big Ladies room mirrors where, in your peripheral vision, prettier women hovered like putti, with their lipsticks and brushes. What you thought of the waiter was a litmus test of who you were: could you be made insecure by a waiter’s perfunctory attention if you had no penchant toward paranoia? Did it mean something if you were secretly relieved the waiter was gay?

Abe was the nineteen-year-old son of one of her husband’s friends, James Wyer. James was her friend, too, but he wasn’t a friend the way Iris was. He wasn’t a friend the way a woman could be. At the beginning of summer, her husband had left her a note: “Honey—Abe is going to cut our grass today. Already paid him. P.S. This is proof I’m not such a megalomaniac that I have to cut the grass.” “Not” was underlined three times.

Abe had begun to come every week to mow the lawn. He loved to read, and he and she had struck up long conversations about books on the back porch, when he finished work, drinking iced tea she’d made

the night before and let brew in the refrigerator. The inside of the refrigerator was a study in activity masquerading as inactivity: the ice maker spewing out cubes; tea brewing; apple juice fermenting. So much going on—how deceptive, that when you opened the door there seemed to be such stillness.

Earlier, they had gotten manicures while Abe browsed through the Strand. He had exited with a big bag of books; they had joined him, as they'd agreed, on the corner of Broadway. (And *yes*, they could have taken the train, but wasn't it thoughtful of them to give Abe a day in the city?)

Abe was so simple in his niceness and his desires: a relief from her husband, who had recently taken to refuting her about things he imagined she thought. She thought her husband was a cheapskate (she pretended to think he was a megalomaniac when he wouldn't hire help, because that was kinder). If he'd ever thought he could wait her out so that she'd do her share and cut the grass, the allergist's warning had been passed on to him. Mold, to which she was allergic, would of course be stirred up by the mower.

"Young Mr. Capote's been gone a long time," Iris said. Iris opened her compact and looked in the mirror. She reached for her lipstick. She ordered espresso. Janet also asked for one.

"Did you know," Iris said, clicking closed her compact, "that some men find lipstick stains a turn-on?"

Abe came back, slightly abashed; he'd gotten involved in playing a video game in the bathroom. There it was: women had Tampax machines, men had video games.

Abe's father, James, was nothing like his modest son. James had recently married his fourth wife—a former beauty queen. Still, he flirted with everyone, though he seemed temporarily devoted to Miss Oregon.

Janet and Iris took out their wallets and split the check.

"Why don't you do whatever you want and come to the hospital in an hour or so?" Janet said to Abe. "We can meet in the lobby."

"Maybe I'll see if there are any bookstores," he said.

"We should have left you at the Strand and taken a cab back to get you!" Janet said. He'd only pushed the food around on his plate at lunch. She should never have suggested he eat something unfamiliar. He was unadventurous and shy; his best friends were books. She should have thought of the cab-back-to-bookstore plan to begin with.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said.

“I don’t worry about you,” Janet said. “See you at the hospital about two?”

“Sure. See ya,” he said in response, as they stood outside the restaurant.

“He seems too nice,” Iris said, watching him walk away, carrying his bag of books. “Maybe he’s going off to smoke crack.”

“I don’t know how I could exist without your explaining things to me, Iris.”

“What?” Iris said. “I never know what’s going on, I’ll be the first to admit. For all I know, you two are. . . . You know.”

“Iris. Even if we were, do you think I’d tell you if you made it so obvious you wanted to know?”

“*Are you?*”

“No, so get your mind out of the gutter and go back to your crack fantasy.”

They walked into the hospital, Janet trying to ignore her throbbing ankle as she led the way. Sometimes, she felt sure, a thing could stop occupying your attention if you simply did not let it. She had visited Peggy here after her first surgery, when Iris had been out of the country. Behind them, in a waiting area across from the elevators, many Muslims bent forward in prayer. Janet carried the bag of presents: French *Vogue*. A little bottle of Evian, for Peggy to mist her face, which served the purpose of being both luxurious and ridiculous. A silk bathrobe.

