



The Snowdrift, the Swan

Helen Walker Jones

IN THOSE IDAHO SUMMERS, Maggie drove a tractor and sat on her hands in the movies, hiding her callouses from the fresh-faced college boys she dated. She worried about her peeling nose and ate nothing but tuna fish, in emulation of the ancient Twiggy poster on her wall. After graduation, she taught in a one-room school, despairing of ever being thin or beautiful.

When she met Nick on a ski lift in the Tetons, he was just home from Vietnam, his army brushcut glaring in that era of long-haired hippies. Fair, blue-eyed, and tall, he was totally her opposite in appearance. Her thick black hair hung to her waist, coarse as a horse's tail. And she still ate a lot of fish because, as her mother always said, at five-foot two every pound shows.

Nick began squiring her to outdoor rock concerts, the thick smell and smoke of marijuana wafting over them as though the lid had been removed

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from a steaming cauldron. Nick would lie on the hillside, smothering fistfuls of clover against her nose, tickling her with the stems, murmuring about his summer in Scotland as a bartender, the frenzy of law school, his endless months in a barracks reading military-legal documents.

Maggie loved to hear him talk. She would lie back against the deep reeds or bristling weeds of whatever farmer's field it was, waiting for the band to arrive, smelling the pot, the musky perfume, the incense. Nick's voice reminded her of a disc jockey's — resonant, clipped, worldly-wise. She kept waiting for him to announce a contest: **FOLKS, WIN BY BEING THE SIXTH CALLER ON OUR REQUEST LINE.**

She critiqued the girls around her, their lavishly thick hair frizzed and kinked, legs bare, shoulders exposed. They drank beer or wine and never worried about their figures, forsook makeup and bras, relishing their firm, dewy youth. At twenty-four, Maggie felt like an old woman, furrowed by time, slowly starving herself toward hollow cheeks.

She was amazed when Nick proposed marriage, as though all those intense months of weeping and aching had been an ordinary, casual experience. Somehow, she couldn't believe he loved her, too. When they married that summer, her mother breathed a sigh of relief at having one less old maid in the family but fretted about what people would think of a civil wedding. "Well, at least he was born a Mormon," her mother said. "He might come around some day."

They began marriage with the usual expectations: a home, children, endless passion. Maggie pictured herself pureeing baby food, rocking through wintry nights with her breast bared to a suckling child, making quilts in Relief Society. Instead, she spent ten childless years waving to nieces and nephews over a chasm of white carpet unmarred by teething biscuits, sticky fingers, or wet diapers.

Nick's law partners regarded them as a modern, childless-by-choice couple who relished their freedom to travel and entertain. They weekendend in Jackson or Aspen and threw lavish dinner parties at a moment's notice. Maggie knew a marvelous caterer whose phone was unlisted — her mother.

Maggie basked in the social life but harbored the feeling that an upright Idaho Mormon girl could not be complete without children. Finally, shortly before her tenth wedding anniversary, she visited yet another fertility specialist who examined her, then tilted back in his chair, sucking on a pencil, his stethoscope dangling beneath his armpit like a wayward tadpole. "Mrs. Slattery," he said softly, "a fear of childbirth can sometimes prevent pregnancy. I suggest you loosen up a little and keep trying. I know you've been told this before but get rid of those hangups. Your husband checks out, so it must be your problem, and there's no physical reason you can't conceive."

He was the fourth specialist they had consulted. Maggie thanked him politely and walked to the parking lot, where she wept with her head on the steering wheel of her sports car.

That evening she spent two hours getting ready to attend a reception for Warren Burger, who turned out to be friendly and congenial. Maggie asked

about his children and grandchildren, wondering if he noticed the swollen bags under her eyes. She had rubbed ice cubes on them all afternoon.

On the way home, in the car, Nick loosened his tie knot and pulled her close to him. "I think every lawyer in the state was there," he said.

"And I was an Oscar-worthy actress," Maggie said, snuggling under his arm at a stop light. "My pearly teeth and wintergreen breath awed the legal eagles, who hovered around me and discussed the fine points of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*."

Nick laughed. "Don't tell me. A quote from the society page, right? You're not tired of this wild social life, are you?"

"We're not quite the Duke and Duchess of Windsor yet. Although, come to think of it, they never had children either."

Nick looked at her sideways then glanced back at the road. "Forget that doctor." He stubbed his cigarette in the ashtray. "You know what somebody said about you tonight? That you looked like a cross between Ava Gardner and Vivien Leigh."

"Ah, that must have been because I fluttered my eyelashes while they discussed Giotto or Mendelssohn and tried not to cough when they blew smoke in my face."

"I'll bet no one there dreamed you still think of yourself as an overweight tractor driver." Nick laughed again and squeezed her shoulder. "Hey," he said, "I saw Mr. Burger helping you on with your coat. Do I have grounds for jealousy?"

"Maybe a little. Or maybe he just likes fox fur."

Nick pulled into the driveway and turned the key, flipped it out of the ignition and into his pocket. "My dear, you conducted yourself admirably," he said in a British accent. "Especially after your harrowing experience at the doctor's office." He kissed her cheek.

