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1. Common Knowledge

Anyone in the neighborhood could tell you how Michael and Pauline first met.

It happened on a Monday afternoon early in December of 1941. St. Cassian was its usual poky self that day—a street of narrow East Baltimore row houses, carefully kept little homes intermingled with shops no bigger than small parlors. The Golka twins, identically kerchiefed, compared cake rouges through the window of Sweda's Drugs. Mrs. Pozniak stepped out of the hardware store with a tiny brown paper bag that jingled. Mr. Kostka's Model-B Ford pattered past, followed by a stranger's sleekly swishing Chrysler Airstream and then by Ernie Moskowicz on the butcher's battered delivery bike.

In Anton's Grocery—a dim, cram-packed cubbyhole with an L-shaped wooden counter and shelves that reached the low ceiling—Michael's mother wrapped two tins of peas for Mrs. Brunek. She tied them up tightly and handed them over without a smile, without a "Come back soon" or a "Nice to see you." (Mrs. Anton had had a hard life.) One of Mrs. Brunek's boys—Carl? Paul? Peter? they all looked so much alike—pressed his nose to the glass of the penny-candy display. A floorboard creaked near the cereals, but that was just the bones of the elderly building settling deeper into the ground.

Michael was shelving Woodbury's soap bars behind the longer,

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left-hand section of the counter. He was twenty at the time, a tall young man in ill-fitting clothes, his hair very black and cut too short, his face a shade too thin, with that dark kind of whiskers that always showed no matter how often he shaved. He was stacking the soap in a pyramid, a base of five topped by four, topped by three . . . although his mother had announced, more than once, that she preferred a more compact, less creative arrangement.

Then, *tinkle, tinkle!* and *wham!* and what seemed at first glance a torrent of young women exploded through the door. They brought a gust of cold air with them and the smell of auto exhaust. "Help us!" Wanda Bryk shrieked. Her best friend, Katie Vilna, had her arm around an unfamiliar girl in a red coat, and another girl pressed a handkerchief to the red-coated girl's right temple. "She's been hurt! She needs first aid!" Wanda cried.

Michael stopped his shelving. Mrs. Brunek clapped a hand to her cheek, and Carl or Paul or Peter drew in a whistle of a breath. But Mrs. Anton did not so much as blink. "Why bring her here?" she asked. "Take her to the drugstore."

"The drugstore's closed," Katie told her.

"Closed?"

"It says so on the door. Mr. Sweda's joined the Coast Guard."

"He's done *what?*"

The girl in the red coat was very pretty, despite the trickle of blood running past one ear. She was taller than the two neighborhood girls but slender, more slightly built, with a leafy cap of dark-blond hair and an upper lip that rose in two little points so sharp they might have been drawn with a pen. Michael came out from behind the counter to take a closer look at her. "What happened?" he asked her—only her, gazing at her intently.

"Get her a Band-Aid! Get iodine!" Wanda Bryk commanded. She had gone through grade school with Michael. She seemed to feel she could boss him around.

The girl said, "I jumped off a streetcar."

Her voice was low and husky, a shock after Wanda's thin violin notes. Her eyes were the purple-blue color of pansies. Michael swallowed.

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“A parade’s begun on Dubrowski Street,” Katie was telling the others. “All six of the Szapp boys are enlisting, haven’t you heard? And a couple of their friends besides. They’ve got this banner—‘Watch out, Japs! Here come the Szapps!’—and everyone’s seeing them off. They’ve gathered such a crowd that the traffic can’t hardly get through. So Pauline here—she was heading home from work; places are closing early—what does she do? Jumps off a speeding streetcar to join in.”

The streetcar couldn’t have been speeding all that fast, if traffic was clogged, but nobody pointed that out. Mrs. Brunek gave a sympathetic murmur. Carl or Paul or Peter said, “Can I go, Mama? Can I? Can I go watch the parade?”

“I just thought we should try and support our boys,” Pauline told Michael.

He swallowed again. He said, “Well, of course.”

“You’re not going to help our boys any knocking yourself silly,” the girl with the handkerchief said. From her tolerant tone, you could see that she and Pauline were friends, although she was less attractive—a brown-haired girl with a calm expression and eyebrows so long and level that she seemed lacking in emotion.

“We think she hit her head against a lamppost,” Wanda said, “but nobody could be sure in all the fuss. She landed in our laps, just about, with Anna here a ways behind her. I said, ‘Jeepers! Are you okay?’ Well, *somebody* had to do *something*; we couldn’t just let her bleed to death. Don’t you people have Band-Aids?”

“This place is not a pharmacy,” Mrs. Anton said. And then, pursuing an obvious connection, “Whatever got into Nick Sweda? He must be thirty-five if he’s a day!”

Michael, meanwhile, had turned away from Pauline to join his mother behind the counter—the shorter, end section of the counter where the cash register stood. He bent down, briefly disappeared, and emerged with a cigar box. “Bandages,” he explained.

Not Band-Aids, but old-fashioned cotton batting rolled in dark-blue tissue the exact shade of Pauline’s eyes, and a spool of white adhesive tape, and an oxblood-colored bottle of iodine. Wanda stepped forward to take them out of Michael’s hands, and the cotton himself

and tore a wad from one corner. He soaked the wad with iodine and came back to stand in front of Pauline. "Let me see," he said.