There was the horrible possibility, not yet ruled out, that Peggy might lose her lower leg. What was it going to be like, visiting a woman you knew your husband had been in love with before he met you? Who might have that happen?

The elevator doors opened, and everyone moved quickly forward. An intern used his elbow to cut through the crowd. Janet faced forward as the elevator doors closed, keeping the bad ankle a bit behind her so no one would knock into it. They rode in silence to Peggy’s floor. As they stepped out, Iris spontaneously grasped Janet’s hand.

Janet knew she was going to have to do most of the talking with Peggy. She’d be talking for two. For three, really; for her husband, as well. He had told her, after Peggy gave him the bad news on the telephone, when she sank into the nearest chair and announced they must visit her in the hospital immediately, that he had already “dropped

her a note.” Not even a visit, after a three year long relationship in their youth, and twenty-plus years of friendship? She prided herself in not being the jealous type; she, after all, had been the one who’d invited Peggy to dinner, way back when. What had he said in the note? She could imagine that he’d written some “Buck up and bear it” nonsense to Peggy the same way he’d talked to her—his own wife—when she’d applied to graduate school and not been admitted, and when she miscarried, and when the book she spent years writing was rejected everywhere. She hadn’t thought of it before, but wasn’t it a little strange that he’d written Peggy so very quickly, and mailed the letter, before she even returned from shopping?

“Did James ever make a pass at you?” Iris said.

“What would make you ask that?” Janet said.

“Just wondering,” Iris said.

“In fact, he did, once, in a very oblique way. He asked me how long it had been since I read ‘Gatsby.’ I said it had been a long time. The next time we saw each other, he gave me a copy. He’d underlined it, in the oddest places, I thought at first. Then I realized he wanted me to think he was very . . . what would it be? *In the know*, I guess. He’d drawn a line down the margin of the page where Gatsby and Daisy meet again and written in the margin: ‘Zelda was having an affair with a French naval officer during this time.’ I mean—tell me that isn’t a strange way to flirt! I found the same note over and over when Daisy was mentioned. He kept jotting down, “French officer.”

“Maybe he was just expressing cynicism,” Iris said.

“Iris. Think about it.”

“Things happen in your life in the strangest ways,” Iris said. “When James came on to me, it was just groping me when I bent over for a bottle of gin! To tell you the truth, I’ve felt a bit strange all day because of Abe. I haven’t seen him since he was a little boy, but he saw us. James grabbing my ass, I mean. As a child. He came around the corner in his pajamas. I mean, he probably doesn’t even remember it was me, and even if he does, I’m certainly not to blame for picking up a bottle.”

“You never told me that,” Janet said.

“Well, I wasn’t exactly proud of it. I’ve got no reason to be embarrassed, but you know, for some reason I’ve always felt ashamed. He had blue pajamas on. I remember how small he was, standing there in those blue pajamas.”

They passed a nurse, walking alongside an old lady hooked up to

an I.V. tube. Sunlight glared through the window. A red light flashed above a door. They passed it without looking in—a hospital was a great cure-all for curiosity—and came to the end of the corridor. In the last room to the left—a private room; there was no other bed—Peggy must be lying behind the white curtain pulled around the bed. As Janet tried to gather her thoughts—indeed, all the talking was going to be her responsibility; Iris’s face was turned away, and she could almost sense words disappearing like dust motes in the air—a low moaning began. “Peggy!” Janet almost exclaimed, as if Peggy’s pain was her own. Iris said absolutely nothing. She stiffened and raised her hand to her lips. That was Iris, Janet supposed: almost the embodiment of Hear no evil, See no evil, Speak no evil. Yet she had to plant her seeds of doubt, didn’t she? Even Abe’s plans for the afternoon couldn’t be taken at face value. Make your pact with the devil and marry a boring military man, pass off affairs as mere moments when someone else acted badly, open your compact pretending to study your face, then squint hard to get a quick glance of what’s going on behind you.

“Excuse me,” a doctor said, pushing past them, turning into Peggy’s room.

For a moment they stood there like paper dolls with their blonde-colored hair and their go-to-the-city-clothes, not quite touching, not themselves severed by scissors.