"It's just skillful acting," she said. "When I keep my mouth shut, they think I'm smart. But really, my mind is mildewed like a month-old banana."

"Go put on your nightgown, Chiquita. I'll be up in a minute."

The Wall Street Journal lay open on their bed. Undressing, Maggie remembered filling in once for Nick's secretary. He had sent her to the news stand for a *Journal* and when she returned with a *Ladies' Home Journal* everyone had laughed hysterically. For weeks afterward, Nick's partners asked her for the latest Dow Jones recipes.

Old banana brain, she thought. I'm okay if I keep my mouth shut and my mind open. Loosen up and keep trying, Mrs. Slattery. There's no physical reason you can't conceive.

When Nick came upstairs, she was in bed. He threw back the satin comforter, dropped his shoes beside hers, then switched off the lamp.

"Undressing in the dark to spare my innocent eyes?" she asked.

He climbed in, pulling the blanket up to his chin and shivering. When he reached over and clicked off her side of the electric blanket, she said, "Step one — foreplay."

"Do you have to be funny all the time?" he said quietly, lying back on his pillow.

"I thought you liked it."

"When it's appropriate I do."

"Sorry," she said. "Did you pull the drapes? Mrs. Leroy might have her telescope trained on our window again."

"They're closed."

Maggie turned toward him, flattening his hair against her forehead. His breath was warm and she pictured him at the reception, eating an olive from a toothpick.

"I want you to quote to me," she said.

He punched his pillow, then began in a deep, mocking voice, "Your hair is black as ebon; your eyes, the hue of raw honey." Spoofing the Song of Solomon was his best-loved ritual. They had begun it years ago, waiting endless hours for the concerts to start.

"You forgot my favorite part," she said.

"Your lips are a scarlet ribbon dripping with wine?"

"No, the snow and the swan."

"Aha, that's not even biblical. It's from a Scottish song, I think. 'Your brow is like the snowdrift, your throat is like the swan.'" He rolled his "r's" and Maggie pictured him wearing an outrageous orange kilt, standing behind a bar, mixing drinks.

"I'd put my arm around you," Nick said, "but Warren Burger might be jealous."

"Well," she said, "if you can have Raquel, I can flirt with Warren." Before they were married, Nick had a poster of Welch taped to his bedroom wall, an index card with the words "These are the times that try men's souls" stapled across her bare midriff.

"I don't know what Warren sees in you," Nick said. "You're developing dark circles under your eyes."

"I know. You'll have to change your quotation: 'Your eyes are purple rings, creased with crows' feet.'"

He laughed and hugged her. "Maggie, Maggie, I love you even if you're crazy."

"And I love you," she said, "even though you wear cowboy boots to court."

After Nick began snoring, she lay awake thinking of Sally Kellso, her college roommate — a frail, undeveloped redhead. Maggie dreamed about Sally often. Sally had had a habit of staring at Maggie, admiring everything she did. "You're so gorgeous," she would say, watching Maggie roll her hair onto juice cans. "You could have any guy in the world."

Sally undressed in the closet and took sponge baths to avoid the community shower in P.E. class. She washed her underwear in the bathtub so no one would catch a glimpse of it in the laundry room.

Sally was a shy, harmless girl, but the dreams Maggie had about her were nightmares. One night during her sophomore year, Maggie had returned from badminton class to find Sally sprawled on the bed in her shortie nightgown, pale and shivering, her legs mottled with blue veins. As Maggie stood there with her mouth open, Sally miscarried, drenching the bed with blood. The clotted mass lay in a heap on the gray bedspread. Maggie picked it up in a towel with both hands, closing her eyes to keep from fainting, and hurled it into the toilet. Then she watched it swirl around as she flushed it away. A fetus. A few months more and it would have been a fully developed baby.

Afterward, Sally was completely hysterical, screaming for her lost baby, holding her hands over her mouth so she wouldn't divulge the name of the father, who was married. She spent the next year in a mental hospital.

Now, each time Maggie dreamed of Sally Kellso, she woke up sweating, walked to the window and touched the curtains to see if they were the scratchy green dorm curtains or her sheer floor-length drapes. Then she would lie in bed, pressing her hands into the mattress to keep from rubbing them, feeling through the towel the slimy dark mass that reminded her of blueberry jam.

The day after Warren Burger's reception, Nick called Maggie from the office. "There's a meeting at the bank tonight," he yawned. "An embezzlement problem, it looks like. They want counsel present. So I'll grab a sandwich at the drug store."

"Okay," she said. "I guess I'll go buy myself a steak."

She was standing at the meat counter when a man in greasy khakis asked her how to cook barbecued ribs. "I'm not much of a cook," she said. "Sorry."

"Me neither. Why don't we eat out?"

"Huh?"

"I'm asking you to dinner," he said, grinning. He was almost as blond as Nick, with immaculate white teeth.

"I'm married." She flashed her diamond.

"What does that mean these days?" He was wearing a blue baseball cap. Maggie pushed her cart away and he reached out to touch her shoulder. "Hope I didn't offend you," he said. "I get a little rowdy sometimes."