There was a reverent, alert silence, as if everyone understood that this moment was significant—even the girl with the handkerchief, the one Wanda had called Anna, although Anna could not have known that Michael Anton was ordinarily the most reserved boy in the parish. She removed the handkerchief from Pauline's temple. Michael pried away a petal of Pauline's hair and started dabbing with the cotton wad. Pauline held very still.

The wound, it seemed, was a two-inch red line, long but not deep, already closing. "Ah," Mrs. Brunek said. "No need for stitches."

"We can't be sure of that!" Wanda cried, unwilling to let go of the drama.

But Michael said, "She'll be fine," and he tore off a new wad of cotton. He plastered it to Pauline's temple with a crisscross of adhesive tape.

Now she looked like a fight victim in a comic strip. As if she knew that, she laughed. It turned out she had a dimple in each cheek. "Thanks very much," she told him. "Come and watch the parade with us."

He said, "All right."

Just that easily.

"Can I come too?" the Brunek boy asked. "Can I, Mama? Please?"

Mrs. Brunek said, "Ssh."

"But who will help with the store?" Mrs. Anton asked Michael.

As if he hadn't heard her, he turned to take his jacket from the coat tree in the corner. It was a schoolboy kind of jacket—a big, rough plaid in shades of gray and charcoal. He shrugged himself into it, leaving it unbuttoned. "Ready?" he asked the girls.

The others watched after him—his mother and Mrs. Brunek, and Carl or Paul or Peter, and little old Miss Pelowski, who chanced to be approaching just as Michael and the four girls came barreling out the door. "What . . . ?" Miss Pelowski asked. "What on earth . . . ? Where . . . ?"

Michael didn't even slow down. He was halfway up the block

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now, with three girls trailing him and a fourth one at his side. She clung to the crook of his left arm and skimmed along next to him in her brilliant red coat.

Even then, Miss Pelowski said later, she had known that he was a goner.

“Parade” was too formal a word, really, for the commotion on Dubrowski Street. It was true that several dozen young men were walking down the center of the pavement, but they were still in civilian clothes and they made no attempt to keep in step. The older of John Piazý’s sons wore John’s sailor cap from the Great War. Another boy, name unknown, had flung a regulation Army blanket around his shoulders like a cape. It was a shabby, straggly, unkempt little regiment, their faces chapped, their noses running in the cold.

Even so, people were enthusiastic. They waved homemade signs and American flags and the front page of the *Baltimore Sun*. They cheered at speeches—any speeches, any rousing phrases shouted over their heads. “You’ll be home by New Year’s, boys!” a man in earmuffs called, and “New Year’s Day! Hurray!” zigzagged through the crowd.

When Michael Anton showed up with four girls, everybody assumed he was enlisting too. “Go get ‘em, Michael!” someone shouted. Though John Piazý’s wife said, “Ah, no. It would be the death of his mother, poor soul, with all she’s had to suffer.”

One of the four girls, the one in red, asked, “*Will* you be going, Michael?” An outsider, she was, but very easy on the eyes. The red of her coat brought out the natural glow of her skin, and a bandage on her temple made her look madcap and rakish. No wonder Michael gave her a long, considering stare before he spoke.

“Well,” he said finally, and then he kind of hitched up his shoulders. “Well, naturally I will be!” he said.

A ragged cheer rang out from everyone standing nearby, and another of the girls—Wanda Bryk, in fact—pushed him forward until he had merged with the young men in the street. Leo Kazmerow walked on his left; the four girls scurried along the sidewalk

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on his right. “We love you, Michael!” Wanda cried, and Katie Vilna called, “Come back soon!” as if he were embarking for the trenches that very instant.

Then Michael was forgotten. He was swept away, and other young men replaced him: Davey Witt, Joe Dobek, Joey Serge. “You go show those Japs what we’re made of!” Davey’s father was shouting. For after all, a man was saying, who could tell when they’d have another chance to get even over Poland? An old woman was crying. John Piaz was telling everybody that neither one of his sons knew the meaning of the word “fear.” And several people were starting in on the where-were-you-when-you-heard discussion. One had not heard till that morning; he’d been burying his mother. One had heard first thing, the first announcement on the radio, but had dismissed it as another Orson Welles hoax. And one, a woman, had been soaking in the bathtub when her husband knocked on the door. “You’re never going to believe this,” he’d called. “I just sat there,” she said. “I just sat and sat. I sat until the water got cold.”

Wanda Bryk returned with Katie Vilna and the brown-haired girl, but not the girl in red. The girl in red had vanished. It seemed she’d marched off to war with Michael Anton, somebody said.

They did all notice—those in the crowd who knew Michael. It was enough of a surprise so they noticed, and remarked to each other, and remembered for some time afterward.

Word got out, the next day, that Leo Kazmerow had been rejected because he was color-blind. Color-blind! people said. What did color have to do with fighting for your country? Unless maybe he couldn’t recognize the color of someone’s uniform. If he was aiming his gun in battle, say. But everyone agreed that there were ways to get around that. Put him on a ship! Sit him behind a cannon and show him where to shoot!

