

The van der Lindens' house was distinguished from the others on the street by the creeper that covered half the front, running up to the children's rooms beneath the eaves, where at night the glow from the sidewalk lamp gave to Number 1064 the depth and shadow of a country settlement, somewhere far away from this tidy urban street. Among the row of new Cadillacs, their tail-fins glinting like a rumour of sharks, Charlie van der Linden's two-tone 1953 Kaiser Manhattan, maroon with cream roof and a dented rear fender, struck a doubtful, out-of-town note.

The house dominated its plot, the architect having sacrificed half the backyard to the status two extra rooms would bring a man. The lawn that remained was part paved, with a brick barbecue and a basketball hoop left by a previous tenant; at the end of the grass was a child's metal swing which Charlie had assembled after a summer cook-out, to the amusement of his children, who had left it to rust unused. Where its neighbours sank their near-identical roots into the earth, this house gave off an air of transience; and when at night the bedroom lights went off along the street, like candles on an old man's cake, the lamps in the van der Lindens' house would often start to blaze again as a party spilled into another room. The guests' cars were parked along the street as far as Number 1082, home to the Washington correspondent of a French magazine that no one had ever seen.

In their rooms, Louisa and Richard stirred occasionally in their sleep as a shriek of mirth came up the stairs or the gesture of some exuberant raconteur sent a glass shattering on the tiled floor of the hall. If the party wore on too long, Mary would go upstairs to check on them, leaning across their beds, fussing over the blankets

and tucking them in; sometimes in the morning the children had a memory of her scent, lipstick, gin, and words of love pressed into their ears and sealed with the touch of her fingers.

That December evening, the van der Lindens were having a party. It was to be their last of the decade and it marked the anniversary of their wedding eleven years earlier in London. It was a change for them to have a private pretext; it was a relief not to have to feign interest in a visiting dignitary, a national day or a harassed politician who was passing through Washington in a daze, uttering solemn pleasantries. The guests were a favoured variation of the regular diplomats and journalists; there were one or two neighbours, either the most genial or the ones who would otherwise complain; there was also Weissman, Charlie's doctor, and his Haitian bride.

'To Scottish national day,' said Charlie, flushed and off-duty as he unscrewed a bottle of scotch and poured three fingers of it over ice for Edward Renshaw, his closest ally at the British Embassy. 'Tell me, how's your economy doing these days?'

'It's a wreck. Chin-chin.'

Mary van der Linden stood in the sitting room, her dark hair alive in the electric glow of the table lamp behind her. Her dotting brown eyes returned to Charlie. Here was the fountain of her happiness, her repeated glances seemed to suggest: erratic, flawed, but, in his way, dependable. Mary's smile was not a thing anyone could predict; she was not the diplomatic wife in all circumstances. To begin with, she was too shy and found each function a trial of her resolve, but she seemed to have a resource of contentment that was stable, beyond the irritation of the day, and when her smile came from that depth, her face was lit with such serenity that people stopped for a moment to watch.

In the kitchen, Dolores, the resident Puerto Rican maid provided by the Embassy, was cutting Wisconsin cheddar into cubes, then impaling them, with olives, on to plastic cocktail sticks. With these and dishes of pretzels, nuts and clam dip with Salteen crackers, she loaded another tray and squeezed her way through the hall.

Charlie put a bossa nova record on the phonograph, took a cigarette from the pack in his shirt pocket and inhaled the smoke

as he gazed upon his party. His face, though flushed by broken capillaries and patchily shaved beneath the chin, retained some youthful beauty; his rumpled hair and sagging tie gave him a schoolboy look that the creeping fleshiness about his jaw had not quite dispelled. He saw Mary, now in the doorway to the hall, and smiled at her. It was a complicit smile which acknowledged the joint effort that their days consisted of – the compromises of the guest list, their shared jokes and fears about this man's wife and that man's drinking; the daily division of irksome duties, the labour of managing children and the pleasure of having despatched them, just in time, to bed. Charlie van der Linden was in trouble, not just with his health, but with his life; yet as he caught his wife's eye he felt he could postpone a reckoning indefinitely, that three more glasses of scotch, a quiet weekend in the rustic inns of the Shenandoah valley and maybe some hard thinking would see him clear.

'Who's that man talking to Mary?' Charlie felt his elbow taken by Edward Renshaw.

'He's a journalist, I think. I bumped into him this morning at the Spanish Embassy do and he claims we've met before somewhere.'

'Let's go and say hello.'

'Eddie,' said Mary, 'this is Frank Renzo. Frank's in town for a few days.'

