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DAYDREAM

Marybelle was standing on the steps of the high school that Friday afternoon impatiently waiting for her own special crowd to assemble.

"Why did I promise to wait for the girls," she thought. "I'm losing precious time, and I have something so very special to do."

No one ever walked away from Larchmont High School alone. That is, none of the girls in her crowd ever did. But Marybelle would have risked the ignominy of walking alone in order to gain extra time for her secret mission. She cradled her books first in one arm and then in the other. She stood on her toes until her flat shoes fell off her heels. She hummed a little tune while the brisk, spring breeze fluttered her head scarf and billowed her long full skirt.

A feeling of superiority made her tilt her chin smugly as she looked out over the heads of the hurrying students. She had heard the word, "trivia," used by a radio commentator, and she applied it now to the conversation on all sides of her.

"Why don't they grow up?" she said to herself. "Most of them act just like grade school children." Perhaps it took some pleasant anticipation such as hers to make you feel as she was feeling. Last week she, too, had been a child. This week she had grown up--changed--and all because--

"Hi, Marybelle, Phil's looking for you every place," called a boy as he rushed by her.

Marybelle drew back behind a pillar. She had something better to do than walk down the street with Phil Mason and stop at the drug store for a coke.

When the girls came along, Marybelle came out from her hiding place and joined them. The laughing, chattering group of girls moved along with the crowd until the library corner was reached.

"Oh, no, Marybelle, surely not on Friday evening," said one of the girls as Marybelle began disentangling herself from the compact group. "You've gone to that library every evening this week after school to study. We're going over to Lutie's house to plan for our dance. You'll just have to come along. Some of the boys are going to drop in around five o'clock to help us try out some new records."

Marybelle had her answer ready. "Miss Hillman said she would give extra credit to anyone handing in a special report in history. It's so quiet in the library. I can get so much reading done."

"Who wants extra credit in that dull old history course?" remarked another girl. "But go on, be a bookworm, if you want to. You'll have history written on your heart one of these days."

"Wouldn't she be surprised if she knew what was written on my heart right now," thought Marybelle.

"Phil will be so disappointed if you aren't at my house," said Lutie.

"Oh, Phil, he's such a child. I can't waste my time on him," called Marybelle airily as she went up the library steps.

She went to her usual corner in the reference room, right near a statue of Venus. She got a book from off the shelf and propped it up in front of her. She took out her compact and powdered the shine off her nose. A drop of perfume from her pocket vial, on each ear, brought a subtle touch of fragrance to her corner of the room. She raised her narrow shoulders until they filled the red sweater, and then,--she looked around the room.

No, he hadn't come yet. Oh, she hoped he wouldn't be too late. She was making some rather unintelligible notes on her paper when she heard his peculiar tread across the rubber tile of the floor--step, drag, step, drag.

"Oh, he's limping more than ever," Marybelle thought in sorrowful ecstasy. "Perhaps the change in the weather has something to do with his old wound, or whatever it is that causes him to limp."

She read two more lines in her book before she looked up. He was hunting for the books he wanted on the shelves. He found several volumes and took them to a table across the room. Marybelle could not see the titles, but she felt sure there would be romance somewhere within their pages.

She had seen him for the first time on Monday evening when she had gone to the library to get a book to take home. There was something about him that put her romantic imagination to work at once. Here was a man with a past. It was written all over him, in the thrilling depths of his dark eyes, in the blue veins that marked his forehead, in the limp that distinguished him from other men. She hadn't a doubt but that he had been wounded on some battlefield, perhaps left to die until some corpsman had found him and carried him back to safety. He would have a purple heart to commemorate his wound, but he would not want to talk about it. Probably he had been very young when he enlisted, but his stint as a soldier had matured him and given him the glamor that the boys of her crowd lacked.

She had been a half hour late for dinner that first evening. Her mother was telephoning around to all her friends trying to find her, but was somewhat mollified to learn that Marybelle had been at the library studying. But Marybelle had never dared to be that late again, for she could not bear to have her enchantment broken by questioning.

The man had come to the library every evening almost by schedule. Marybelle thought he was beginning to be aware of her presence there for he had looked over in her direction several times. Once she was sure he was coming over to speak to her. But he only wanted to get a book from off the shelf near her. She had caught the faint acrid smell of tobacco

mixed with the tweedy odor of shaving lotion. Not the strong spicy scent that floated into the hall from the bathroom when her father was shaving, but a definitely more exciting kind that smelled just the way the advertisements in magazines looked.

Marybelle's own perfume was becoming a little heady. She pushed her hair back behind her ears, the better to enjoy the fragrance while she dreamily wrote her name with many flourishes across the cover of her note book. Marybelle, Marybelle,-- it was a musical sounding name--She slipped willingly into the pleasant land of make believe.

"Your name is Marybelle, I believe," he was asking in a voice low and thrilling.

"Yes, how did you know?"

"Oh, you just look like the kind of a girl that would have Marybelle for a name. You're quite studious, aren't you? I've noticed you in here every evening this week." He sat down beside her and opened one of her books.

"Yes, I'm doing special reading for history. (Oh, I hope he'll think I'm a college student.) My professor says there's much romance in history if you just look for it."

"But a pretty girl shouldn't spend all her leisure time in a library reading history. I'm quite hungry, and I hate to eat alone. Won't you have dinner with me? The Roma Cafe down the street has wonderful Italian spaghetti."

Marybelle floated out of the library and down the steps. His hand on her arm guided her as she fitted her low-heeled stride to his limping steps. She had never eaten in the Roma Cafe, but had often read the menu pasted on the window. He ordered the dinner. When the wine came, Marybelle sipped it slowly, enjoying its bouquet, as she had seen it done in the movies.

There was music coming out of the juke box, loud and discordant. "I'll fix that," said her companion. He limped over to the box, and soon a romantic ballad, "I'll See You in the Spring-time" was thrilling them. They listened in silence until the song was over.

"Now tell me all about yourself," he said.

"Let's don't talk about me," Marybelle answered. "There are so many important things going on in the world today. Let's talk about them."

But they didn't, for by this time they were wandering down the street looking in all the store windows.

"Would you like a box of Fannie May's to take home?" he was asking--

"This is where the girls said I would find you." From somewhere out of reality a voice recalled Marybelle from her dream. "But I didn't believe anyone would be in a library studying on Friday evening. What's the matter, Marybelle? You look as if you are in a trance."

Marybelle felt ecstasy leaving her in a rush. How hard life really was when a day dream could be shattered so ruthlessly.

"What do you want, Phil?" she asked resignedly.

"There's a terrific picture at the Avon. All the gang's going to the first show. I want you to go with me."

Marybelle still under the enchantment of her fancied half hour was thinking up an excuse when Phil broke in, "Oh, there's Hank Jackson over there. I'll have to go over to speak to him."

Marybelle watched while Phil hurried over to the man who had just taken her out to dinner. "His name just can't be Hank," she thought. "It's just a nickname."

Phil was back in a moment. "That poor guy is over there boning up for a Civil Service exam. If he passes the exam, he'll have a job. Then he and my Aunt Isabel will be married right away. They've been engaged for years. I don't believe in long engagements, do you Marybelle?"

Marybelle didn't answer for she was gathering up her things and preparing to leave the library,--perhaps forever.

For the second time that evening she went down the library steps. "What show are we going to see, Phil? I hope it's a good western."