This conversation took place in Anton’s Grocery. Mrs. Anton was answering the phone, but as soon as she hung up, someone asked, “And what’s the news of Michael, Mrs. Anton?”

“News?” she said.

“Has he left yet?”

“Oh, Michael’s not going anyplace,” she said.

They slid their eyes toward each other—Mrs. Pozniak, Mrs. Kowalski, and one of Mrs. Kowalski’s daughters. But nobody wanted to argue. Mrs. Anton had lost her husband in 1935, and then her firstborn son two years later—handsome, charming Danny Anton, dead of a progressive disease that took him away inch by inch and muscle by muscle. Mrs. Anton had been a changed woman ever since, and who could blame her?

Mrs. Pozniak asked for Cream of Wheat, Fels Naphtha, and a tin of Heinz baked beans. Mrs. Anton set each item flatly on the counter. She was a straight-faced woman, gray all over. Not just her hair was gray but her dull, slack skin and her lusterless eyes and her stretched-out, pilled, man’s sweater worn over a gingham dress. She had a way of looking past her customers’ shoulders while she dealt with them, as if she hoped someone else would show up, someone less disappointing.

Then the bell on the door tinkled and in burst a girl in a red coat, carrying a tissue-wrapped parcel. “Mrs. Anton?” she said. “Do you remember me?”

Mrs. Pozniak hadn’t completed her order. She turned, one finger poised on her grocery list, and opened her mouth to protest.

“Pauline Barclay,” the girl explained. “I cut my forehead and your son gave me a bandage. I’ve knitted him a scarf. I hope I’m not too late.”

“Too late for what?” Mrs. Anton asked.

“Has Michael left for the front yet?”

“The front?”

Mrs. Anton pronounced the word with a little halt, a little different sound to the *o*. It seemed possible that she was picturing the front of a room or a piece of furniture.

Before Pauline could elaborate, the door tinkled open again and here came Michael in his shaggy plaid jacket. He must have caught sight of Pauline from the street; you could tell by his artificial start of surprise. “Oh! Pauline! It’s you!” he said. (He’d never have made an actor.)

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"I knitted you a warm scarf," she told him. She held up her parcel in both gloved hands; she tilted her fine-boned, delicate face. The little store was so crowded by now that they were standing almost nose to nose.

Michael said, "For me?"

"To wear to the front."

He sent a quick glance toward his mother. Then he took hold of Pauline's elbow. "Let's go get a Coke," he said.

"Oh, why, that would be—"

"Michael? We have another telephone order," Mrs. Anton said.

But he said, "I'll be back soon," and he guided Pauline out the door.

They left behind a larger space than they had occupied, somehow.

Mrs. Pozniak paused for a moment longer, just in case Mrs. Anton had something interesting to say. She didn't, though. She was staring grimly after her son, one hand tracing the Cream of Wheat box as if to square off its corners.

Mrs. Pozniak cleared her throat and asked for a bottle of molasses.

The parlor windows on St. Cassian Street developed a military theme, the Blessed Virgins and china poodles and silk flowers replaced overnight by American flags, swoops of red, white, and blue bunting, and grade-school geography books laid open to maps of Europe. Although in some cases, the religious items stayed put. Mrs. Szapp's bleached-out Palm Sunday palm fronds, for instance, remained in place even after a banner bearing six satin stars was tacked to the wooden sash. And why not? You need all the intervention you can get, when every last one of your sons is off risking his life for his country.

Mr. Kostka asked Michael what branch of the service he'd joined. This was in Sweda's Drugs, which had reopened under the management of Mr. Sweda's brother-in-law. Michael and Pauline were sitting at one of the marble-topped tables; they'd been observed together often over the past few days. Michael said, "The Army," and Mr. Kostka said, "Is that a fact! I'd have thought the Navy."

"Yes, but I get **Copyrighted Material**

Mr. Kostka said, "Well, young fellow, the Army's not going to ship you over by motorcar, you know."

Michael got a sort of startled look.

"And when do you leave for boot camp?" Mr. Kostka inquired.

Michael paused. Then, "Monday," he said.

"Monday!" By now it was Saturday. "Has your mother lined up any help at the store?"

Oh, sneaky; very sneaky. Everybody knew that Mrs. Anton had no idea Michael had enlisted. But who was going to tell her? Even Mrs. Zack, famous for interfering, claimed she hadn't the heart. They were all waiting for Michael to do it; but here he sat, sipping Coke with Pauline, and the only thing he would say was "I'm sure she'll find someone or other."

Pauline was wearing red again. Red seemed to be her color. A red sweater over a crisp white shirt with a rounded collar. It was known by now that she came from a neighborhood north of Eastern Avenue; that she wasn't even Catholic; that she worked as a receptionist in her father's realty office. *How* this was known was through Wanda Bryk, who had somehow become Pauline's new best friend. It was Wanda who reported that Pauline was just the nicest person imaginable, and so much fun! So vivacious! Just always up to some mischief. But others had their reservations. Those seated at the soda fountain, now. You think they weren't cocking their ears to hear what foolish talk she might be filling Michael's head with? Not to mention they could see her in the long mirror behind the counter. They saw how she tucked her face down, all dimpling and demure, fingers toying coquettishly with the straw in her Coca-Cola. They heard her murmuring that she wouldn't be able to sleep a wink nights, fearing for his safety. What right did she have to fear for his safety? She barely even knew him! Michael was one of their own, one of the neighborhood favorites, although not till now considered the romantic type. (Over the past few days a number of girls, Katie Vilna and several others, had started wondering if he might possess some unsuspected qualities.)