'Good to meet you.' Frank Renzo was a tall, lean man, his cropped hair showing the first dust of grey; his accent was from the urban Midwest, perhaps Chicago.

'Do you need a drink, Frank?' said Charlie.

'No, I already have one.'

'What are you doing in town?' said Edward Renshaw politely.

'Just a piece for my paper. I'm based in New York.'

'Well, enjoy yourself,' said Charlie. 'Call if we can do anything to help.'

Mary watched as Charlie left the small group and went towards the bar he had set up in the corner of the room. Normally they hired a barman from the Embassy staff to stand behind the row of liquor bottles, but tonight, as a small gesture of economy, Charlie had taken the task on himself. He scooped more ice cubes into the

ornamental bucket from a pail concealed beneath the tablecloth.

‘They say the Kennedys are buying a new house on N Street,’ said the man from the *Post*. ‘Martha knows the realtor who showed them round. Apparently Jackie was crazy for it.’

‘Oh yes?’ Charlie poured bourbon over ice and heard it snap. ‘I thought they were buying Joe Alsop’s.’ He felt the scotch beginning to take hold, or rather to relax his grip, as he approached the state of uncritical bonhomie he most enjoyed. He smiled to himself. It was of course an irony that only in these moments of inebriation, these instants of perfect balance, did he have the philosophical poise to see his difficulties in their true perspective and to know that he could one day banish them. For the moment he was alive, and he glowed with the pleasure of these people’s company. At bad times he suspected that the fire was not renewable, that, for their delectation, he was burning away the core of himself; he feared that few of them shared his embrace of the minute, or were even momentarily diverted by his defiance of pettiness and tedium and time passing. He had never reached the lowest point of all, at which he might have wondered whether there was something morbid in his being so solitary in his flight from an unnamed terror.

Feeling as good as he did, generosity surging in his veins, tobacco unfurling in his lungs, he had no choice but to push onwards.

‘We meet on Wednesdays after we’ve taken the kids to school,’ Lauren Williams was telling Frank Renzo. ‘Then for lunch Kelly makes the appetizer, Mary-Beth or I does the entrée and Katy does the dessert. She does the best desserts you ever tasted.’

‘And you always have a project?’

‘Sure. Sometimes we just have a book we’ve all read, sometimes we’ll go see a show.’

‘And is that all the ladies in your group?’

‘Oh, no, there’s more. That’s just the inner circle. We’re usually seven or eight. Mary comes along pretty often.’

‘And what does she do?’

‘You mean, like, what’s her specialty? Well, she brings wine sometimes. You know, coming from Europe. I don’t know.’ Lauren Williams began to laugh. ‘Katy, what does Mary bring to our group?’

‘Mary?’ Katy Renshaw, too, looking at Frank’s grave face, began to laugh. ‘I guess she brings culture. Isn’t that right, Mary?’

‘Isn’t what right?’ said Mary, turning from another conversation.

‘In fact,’ said Lauren Williams, ‘Mary’s writing a book.’

‘Am I?’

‘Charlie always says you are.’

‘He has to find an explanation for me.’

Mary went with a tray out into the kitchen, where Dolores was stirring a pan.

‘Happy, Dolores?’

‘Yes, thank you, Mrs van der Linden. You happy?’

Mary considered, as she leaned back for a moment with her back to the stove and sipped from the glass of gin and tonic with its clashing ice. Happy . . .

When Louisa was twenty months old, she could talk with the fluency of a child of three or four, yet what was in her mind was quite unformed. On the Home Service in London she had heard the stations of the shipping forecast and talked back to them, Dogger, Fisher, German Bight, her head cocked to one side, her concentration earnest. In moments of exalted love, of rapture, Mary believed Louisa’s mind was not empty, but filled with clouds of glory from a previous and purer world. She had spent many weeks in hospital with Louisa while doctors tried to discover the source of some violent allergy. When they eventually came home, they were seldom out of the same room. At bath-time, while Mary lay back in the water, the child stood hammering at her mother’s raised and closed knees, demanding to be let into the castle that would be formed by their parting. Once inside, she would ask questions about things that puzzled her: America, for instance: how big it was, how far, how different and then, after a long, considering pause: ‘Do they have children in America?’ Now, at ten years old, she had retained that unworldly grace, though she had been bruised by some encounters with the everyday that would have left no mark on others.

