



Cathy knew it was flagrant flattery, but she loved it.

Homecoming Week End

by Seymour Krim
Art by Paula Beaver

CATHY NELSON knew her nose was turning blue as she wrapped the rented blanket around her knees. Sitting outdoors on chilly Saturdays in November was fun when you were 18, but for middle-aged mothers with two teen daughters—well, she could think of better things. The crowd roared as Western, trying to overcome a 6-0 handicap, fumbled. This was the first homecoming game she and Doug had attended since the war, what with the children, his work in Washington, and sheer seven-days-a-week weariness. He had bought the tickets only because Charley Bright, another Western alumnus working in the Pentagon, had blackmailed him into it.

Cathy looked down at the wilting gardenia pinned to her sealskin coat, and smiled. Half-frozen and bored, it was impossible to shake off the memories that had come back as they stepped off the train Friday night. It had been exactly 24 years before that she had spent her first homecoming week end on the Western campus.

As the crowd roared again, she could remember the hoarse cheering on that other Saturday—cheering that had brought joyous tears to her eyes. Surrounded by five Delta Phi boys for protection, she had watched her date score three touchdowns against Concord and be carried from the field on his teammates' shoulders. To spend a week end when you're 18 with a real, live, handsome college hero, dance to a New York band, and be proposed to on a Christmas-postcard evening—could a girl ask for more?

Cathy glanced at Doug trying to snuggle into the protection of muffler and overcoat, a worried, baldish man with wind-whipped tears in his eyes. After the war, and a not-very-successful career before as an attorney, he had stayed in the Army as a lawyer in the Adjutant General's office with the rank of major.

Doug coughed, and Cathy immediately thought of their 14-year-old daughter, Ellis, who hadn't been able to shake her cold all month long. Just then the first half ended.

They made their way through milling undergraduates and their fresh-faced girls, and as they headed for refuge under the grandstand Cathy couldn't help feeling self-conscious. She and Doug seemed out of place.

Doug, middle-sized, his pale face pinched with cold, was silent as he led her toward the coffee counter. Since he wasn't wearing his uniform—never did unless it was official business—even that slight authority was denied him, and both he and Cathy were jostled by the robust, chattering youngsters. Then suddenly, as in a dream, there was Ralph Snyder in front of them.

"My goodness," he shouted, "why didn't you tell me you were coming down? How are you?" He almost took Doug's hand off and gave Cathy a gallant kiss on the cheek.

"You both look wonderful," he said, with a big hand on each of their shoulders, as if they were children. Cathy knew it was flagrant flattery, but she loved it. The vitality of the man, compared to Doug, was tremendous. He didn't look a day over 30, this broad-shouldered curly-haired guy.

"I'll go get some coffee," Doug said quietly. "You two talk. There must be a lot to—say."

Ralph took Cathy's icy hand and looked down into her eyes. "Homecoming," he said softly. "Do you remember?"

"How could I ever forget?" she parried, smiling up at Ralph. For a moment she felt almost 18 again—her heart beat a little faster. And in the back of her mind a question intruded, even though she tried to laugh it away. "Did I make the wrong choice?" it kept asking. "You idiot," she

answered, "it's several thousand years too late."

"Have you given some lucky female a ring yet, Ralph?" She chattered brightly.

"No. Probably never will."

Ralph's voice became soft and caressing. "Do you remember when I stole you away from the dance—and we stood in the archway to the library, watching the stars?"

She blushed, despite her frozen face. He had kissed her and she had felt terrible because she was 18. Then he had proposed and, trembling, she had said she loved another. "You were very exciting to a young girl," Cathy answered softly, the wonder and tumult of that memorable week end suddenly as alive as the present moment.

"But you went and married my fraternity brother instead," Ralph went on. "I was crazy about you," he said looking straight into her eyes and squeezing her hand.

"Don't, Ralph." It had suddenly become much too real, the thought that her life might have been different all these careworn years. But what does an 18-year-old girl know, she thought with a touch of bitterness. As she stood in Ralph's strong masculine aura, Cathy couldn't help being pierced by doubt. She and Doug had hardly seen him in the last ten years and she had forgotten how she could weaken in his presence.

"Sorry I took so long," her husband said as he came back with the coffee. "Had to wait in line."

The three of them chatted while Cathy drank her hot liquid. But there seemed little for Ralph and Doug to talk about, and pauses grew longer.

"Now I want you both to have a drink with me afterwards," Ralph said heartily as people started moving back upstairs. "For old times' sake and all that."

"We can't make it," Doug answered. "We're catching the 5:30 train back to Washington. I have to work over the week end and..."

At that moment a glossy redhead who couldn't have been more than 19 caught Ralph by the arm and breathlessly said, "Sweetie! I've been looking all over for you. Come on. The second half is starting and the rest of the gang thinks you were trampled to death or something."

With promises of getting together, which would never be kept, Ralph went off with his young girl while Cathy and Doug made their way up the concrete runway. "Same old Ralph," Doug said with a wry smile.

Cathy didn't answer. Instead, she linked her arm through Doug's as they walked down the grandstand aisle and the cold wind tore at them. She was profoundly ashamed. Yes, Ralph was exciting for five minutes, but in a way he had never grown up.

When they sat down she put the blanket over Doug's knees and tucked it around her own. Perhaps you needed cares, worries, sacrifices, to be a legitimate adult. You couldn't remain handsome or rah-rah all your life—there was something false about it. That was reserved for the glory of youth and to trespass on it was to violate the rhythm of life itself.

She impulsively leaned over and pecked Doug's cheek.

"What's all this?" he asked, the wind blowing a few greynish hairs that sprouted on the sides of his head, accenting the nakedness of the crown. She looked into the seamed face of the man who for almost a quarter of a century had been her lover, the father of her children, and her hand-holder in times of trouble.

"Nothing," she said. "I just like you, that's all."

They sat shivering under the blanket, waiting for the second half to begin, when the announcer's voice came over the loudspeaker: "Ladies and gentlemen, I've just been informed that one of the greatest quarterbacks ever to play for Western is here today. I'd like the captain of our 1932 team, Doug Nelson, to stand up please."

Cathy pushed her embarrassed husband to his feet, with the blanket half caught in his coat, while waves of applause broke over the stadium.

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