Old Miss Jakubek, drinking seltzer at the counter with Miss Pelowski, reported that the evening before, she had gone up to Pauline at the movies and told her she looked like Deanna Durbin. "Well, she

does, in a way," she defended herself. "I know she's a blonde, but she does have that, oh, that dentable soft skin. But what did she say? 'Deanna Durbin!' she said. 'That's just not true! I look like me! I don't look *like* anyone!'"

"Tsk, tsk," Miss Pelowski sympathized. "You were only trying to be nice."

"I myself would love it if someone told me I looked like Deanna Durbin."

Miss Pelowski drew back on her stool and studied Miss Jakubek. "Well, you do, around the chin, a little," she said.

"His poor, poor mother, is all I can think. And the girl is nothing; no nationality. Not even Ukrainian; not even Italian! Italian I might be able to handle. But 'Barclay'! She and Michael don't have the least little thing in common."

"It's like *Romeo and Juliet*," Miss Pelowski said.

Both women thought for a moment. Then they glanced toward the mirror again. They saw that Pauline was crying; that Michael was leaning across the table to cup her chrysanthemum head in both hands.

"They do seem very much in love," Miss Jakubek said.

That night there was a huge going-away party for Jerry Kowalski. Depend on the Kowalskis to make more of a fuss than other people. Other people had been seeing their boys off all week with no more than a nice family dinner, but the Kowalskis rented the Sons of Warsaw Fellowship Hall and hired Lenny Zee and his Dulcetones to play. Mrs. Kowalski and her mother cooked for days; giant kegs of beer were rolled in. The whole of St. Cassian's Church was invited, as well as a few from St. Stan.

And of course, everyone came. Even babies and small children; even Mr. Zynda in his cane-seated wooden wheelchair. Mrs. Anton arrived in a ruffly blouse and ribbon-trimmed dirndl skirt that made her look grayer than ever, and Michael wore a pinchy suit that might have been his father's. His raw, bare wrist bones poked forth from the sleeves. A white flake of rotten paper clung to a nick on his chin.

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But where was Pauline?

Most certainly she had been invited, at least by implication. “Feel free to bring a date,” Mrs. Kowalski had told Michael—in his mother’s presence, no less. (Oh, Mrs. Kowalski was widely known to be a bit of an imp.) But the only girls here were neighborhood girls, and when the first polka started sawing away, it was Katie Vilna who came over to Michael and pulled him onto the dance floor. She was the forward one of the group. She kept tight hold of his hand even when he resisted. Eventually, he gave in and began awkwardly hippity-hopping, every now and then glancing toward the door as if he were expecting somebody.

The Fellowship Hall was a warehouse-like building with splintery floors and metal rafters and naked overhead lightbulbs. Card tables draped with hand-stitched heirloom linens lined the far wall, and it was here that the older women gathered, scrutinizing Mrs. Kowalski’s pierogi and finickily readjusting the sprigs of parsley garnish after one or another of the men had passed through loading his plate. When they stood back to watch the dancing, they tended to clasp their hands on their stomachs as if folding them beneath aprons, even though not a one of them actually wore an apron. They commented on Grandfather Kowalski’s sprightly step, on the evident chill between the Wysockis (newlyweds), and—of course—on Katie Vilna’s unbelievable nerve. “I swear, she has no shame,” Mrs. Golka said. “I’d die if one of *my* girls was to chase a boy that way.”

“Fine chance she has, anyhow, with that Pauline person in the picture.”

“Where *is* Pauline, though? Wouldn’t you think she would be here?”

“She’s not coming,” Wanda announced.

Wanda had approached unnoticed, her footsteps drowned out by the music. (Otherwise, the women never would have said what they did about Katie.) She forked a kielbasa onto her plate. She said, “Pauline’s miffed that Michael wouldn’t call for her.”

“Call for her?”

“At her folks’ house.”

“But why—?” **Copyrighted Material**

“He wanted to spare his mother’s feelings. You know how his mother can be. He told Pauline to meet him here; they’d act like it was just happenstance when they ran into each other. And first she said okay, but then I guess she reconsidered because when I phoned her this evening, she told me she wasn’t coming. She said she was the kind of girl a fellow should be proud to be seen with, not all ashamed and hidey-corner.”

Wanda moved off toward the dessert table, leaving a silence behind her. “Well, she’s right,” Mrs. Golka said finally. “A girl has to set some standards.”

“He was only thinking of his mother, though.”

“And what good will that do him, might I ask, when Dolly Anton’s dead and gone and Michael’s a seedy old bachelor?”

“For mercy’s sake,” Mrs. Pozniak said, “the boy is twenty years old! He’s got a long way to go before he’s a seedy old bachelor.”

Mrs. Golka didn’t seem convinced. She was gazing after Wanda. “But does he know,” she said, “or not?”

“Know what?”