Richard, her brother, felt no such pain. To begin with, Mary

had worried that she could not love a second child as much. He was so different from his sister that she was astounded to concede that he had eventually quarried out a comparable place in her affections for himself; by brute persistence he commandeered a territory as rare and irreplaceable as that occupied by Louisa. Perhaps it was the smell of him that first intoxicated Mary, of his neck along the hairline when she lifted him from his cot on her return from an evening out: the faint aroma of honey, calico, half-baked bread, wild strawberries, of warmth itself, was so delightful to inhale that she made excuses to 'resettle' him, though it was clear that he was already as tranquil as a sleeping child could be. His fierceness was the opposite of Louisa's detached and dream-like curiosity; he wanted the same lunch each day, the same programme on the wireless and then, at the same hour, to visit the bathroom where he would sit on the wooden seat, the cat clamped beneath his arm while, with tears rolling over his cheeks, he sang 'The Camptown Races'.

Happy, thought Mary, as she folded the apron over the back of the chair and straightened her hair in the mirror over the kitchen counter: maybe not exactly happy, not in the facile way the word itself suggested, but who in these circumstances could not at least be touched from time to time by the ridiculous joy of existing?

Back in the sitting room, beneath the simmering layer of fresh cigarette smoke, Duncan Trench was stabbing his finger at Katy Renshaw, Edward's American wife. Trench's huge, slabbed cheeks and small eyes gave him what people called a chub-face, though the colour of his complexion always reminded Mary not of fish but of undercooked beef.

'If the Negroes in North Carolina want to sit at the lunch counters all day without being served,' he was saying, 'then the storekeeper is quite entitled to use reasonable force to evict them. They're preventing him from making a living.'

Few people knew what Trench's job in Chancery entailed, but his manner was seldom diplomatic.

'Sure,' said Frank Renzo, 'and he's preventing them from having lunch.'

‘There are plenty of other places they can go.’

‘But they want to go to Woolworth’s. They like the sixty-five cent turkey dinner. You ever try it?’

‘No, but that’s not the point. What I’m saying is—’

‘You should. It needs some gravy. But, you know, it’s pretty good.’

‘By refusing to move they’re preventing customers being served.’

‘But they are the customers.’

‘You know what I mean.’

Mary could see Duncan Trench’s colour go from beef to borscht as she moved swiftly into the group.

‘Who’d like another drink?’ she said. ‘Duncan, have you met Kelly Eberstadt? She and her husband have moved into Bethesda and—’

‘Did you ever hear of a young man called Emmett Till?’ said Frank.

‘I don’t believe so,’ said Trench, as Mary took his elbow and guided him away.

‘You’d have liked him. Your kinda guy.’ Frank Renzo watched Trench depart; Katy Renshaw stared down at her shiny shoes for a moment.

‘Well,’ said Katy, looking up brightly again. ‘Que sera, sera.’

‘Nice song.’

‘Nice movie. You like Doris Day?’

‘Sure I like Doris Day, though I guess I like jazz even better,’ said Frank.

‘Oh, so does Charlie! Let’s put on a record and we can dance.’

The guests began to leave soon after one, though it took so long for them to be gone that Charlie was able to drink a half-bottle of burgundy he found in the dresser and a tumbler of Four Roses on the rocks as a nightcap. From time to time he tottered to the doorway, chastely pecking Lauren Williams on her powdered cheek, pummelling her husband, whose name always just eluded him, on the shoulder, taking the opportunity to bury his face in Katy Renshaw’s fragrant hair as he squeezed her waist.

‘A stoop full of kisses and goodbyes,’ he murmured. ‘Do you know that line?’

‘What?’

‘It’s from Wallace Stevens.’

‘Not in the *Collected* I read, Charlie,’ said Edward Renshaw, as he threw a wrap round the shoulders of his wife.

‘You’re right, Eddie. I made it up.’

The night had grown woundingly cold with a breeze whistling down out of Canada. Charlie lit one more goodnight cigarette as he leaned against the door-frame; Mary stood beside him as the last of their guests started up their cars. An upstairs light went on opposite: it was the Chinese couple who dined on bowls of clear soup and went to bed at seven. Mary flinched. The guests had left quietly, but the rumble of Detroit machinery was enough to shake the storm-windows gently in their frames.

As Mary looked down again, she saw a tall figure making its way towards them, hunched, veering from side to side. It was Frank Renzo. He was clasping his right hand in his left, and behind him, along the snowy sidewalk, there ran a trail of blood.

‘Jesus . . . goddam car door,’ he was muttering.

Mary went forward anxiously. ‘What happened? Come inside. It’s all right, it’s just tiles,’ said Mary as she led him, dripping, through to the kitchen.

‘What happened?’ said Charlie. ‘Do we have a bandage or something?’

‘Upstairs. In the bathroom.’

