

BUTLER LITERARY CONTEST SECTION

The following short story, group of poems and essay comprise the winning material in the 1948 Butler University literary contest.

## Cancelled Flight

GEORGE FULLEN

(First prize in the short story, Butler literary contest, 1948.)

The smell of gas was sickening.

"It's all your fault, Jane," he thought he could hear his own voice saying in a distant room.

It sounded so strange that he forced his eyes open, against the nausea, and tried to focus them. The lurid, dirty wall-paper focussed, receded and focussed again. It only increased his nausea. He had been sick when he turned on the gas.

And then he was falling, falling, falling. He never knew just when it was that the sensation of falling ceased, but he became aware, finally, that he was walking, stumbling across a field toward a distant light. As he approached it, the light and the building from which it shone took shape. The building was a small hangar; and outside it, with the motors running, was an airplane. The sight of a plane, ready for flight, caused the dull longing which was always with him to become more intense. He walked around it; he bathed himself in the "prop wash." Suddenly, he felt that he had to fly the plane. He shouted but no one appeared from the hangar. He walked to the hangar and looked inside. He shouted again, but still there was no answer. It was empty.

He walked back to the plane, got in and shut the door. There was no one in the plane. He stood for a moment, enjoying the purely sensual pleasure of the rhythmic vibration of the plane. Then he took his place in the pilot's seat. The instrument panel looked familiar and strange at the

same time. He checked the instruments, turned on the landing lights, released the brakes and taxied out to the landing strip. He looked back at the hangar, but no one had appeared to protest his theft. He pushed the throttles forward. The engines revved up, and the plane began to race along the rough, unpaved strip. As the plane was airborne, he felt the surge of a moment's happiness, the first real pleasure he had felt for many months. When he had gained sufficient altitude, he indulged his whim and put the plane through every trick he knew. Then he gained altitude again, climbing until he had topped the ceiling of clouds. The moon was bright and the air was clear as it always was above the clouds.

As he leveled off, a feeling of contentment came to him. He settled more comfortably in the seat. The drone of the motors gave him a delicious feeling of security. It had been so long since he had felt secure about anything. And his mind seemed as clear as the atmosphere—clarity was also a rare thing. Life had been so hopelessly muddled. One disappointment had occurred before another dimmed in his consciousness. He had been unable to cope with them, even to think about them.

The war, he supposed, had been the beginning. Or had it been the end? Anyway, life had been wonderful until the war came along. He had grown up pleasantly. His childhood was filled with pleasant memories. Baseball, tennis, swimming, ice

skating, digging caves on vacant lots with the gang, Hallowe'en pranks, the smell of smoke and wieners roasting, playing stage-coach with bicycles and a wagon which always ended by capsizing the wagon and hurting someone—everything had seemed to be pleasant in those days. And later, there had been the great, the earth-shaking revelation of the ecstasy of sex. Then there had been dating, dancing, learning how to smoke, the soulful satisfaction of shaving. He had met Jane in his last year in high school. Like most of the couples in school that year, they had fallen in love. They had been just nineteen when they were married. God, how he had loved her! They had had a year, and they'd made the most of it.

Then he had enlisted in the Air Corps. He'd always wanted to fly. The war really hadn't been so bad. Oh, he'd been aware of the waste, the ruin, the terror of death, all the things that made war truly hell. But it had been necessary. He had known that it was necessary. And he had done what he could do best and been happy, though frightened, doing it. The worst thing about the war had been the way he missed Jane. He'd missed her terribly because he loved her and because he'd been faithful.

Somehow, the war had seemed to end too soon. It wasn't that he hadn't wanted it to end. God knows, he'd been as eager as anybody for it to be finished and to get back home. But it had been hard to believe that the end so long awaited, so eagerly awaited, had actually come. Even though it had taken some time to get home, it had seemed very short.