“Does he know that Pauline’s miffed? Did Wanda tell him?”

Now several of the women began to show some sense of urgency. “Wanda!” one called. “Wanda Bryk!”

She turned, her plate in midair.

“Did you tell Michael that Pauline’s not coming?”

“No, she wants him to worry,” Wanda said, and she turned back and plucked a pastry from a tray.

There was another silence. Then, “Ah,” the women said in unison.

The Dulcetones stopped playing and Mr. Kowalski tapped the microphone, sending a series of furry-sounding thwacks through the hall. “On behalf of myself and Barbara . . .” he said. His lips were too close to the mike and each *b* was an explosion. Several people covered their ears. Meanwhile, the children were getting up a game of Duck, Duck, Goose, and the babies were fussing themselves to sleep in nests of their mothers’ coats, and several young men near the beer kegs were growing loud-voiced and boastful.

So nobody noticed when Michael slipped away. Or maybe he

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didn't slip away; maybe he walked out openly. Even his mother was absorbed by then in the goings-on, the speeches wishing Jerry well and the prayer from Father Pasko and the cheers and the rounds of applause.

But they noticed when he returned, all right, later in the evening. Here he came, brave as you please, leading Pauline by the hand through the big plank doors. And when he helped her take her coat off—which no one had even realized Michael knew to do—it emerged that she was wearing a slim black dress that set her apart from the other girls in their lace-up waistcoats and drawstring blouses and flouncy embroidered skirts. But it was her eyes that caused the most comment. They were wet. Each of those long lashes was a separate, damp spike. And the smile she gave Wanda Bryk was the rueful, wan, chastened smile of someone who had just come through a crying spell.

Oh, plainly she and Michael had been having words of some kind.

She turned from Wanda and looked at Michael expectantly, and he gathered himself together and squared his shoulders and took hold of her hand again. He led her further into the hall, past the microphone where Jerry himself now stood, foolishly grinning, past the accordionist who was flirting with Katie, over to the women on their cluster of folding chairs. "Mama," he said to his mother, "I know you remember Pauline."

His mother held a plate in both hands on the very tip end of her lap—a single beet swimming in horseradish sauce. She gazed up at him bleakly.

"Pauline is sort of . . . my girl," he told her.

Even this late, the noise was deafening (all those overtired children on the loose), but where Mrs. Anton sat, the silence spread around her like ripples around a stone.

Pauline stepped forward, and this time her smile was heartfelt, her dimples deep as finger pokes. "Oh, Mrs. Anton," she said, "we're going to be such good friends! We're going to keep each other company while Michael is away."

Mrs. Anton said, "Away?"

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Pauline went on smiling at her. Even with her damp lashes, she had a natural kind of joyousness. Her skin seemed to radiate light.

“I’ve joined the Army, Mama,” Michael said.

Mrs. Anton froze. Then she stood up, but so unsteadily that the woman next to her stood up too and took away her plate. Mrs. Anton relinquished it without a glance. It appeared that she would just as soon have dropped it on the floor. “You can’t,” she told Michael. “You’re all I’ve got left. They would never make you join.”

“I’ve enlisted. I report for training Monday.”

Mrs. Anton fainted.

She fell in an oddly vertical manner, not keeling over backwards but slowly sinking, erect, into the folds of her skirt. (Like the Wicked Witch melting in *The Wizard of Oz*, a child reported later.) It should have been possible to catch her, but nobody moved fast enough. Even Michael just watched, dumbstruck, until she reached the floor. Then he said, “Mama?” and he dropped sharply to his knees and started patting both her cheeks. “Mama! Talk to me! Wake up!”

“Stand back and give her air,” the women told him. They were rising and moving their chairs away and shooing off the men. “Lay her flat. Keep her head down.” Mrs. Pozniak took Pauline by the elbows and planted her to one side. Mrs. Golka sent one of her twins off for water.

“Call a doctor! Call an ambulance!” Michael shouted, but the women told him, “She’ll be all right,” and one of them—Mrs. Serge, a widow—heaved a sigh and said, “Let her have her rest, poor soul.”

Mrs. Anton opened her eyes. She looked at Michael and closed them again.

Two women helped her to a sitting position, and a moment later they lifted her onto her chair, all the time saying, “You’ll be just fine. Don’t rush yourself. Take it easy.” Once she was seated, Mrs. Anton bent double and buried her face in her hands. Mrs. Pozniak patted her shoulder and made soft clucking sounds.

Michael stood at a distance, now, with his palms clamped in his armpits. Various men kept slapping him reassuringly on the back, but it didn’t seem to do any good. And Pauline had simply vanished.

Not even Wanda Boy had seen her go.

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The Dulcetones were drifting helplessly among their instruments; some of the children were quarreling; Jerry Kowalski was standing slack-jawed at the microphone. Cigarette smoke hung in veils beneath the high rafters. The air smelled of pickled cabbage and sweat. The tables had a ravaged look—platters almost empty and puddled with brownish juices, serving spoons staining the linens, parsley sprigs limp and bedraggled.

Everybody said later that the party had been a mistake. You don't throw a celebration, they said, when your sons are leaving home to fight and die.