Frank’s face was pale. Mary held his hand beneath the kitchen faucet and the cold water pounded on to the metal sink, swilling with its rosy flow the last of the jettisoned clam dip. Mary pushed back the shirt cuff and rolled up the sleeve of his suit with its grey nailhead pattern. The cut was deep but clean; it ran through from the base of the thumb down into the blue wiring of the wrist.

‘Goddam car tool . . .’

‘Maybe we should call a doctor. Perhaps it needs stitches.’

‘Sutures? No, no, it’s fine. As soon as it stops bleeding.’

‘Is this any use?’ said Charlie. He was holding a first-aid box.

‘Let’s have a look,’ said Mary. ‘You’d better keep that hand under the tap.’

‘What happened?’ said Charlie.

‘It was an accident. Could I use your telephone?’

'I'm sure we had a bandage.'

'It's in the hall.'

'Did Louisa take it for her Barbie?'

When Frank came back into the kitchen, Mary dressed the cut with what she could find in the box.

'You sure you're all right?' said Charlie. 'Would you like a drink?'

'Maybe some scotch? Tell me, who was that guy with the red face?'

'Duncan Trench,' said Mary. 'He's at the Embassy.'

'Is he a thimble-belly?'

'What?'

'Can he hold his liquor?'

'I think he was tight.'

Frank sat back with his drink. 'Thank you.' For the first time since he had been back in the house, he smiled. 'To tell the truth, I'm a little scared of blood.'

'Let's go and sit in the living room,' said Charlie, as though sensing the chance that the party might re-ignite. He poured himself a measure of Four Roses to keep Frank company and lit another cigarette as he put on 'Songs for Swingin' Lovers'. It no longer seemed polite to ask Frank exactly what had happened to his hand.

'That girl told me you like jazz,' said Frank.

'I certainly do,' said Charlie. 'We don't get to hear much in Washington. You live in New York, don't you?'

'That's right,' said Frank. 'I have an apartment loaned me by a friend who's on a foreign posting. It's in the Village.'

'How lovely,' said Mary.

'I don't like it,' said Frank, grinding out his cigarette. 'I don't like the Village.'

'Really? Why?'

'Too many bead shops and fancy bakeries.'

Mary, standing with her back to the fireplace, looked at Frank closely for the first time. It was impossible to tell how serious he was being. Surely anyone below the age of fifty, particularly if he liked jazz, would want to live in Greenwich Village more than any neighbourhood in the United States of America; but Frank

didn't seem to be joking. His face, with its long, narrow jaw on which the first shadows of the morning's beard were darkening, was not smiling. He looked drawn and anxious: the thin lapels of his suit, the narrow tie pulled halfway down over his cotton shirt, the long limbs folded over one another combined to suggest fragility. His pants had ridden up a little, showing where the grey woollen socks hung from his shins in slouched, concentric rings. There were dark hemispheres beneath his eyes, yet he showed no signs of wanting to leave. A drop of blood fell from the saturated dressing on to the maple parquet beside his chair.

Charlie said, 'Have you heard this fellow Ornette Coleman I keep reading about?'

'I went to see him once. At the Five Spot. I didn't really like it. That free stuff. I'm not sure it's as difficult as it looks.'

'Apparently he can play the piano and the violin and the trumpet as well.'

'Sure. But how well does he play them? That's the point. Do you like Miles Davis?'

'Quite,' said Charlie. 'But I'm pretty much lost with anything after Duke Ellington. This hard bop stuff, you know Charlie Parker and Dizzy—'

'Yeah, but Miles Davis is kind of melodic, too. Did you hear the *Kind of Blue* record?'

Charlie refreshed their glasses and put his feet up on the table.

'Would you two like something to eat?' said Mary. 'Those little snacks were a long time ago.'

'To tell the truth, darling,' said Charlie, 'I'm not really hungry.'

'Frank? I could make an omelette and toast. There are some potatoes I could fry up, too.'

'I guess I should head back.'

'Have a bloody omelette,' said Charlie genially. 'Here, listen to this.' He took off Frank Sinatra and began riffling through a line of long-playing records held in a red wire rack.

By four o'clock, they had sampled most of the collection and the bottle of Four Roses was empty. Mary showed Frank upstairs to the lumber room at the back of the house; he lost his footing for a moment on the uncarpeted stair. Charlie was already in bed by the time Mary got back to their room and started to undress.

'Have we got to get up early?' he said.
'Just the usual. School.'
Mary slid in beside him.
'What do you make of that chap?' said Charlie.
'Who? Frank?'
'Yes.'
'Strange,' said Mary. 'Your sort of man, though.'
'Yup. Ghastly taste in music.'