He remembered well the day when he arrived home. Jane had been sharing a room with a friend. Of course, he knew she wouldn't be waiting in the little house where they'd spent their idyllic year, but still, he felt very strange as he approached

the apartment house where she was living. He had been excited and frightened. He had been frightened just like he was before their wedding. It was foolish, but that was how he felt. He remembered that, when he entered the apartment house, he'd stood for a moment by the mail boxes. It's here! It's here! The moment we've waited for is here! He remembered thinking as he stood there, trying to regain his breath. Then he'd rung the bell for Jane's apartment and run up the stairs. She was waiting for him at the door.

All he had managed to say was a strangled: "Jane." Then he kissed her. She had dragged him inside. They had fallen on a couch, clutching one another.

"Darling, darling, darling," Jane had chanted.

They had tried to talk, but he had continued to be too breathless. Every breath was such an effort that it made the next one more difficult. Jane had been much calmer and he had cursed himself as a fool. But, finally, the absurd excitement had passed. They had dashed frantically from one subject to another, trying to cover all the things that had not been or could not be said in letters. Eventually, they had had to give that up, too, for they were trying to say too much in too short a time.

Jane had brought them back to practical things when she said, with a gesture indicating the room: "It isn't much, but we have it to ourselves for a whole week. After that, we'll have to find a place for ourselves or for my roommate. She is tripling with two of our friends in their apartment. It is no bigger than this one, so that can't last."

"That's swell of her," he had answered, though, of course, it was no more nor less than she should have done.

"Darling," Jane had continued, "What would you like to eat? We have some steak. Would you like that?"

He would have eaten anything, then.

He had followed her around while she fixed the meal, interfering constantly with her preparations because he could not keep his hands away from her. That week had been idyllic, too.

After that, it had been different. The week had lengthened to a month while he, Jane and her roommate had tried to find something to relieve their housing shortage. Finally, his mother had had her way and made room for them with her. That hadn't gone well from the start. Everything about it was wrong. In the first place, he didn't know what he wanted to do about a job. Of course, he wasn't in a very big hurry to find one, either. He thought that he deserved a vacation. Jane thought so, too, until his vacation had gone into its third month. Then Jane joined his mother who had been nagging him about working since the second month.

He found a job, all right. He didn't like it; so he found another one. He didn't like that one either. That happened several times.

One morning, he announced to Jane: "Hon, I've been thinking about going back into the army. I think I can still keep my commission. How would you like your husband to be a regular army man?"

Jane's face clouded and she replied: "I don't think I'd like it. No, I wouldn't like it at all."

"Why, Hon? I'd be making plenty of money. They would furnish us a nice home. You know, they don't move you around so much during peace time."

"Darling," Jane said patiently, "It'd be all right for us. But I wouldn't like it for our children. I think it would be rather unnatural—like playing war in peace."

He looked at her sitting there, solemnly pronouncing this judgment. For the first time he was really exasperated with her. Of all the foolish things he'd ever heard, rejecting his suggestion on the basis of

children not yet born.

He had let the subject drop, but after that nothing went smoothly. It seemed to him that inflation, shortages, especially the housing shortage, had been brought about just to make his life more difficult. He had insisted that Jane quit her job; and with his constantly changing jobs, their finances were usually pretty precarious. Jane and his mother nagged constantly. He began to spend a lot of time drinking with his old high school buddies, those who were available. Most of them were unmarried.

What had caused the final big scene, he couldn't remember. Jane had said something, and suddenly, he'd hated her; he'd hated her voice; he never wanted to see her again. And he'd told her so. She had been silent while he packed his bag. At the door, she had told him, in a shaking voice: "When you know what you really want to do, I'll be glad to see you."

"I know what I want to do; I don't want to see *you* ever," he had replied. And he had left the house feeling liberated.

The feeling of freedom had been short-lived. It had lasted while he found a room. He had finally found one in the very slummy part of town. It contained a bed, a dresser, a chair, a table, a small cabinet and a gas plate. He had enjoyed his freedom while he sat alone in his room that night, drinking. He slept all the next day and drank throughout the next night. After that, his freedom disappeared. He wouldn't go back to his old job or find another like it. He had very little money. He slept, ate and drank. He had met the blonde who lived across the hall as he came back, one afternoon, from spending his last money for more liquor, cigarettes and coffee. He'd been very apologetic because all he had to offer her was a share of his liquor, cigarettes and coffee. She hadn't minded. She was one of those people too easily moved to pity. But not even she could help him to

escape from his acute melancholy.