The windows above Anton's Grocery stayed dark all the next day, not even a glimmer showing behind the lace curtains. The store, of course, was closed, since it was a Sunday. Neither Michael nor his mother came to church, but that was not unusual. After Danny got sick, the Antons appeared to have fallen away somewhat from their faith. Still, people said, in view of the situation, wouldn't you think Michael's mother would want to offer up a prayer?

This was not a neighborhood of drop-in visits—or any visits, really, other than from blood relatives. Houses were too small and too close together, too exposed, without so much as a shrub to shield them from prying eyes. Best to avoid becoming overfamiliar. But toward evening, Mrs. Nowak from across the street called Mrs. Anton on the phone. She planned to inquire after Mrs. Anton's health and maybe bring by a casserole if she received any encouragement. Nobody answered, though. She told Mrs. Kostka later that she had a definite sense that the ringing was being *listened to*, in silence. You know how you get that feeling sometimes. Eight rings, nine . . . with a kind of watchfulness in between. But that could have been her imagination. Maybe the Antons were out. Mrs. Anton did have a brother-in-law, an unsocial sort who ran a dry-goods store over near Patterson Park. It seemed unlikely, however. Surely somebody would have noticed them walking.

Several times during the evening, Mrs. Nowak glanced across the street again. But all she could see were those secretive curtains and

the display window below them, ANTON'S GROCERY in curly gold letters in front of fifteen Campbell's soup cans neatly arranged in the pyramid style that Michael was so fond of.

The Army hired a special bus to take recruits to Virginia. It was a school bus, from the looks of it, repainted a matte olive drab, and at eight o'clock Monday morning it stood waiting on the designated corner within eyeshot of the seafood market. By fours and by sixes, families approached in a lagging, hanging-back manner, always with at least one young man in the lead. The young men carried suitcases made of cardboard or leather. Their relatives carried lunch boxes and cake tins and thermoses. It was a raw, windy day, but no one seemed in any hurry to pack the young men onto the bus. They stood in small groups clutching their burdens, stamping their feet for warmth. A few of the families knew each other, but a lot more didn't; the bus served a fairly wide area. Still, people made a point of exchanging greetings even if they were strangers. They sent quick, searching smiles toward the young men and from then on averted their eyes, giving the families their privacy.

The Kowalskis came with Jerry and Jerry's girlfriend and Mrs. Sweda, who was Mrs. Kowalski's sister. The Witts came. Mrs. Serge and Joey came.

Mrs. Anton and Michael came.

Mrs. Anton looked even drearier than usual, and she barely responded when her neighbors said hello. She wore a gray tweed overcoat and thin, short socks half swallowed by her brown oxfords. Her hands were thrust deep in her pockets; it was Michael who carried his lunch, in addition to a mildewed black gladstone bag. Around his neck he had wound Pauline's scarf—broad bands of navy blue and white, a pattern any neighborhood girl would have considered too simple.

Just as they arrived, a beefy man in uniform lumbered down the steps of the bus with a clipboard under one arm. No one had even known he was there; all they had seen was the driver, who sat staring ahead expressionlessly with the motor loudly idling.

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“All right, men,” the man in uniform called. “Line up here to my left.”

People began milling in his direction, the relatives as well as the recruits. Michael, however, stayed where he was. He gazed northward, straight up Broadway to where it crossed Eastern Avenue.

“Move along, men. Say your goodbyes.”

Mr. Kowalski raised his Kodak and snapped a picture of Jerry grinning stiffly and unnaturally. Jerry’s little sister blew on a painted tin horn. His girlfriend threw her arms around him and buried her face in his neck.

“Let’s get going, men, double-time.”

But it was from the east, from St. Cassian Street, that Pauline came running. She had her red coat on, which was how they could all spot her from such a distance. They said, “Michael! Look!” and Michael turned at once in the right direction, although Pauline herself had not called out. When she came nearer they could see why. She had no breath left, poor thing. She was gasping and tousle-haired and flushed—really not at her prettiest, but who in the world cared? She was holding out her arms, and Michael dropped his belongings and started running too, and when they collided he swooped her up so her feet completely left the ground. Everybody said “Ah” in one long, satisfied sigh—everybody except his mother, but even she watched with something close to sympathy. How could she not? They were hugging as if they would never let go, and Pauline was speaking in broken gasps: “. . . thought you were leaving by train, but . . . went to your house . . . went to Wanda’s . . . finally asked a man on the street and . . . Michael, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“All aboard!” the man in uniform bellowed.

Michael and Pauline tore apart. He turned and went back for his belongings. He ducked his head to let his mother kiss him. He sent one last look toward Pauline and then he climbed onto the bus.

When it pulled out, Pauline and Mrs. Anton were standing side by side, both waving with all their hearts.

* * *

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Now carved wooden creches and plaster Santas and ten-inch-tall, cone-shaped green straw Christmas trees blobbed with soap-flake snow stood among the flags in the parlor windows. Mrs. Szapp's famous angels—a dozen of them, handblown glass—fought for space beneath the palm fronds. Mrs. Brunek marched eight china reindeer straight across her map of Czechoslovakia.