She moved quickly past the pot roasts.

"You probably think I'm too old," he followed her, "but I'm just a spring chicken." He held up a three-pound fryer and laughed.

Maggie wheeled her cart to the check-out counter. A redheaded model winked from the cover of a magazine, her breasts exposed from a gaping blouse. Maggie looked at the model's carefully disheveled hair and wondered what Sally Kellso was doing these days.

"You know," the man said, nodding at the magazine, "you could make a lot of money as a model. That gal hasn't got a thing on you, honey."

"She hasn't got a thing on, period," Maggie said and he guffawed.

She was closing the trunk of her car when he reappeared, shouting, "Give me your phone number."

"You're nuts," she yelled, slamming the door.

"My name's Ron," he called across the parking lot, jumping into a black pickup truck. He followed her, but she lost him at a yellow light and sighed with relief.

At home, she put her groceries away, wrapped herself in a blanket and sat under the maple tree in the front yard, reading a trashy novel and watching Madeline Leroy's little boy ride his tricycle.

She heard the engine and glanced up from her book to see the C.B. aerial on the black pickup wobbling madly as Ron pulled up in front of the house. She shook her head and set the book in her lap. "Hi there," Ron said. He had changed into ironed levis worn white at the knees. "I went home and showered. I thought you were kind of put off by my work clothes. Yes," he raised a hand to stop her question, "I saw where you turned off after that light."

Maggie stared at the Big Wonderful Wyoming mud flaps on his truck. "Go away," she said.

"I've been afraid you'd say that," he put a hand on her knee. She moved her knee away. "But if you change your mind, honey, here's my card. And don't let anybody tell you you're not the foxiest chick I ever picked up at the meat counter."

She watched him drive off, talking into the C.B. microphone. Probably zeroing in on some lady truck driver, telling her she was a foxy chick, asking her how to barbecue spare ribs.

Madeline Leroy was standing on the sidewalk not ten yards from Maggie's chair, her hands clasped behind her back. Her little boy was sitting on his tricycle with his legs dangling over the handlebars, bent at the knees, leisurely swinging the front wheel from side to side.

"Get those legs down or no treat," Madeline said, pushing a lock of gray hair from her temple. She had become pregnant with this last child at age forty-five, never suspecting until her sixth month that she was pregnant. "I just figured it was menopause," she had explained to Maggie. "But no such luck."

After the little boy dropped his feet to the cement, his mother said, "Open your mouth and close your eyes and I'll give you something to make you wise." He stretched his chin toward the sky and opened his mouth so wide Maggie wondered if it would crack at the corners. Then Madeline dropped two jelly beans down his throat like a mother bird feeding worms to her baby.

Maggie folded her blanket, dragged the lawn chair onto the porch and went inside, sprawling on the white brocade couch, wondering how long it would take Madeline to alert the whole neighborhood that Maggie had entertained a handsome stranger on her front lawn.

She wondered if Nick was thinking of her, or about the embezzlement case, or his pretty secretary who undoubtedly knew all about the *Wall Street Journal* and was incredibly fertile besides.

That night, when Nick climbed into bed beside her, Maggie said, "Don't do your Song of Solomon stuff tonight. I'm not up for it." She stared at the shadows on the ceiling.

"You don't want me to quote at all?" he asked.

"No."

"Then how can I say you're beautiful?"

"Never mind," she said.

"You're the most beautiful woman ever to throw hay bales."

Maggie shook her hair back and smoothed the cool satin of her nightgown. She thought of hot, sweaty afternoons on her dad's farm, her arms tanned deep brown, her hair tangled and filthy. "Sometimes it took an hour to get the dirt out of my eyes after I got off the tractor," she said. "And when I took a bath, the tub was literally black afterward."

"I'll bet every boy in town loved you."

"I was a fat, calloused farmhand. Not exactly the type boys dream about."

"I don't believe it."

She leaned on one elbow and looked at Nick's profile in the moonlight. "It's getting darker in here," she said. "You can quote to me now, if you want."

He began talking in his disc jockey's voice, mocking her, and she thought of her rough hands in those Idaho summers, before she discovered fabulous thick moisturizers and silky rich lotions.

After the hysteria, Sally Kellso had lain on her bed for hours, pale, anemic, twitching from cold and shock. Maggie had wrapped her in blankets and hugged the girl desperately against her chest, trying to ease her own warmth into Sally's quivering body, to revive her somehow, to make things old again, as they had been when Sally was someone to ridicule for her shyness and excessive modesty.

Maggie lay listening to her husband in their wide bed, remembering porch-lights and trembling hands, her first kiss. She pictured Sally's married boyfriend (his face a blur) pressing his lips to Sally's, huddling against her in a dark corner, whispering reckless lies. The clotted fetus seemed to be swirling in her head again, Sally's legs pale against the bloody gray bedspread.

Maggie imagined herself and Nick in thirty years: a perversely chic old couple like the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, growing old together, childless, wealthy, pathetically romantic.

She pulled the electric blanket up beneath her chin and threw one arm over Nick's chest, burrowing up against him, wondering if Sally Kellso had ever given birth again.