There had been that terrible feeling of guilt, too. That was what he really couldn't escape. He had a feeling that he had been wrong, and he couldn't stand that. That was why he had turned on the gas.

He straightened up in his seat, shocked by the realization that turning on the gas plate was the last thing he could remember before finding himself walking toward the hangar. The more he thought about it, the more unaccountable the transition was. How had he got from his room to the small air field? Then the truth came to him. He had tried to commit suicide. He had succeeded. He was DEAD!

He sat, stunned by the truth. He stirred, finally, and fumbled in his shirt pocket to see if he still had a cigarette. Yes, he had been able to bring those with him. He laughed ironically. Who said you couldn't take it with you?

Well, he thought, I wonder where I'm going.

He lit the cigarette and puffed reflectively. Funny situation. The last mission. And what was the objective? He supposed he was heading for—somewhere.

It's funny, he thought, now that it's done, there are some things I wish I'd done while I was alive. I thought when this happened I'd be old and my wife and my kids and their kids would be around my bed. My God, this will be a terrible shock to Jane. No, I guess it won't, either. She'll be glad to get rid of me. I've never been any good to her. She can get married again. She doesn't even have any kids to keep her tied to me. One good thing I did do: I left her with a clean slate.

He felt the tear leave his eyes and run down his face. Clutching the wheel, he let the sobs rise—the gasping, tearing, wrenching sobs. He let them come. They had been down there so long; it felt good to be rid of them. It passed, finally, and he sat

there with his head cradled in his hands which still held the wheel firmly.

I haven't done a thing to recommend me. I haven't really lived at all. I wish I could go back and live. I wish I could go back and do the things I should have done.

He rocked his head, rocking his hands at the same time. And the plane rocked, too. He sat up. The plane rocked! It was still under his control! He wondered what would happen if he turned it around. He put the plane into a steep turn. It responded promptly. How far had he flown? How would he find such a small, obscure field in the dark? Could a dead man hope to live again?

As the plane flew steadily on, he prayed. He prayed hard. He prayed for the first time since he was a child and believed that a prayer would solve any small problem. Not even the war had made him pray again, but now he was praying. He decided to get under the cloud bank. He could see a few distant lights shining in the darkness below him. He descended until he was only three hundred feet above the ground. The lights, closer now, flashed by, but none of them had any meaning for him. Any one of them might be the one, but he wouldn't know it.

The engine sputtered, caught, sputtered again and “conked out.” He gripped the wheel and glided, losing altitude. Could a man die twice? It looked like that was what was going to happen to him. He had very little altitude to lose. He couldn't see a thing. He felt the first thump and the bounce.

He could feel himself rising and falling, rising and falling. The sensation resolved itself into waves of nausea. He was sick. He was very sick. He fought to place himself. He fought to conquer his illness. He

fought to open his eyes. But he couldn't. He was too sick.

He accepted his sickness. He lay in it. Then he felt something in his nose, something which was giving him needed vitality. Then he remembered the gas; he remembered speaking to Jane; he remembered blackness.

In a distant room, he heard a voice ask: "Is he all right, Doc?"

"Yes, he'll be all right. Lucky you found him when you did."

"I knew he was in bad shape, but I didn't know he was this bad. I could smell it in the hall. I was worried about him."

He knew it was the blonde. He owed her an apology. He owed a lot of people apologies. He'd do that when he could open his eyes. He had failed everywhere. He had just failed again. If there was a way, he had to apologize for his failures. Right now, he was too tired. And he wondered why he felt so absurdly glad to be alive.

## Poems

RUTH O'MAHONEY

*(First prize in poetry, Butler literary contest, 1948.)*

### DAY

In the half light before the sun  
The hush of the sleeping world  
Fills the air with waiting  
I hold my breath  
Watching  
Listening  
Will it never come

Then the light slips over the rim  
Day

### HARMONY

The existence we call life  
Seems more the tuning up  
Each melody sweet in itself  
Discord with others

Waiting the leader  
To blend all  
In an harmonious whole