Almost none of the boys who'd enlisted returned for the holidays. They had left too recently; they were confined to their various posts. In theory, this was something that their families had been prepared for, but still it came as a shock. The streets all at once seemed so quiet. Their sons' bedrooms seemed so empty. The dinner tables were too sedate and orderly—no long-armed, greedy boys pouncing on the last chicken wing or gulping down milk by the quart.

Instead, there were mere letters, all of which might have been written by the same person. "Got a 'grand' bunch of guys in my unit" and "You wouldn't believe the tons of gear we have to lug" and "Sure do miss those Sunday evenings with you folks around the radio." These identical lines, with only minor differences, were read aloud in the grocery store by Mrs. Witt, Mrs. Serge, Mrs. Kowalski, Mrs. Dobek . . . and yet their sons were not alike in any way, or at least had not seemed so till now. "Could take my weapon apart blindfolded and put it together again," Michael Anton wrote—Michael! so peaceful, so unmechanical!—as did Joey Serge and Davey Witt. It wasn't just their similar experiences (the KP duty, tetanus shots, blistered feet) but the way they worded things—the slangy, loping language, with too many sets of quotation marks and not enough commas. "Took a 20 mi. hike yesterday and I can tell you my 'dogs' are the worse for it . . . Wish you could see how neat I make my bed mom now that I've got a 'sarge' standing over me watching."

Maybe the letters they wrote their girlfriends were more distinctive. Or maybe not; who knew? There were only so many ways to say "I love you" and "I miss you." But their girlfriends kept their letters to themselves, disclosing only a sentence or two and then just to the other girls. So the older women had to speculate about that.

Michael wrote Pauline every day, Katie and Wanda reported. Sometimes he wrote twice a day. But none of the lines they quoted

revealed anything interesting. He didn't like the food. The guy in the bunk next to him had a constant, honking cough. Life in camp alternated between working your head off one moment and sitting around, sitting around, sitting around the next, just waiting for the war to be over. By now it was a whole new year, 1942, and you would have thought they could have wrapped things up weeks ago.

Every so often, in the late afternoon, the three girls would stop by Anton's Grocery—Katie and Wanda and Pauline, sometimes with Pauline's friend Anna tagging along. "How are you bearing up, Mrs. Anton?" Pauline would say. "Michael asked me to check on you. He's worried how you're doing. Have you heard from him lately?"

Mrs. Anton was her usual gray self ("If he's as worried as all that, he never should have gone and enlisted," she said once), but those who knew her well could detect the gratified pleats at the corners of her mouth. And she always said, "*You've* heard, I guess," which was her devious way of asking without asking.

"Yes, a letter came this morning. He's managing okay, he says."

After the girls had left, the women would tell Mrs. Anton how sweet it was of Pauline to stop by. "She's trying to be nice," they told her. "You have to hand her that much."

Mrs. Anton just said, "Hmpf. For somebody holding down a job, she certainly has a lot of spare time, is all *I* can say."

Mrs. Anton had hired a colored man to help out in Michael's stead. Eustace, his name was. He was small and dry and toasty brown, of an indeterminate age, and he always wore a suitcoat over his bib overalls. Any time Mrs. Anton assigned him a chore, he said, "Yes-sum," and touched the brim of his hat in a dignified and respectful manner, but she told the other women she couldn't wait to be rid of him. "This is a family business," she said. "I can't afford to hire some stranger off the streets! I just want Michael home again. I don't understand what's keeping him."

In February he did come home, but only briefly. By this time people were growing accustomed to the sight of uniforms in their neighborhood, their sons returning for visits in glaringly short haircuts and government-issue woollens. But Michael seemed more changed than the other boys. His face was positively gaunt, with hollows below the

cheekbones and shadows the color of bruises underneath his eyes. He was less attentive to his mother, almost not in evidence around the store, and absentminded when friends addressed him on the street. Every fiber of his being, it seemed, was focused on Pauline.

Well, that was something else people were growing accustomed to: these intense wartime romances. Three of the Szapp boys had married within a single week! But since Pauline was from away, this meant Michael all but disappeared from view. He spent most of his time at her family's house. Her family loved him, Wanda reported. They were very doting and welcoming—a household of daughters, four of them, only one as yet married. They cooked for him and made a big fuss whenever he showed up. And Pauline, of course, was in heaven. It was a perfect, blissful five days, by all accounts, and then he shipped out for special training in California. (Was it his gift for reassembling rifles? Some fund of superior intelligence up till now kept hidden?) Mrs. Anton was left looking more bereft than ever. She no longer discussed her plans to fire Eustace.

Mrs. Szapp asked Mrs. Anton if Michael and Pauline were thinking of marriage. This was not very tactful of her. The other customers tensed. But Mrs. Anton surprised them. Yes, she said mildly, he'd said something about it. He said the subject had come up between them. And it was a fact that a Baltimore girl would be preferable to somebody French or English.

Oh, well, of course. Sure couldn't argue with *that*, people said, tumbling over each other's words in their haste to reassure her.

But you never knew, Mrs. Anton went on. There was many a slip betwixt cup and lip. She wasn't holding her breath.

She brightened as she said this—unbecomingly, some agreed later, discussing it among themselves.

Katie Vilna left the cannery and took a job making airplane parts. The Golka twins journeyed daily to the steel mill out at Sparrows Point. And Wanda Bryk might join the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, as soon as they began accepting applications. Should she?

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Shouldn't she? she asked, twirling on her stool at the soda fountain. Yes! the other girls told her. Do it! *They* would join in a flash, if only their parents would let them.

Pauline didn't come around St. Cassian Street much anymore. She was busy with her volunteer work. The neighborhood girls had their own volunteer work (they must have rolled a million bandages by now, all the while wearing white headdresses that made them look like sphinxes), but Pauline's sounded more interesting. She was helping out at a Red Cross canteen, Katie said, serving coffee and doughnuts to lonesome soldiers passing through the port. Sometimes Katie helped too. Katie couldn't count all the fellows she'd met! She said her biggest expense these days was stationery.

A number of the girls asked if they could come with her next time.

In Anton's Grocery, Mrs. Szapp said, "Where has Pauline got to? Nobody seems to have seen her."

"Oh, she's around," Mrs. Anton said.

"I thought she might have gone off somewhere."

"She's around, I tell you! She was in here just . . . when was it. Just last week, or the week before. Talking on and on about Michael. You know how she talks."

Mrs. Szapp was quiet a moment, and then she asked how many ration points a pound of sausage would cost her.

The younger of the Piazzy boys went down with his ship in the Coral Sea. It was the parish's first casualty. Mr. Piazzy completely stopped speaking. The neighbors walked around for days with pale, tight faces, silently shaking their heads, murmuring phrases of disbelief when they met on the street. So this was for real! they seemed to be saying to each other. Wait a minute! No one had told them things would get so serious!

The Dobeys received a telegram saying Joe was missing in action.

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Davey Witt was sent home with some kind of nervous trouble that the Witts preferred not to discuss. Jerry Kowalski caught malaria. And Michael Anton was shot in the back and sidelined to the infirmary.

Mrs. Anton said she was glad. She said, "Every day he spends lying in that hospital bed is a day he's not overseas getting killed." Nobody could blame her.

Pauline got more letters than ever, now, and already she had three shoeboxes full. She kept referring to Michael's having been "wounded." And of course, he had been wounded, but only by mistake. Some stupid, careless mistake on the part of a fellow trainee. To hear Pauline talk, though, you would think he'd been in hand-to-hand combat.

The elderly Japanese man who cleaned fish in the Broadway Market had quietly disappeared. Where had he gone? He'd been perfectly nice! Oh, things were dragging on too long, here. This war was lasting forever; everything was taking more time than anyone had expected. Already it was summer. Pearl Harbor seemed to have happened about a hundred years ago.

The oddest items were in short supply. Hairpins, for instance. Who would have thought *hairpins*? Gasoline, all right, but . . . And the littlest of the Brunek boys couldn't have the tricycle he'd requested for his birthday. Rubber tires were the reason. But try explaining that to Petey Brunek!

Then the War Office sent the Szapps two telegrams in the space of three days, and everybody felt guilty for complaining about trivia.

Although still, it would have been nice if Petey could have had his tricycle.

When Michael Anton came home to stay, he wrote ahead to his mother and said he would like for Pauline to meet his train alone. Mrs. Anton didn't appear to take offense. She supposed he planned to pop the question, she told the other women, and she spoke calmly, with a light shrug. As well she could afford to, now that she had her son back.

The reason for his discharge was a pronounced and permanent

limp. All his mother had dared hope was that he'd be transferred to a desk job, but mysteriously, unexplainably, he was sent home instead. He would never, ever in his life have to partake in combat. Mrs. Anton said soldiers called that a "million-dollar wound." Then she stammered and glanced toward Mrs. Szapp, but Mrs. Szapp said, kindly, "*Ten* million dollars, I would term it. God's been good to you, Dolly."

At around the time Michael and Pauline were expected to alight from the streetcar—toward noon on a Wednesday at the very tail end of August—women started showing up at the grocery store to make single, random purchases. One box of Jell-O. A flyswatter. They lingered a long while, chitchatting, casting sidelong glances at Mrs. Anton who wore a nicer-than-usual dress and a dab of lipstick. Eventually, having no further excuse to stay, they moved out onto the sidewalk and stood around in front of Mrs. Serge's parlor window next door. Mrs. Serge had a row of china nuns lined up beneath her service banner—little cute nuns, singing O-mouthed over hymn books or kneeling in prayer with tiny gold dots of rosaries painted across their fronts. It was hot as blazes, the sun glistening on the women's faces and spreading darkened half-moons beneath their arms, but still they went on studying Mrs. Serge's nuns.

Might have known the train would be late, they murmured to each other. Trains nowadays were always late, always crowded with soldiers and subject to unexplained stops.

Twice Mrs. Anton joined them, on the pretext of seeing a customer to the door—not something she would ordinarily do. She looked toward Dubrowski Street and then ducked back inside. She was wearing actual stockings, the women realized.

The third time she came out, she called, "Eustace? Is Eustace with you all?" although she had no possible grounds for imagining that he would be. And then she looked up the street and cried, "There he is!"

Not Eustace, of course, but Michael, with Pauline beside him. From a distance, they were as small and tidily matched as a couple on a wedding cake—Pauline in something pastel, Michael in summer khakis. Oh, couldn't a uniform start your heart and fill you with love