

London Epitaph

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THE WHOLE THING seems as if it happened a long time ago. Even now, when I try to set down the chains of circumstance and incident, some of the details blur together, and it is only with painful effort that I am able to remember my sister's face, and the screaming air raid siren, and the great stone house that stood ruined and smoking after the siren stopped screaming and the bombers flew back over the Channel.

I had sailed for England shortly before this country entered the war and, though I was well aware of the omnipresent threat of death and destruction for the Britishers during those strained, terror-filled years, it seemed quite suddenly important for me to be with Elsa when I was certain she needed the strength and support I had always given her and was prepared to offer her now. She was my sister, you see, nearly fifteen years younger than I, and, although she was in her early thirties then, I expected her to be still as vacillating and immature, girlish, perhaps, as she had been in her childhood when I was both mother and father to her. I suppose I had always thought of her in a maternal way and when, at twenty, she married middle-aged Frederic Channing and went back with him to his home in London, I felt as if she were taking the wasted years of my youth and my girlhood across the sea with her. I was not bitter in my regrets however; she had been a wilful, but never an ungrateful child, and after her marriage she wrote me regularly, asking me at last to come and be with her, and it was sufficient that she was still conscious of her need for me. She was weak-natured, you know, and it was perhaps my fault for petting and spoiling her so much; but the appeal in those luminous dark eyes of hers never failed to win me over as I know they must have conquered Frederic time and again during their brief life together when he held to her so lovingly, so blindly.

I remember how they looked the morning my ship reached England, standing against the dock railing, the three of them: Elsa, Frederic, and his son of an earlier marriage, Howard, whom I recognized from my sister's description of him. Elsa was the same, of course; Frederic looked portly and contented; and Howard, I noticed, was raw and handsome in a dark, youthful way. It was very early in the morning and a weak, tentative sun was trying gallantly to thrust through the puffs of fog and haze, and I thought that, standing together there, the three of them excited and waving, they were like children starting on a new adventure and the war and death seemed in that brief moment farther away than I had thought

it possible to imagine. Then, quite abruptly, we were all in each other's arms, breathlessly happy, eager to reach the sanctuary of the gray stone house out in Diderot Square.

The days that followed swiftly were gay and exciting, and I was pleased that my relationship with Elsa was almost the same as always, except of course that marriage had given her a kind of strength and independence, so that she did not lean on me as heavily as before, but confided in me openly and willingly, and I felt in her self-sufficiency a kind of new independence for myself. She needed guidance, naturally; I could see that Frederic, dotting and fatuous and kindly as he was, was not the tower of strength to inspire Elsa's confidence, although their marriage was a success (she had me to understand)—a steady quiet relationship without the pains and the harshness of a youthful wedlock. And, while I said nothing and was silently grateful for Elsa's happiness, I found it difficult to imagine that my vivacious Elsa, who had always been so passionately fond of laughter and bright music, could have found contentment with stoical Frederic Channing and their life together in the dim quiet of the old stone house.

Sometimes, in the evenings, after we had pulled the curtains and dimmed the lights, Elsa played the piano and Howard, leaning awkwardly over her shoulder, sang falteringly in a husky, pleasant baritone; and Frederic and I, conscious of our age and not wanting to dampen their spirits, browsed companionably in the library or chatted together, sometimes about Elsa, most of the time about Howard. Frederic was extremely devoted to the boy, you know. Howard had a promising career in the Ministry and Frederic was pathetically anxious that nothing should happen to ruin his chances. Elsa had been wonderful, Frederic confided, working with Howard, helping him study—almost like a sister, really, instead of a stepmother.

I liked Frederic and his son and, of course, Elsa, and the easy natural way of life there in the old Channing home; and so the weeks became months and I stayed on in London because we were all so happy there, quite untouched by the war. I felt almost as if I had become a Channing myself. We did not actually forget the war, being constantly reminded of it by the sirens and the bombings and the planes overhead, but we tried as most Londoners did, to live our lives around it and not let it become the cynosure of our thoughts and our beings. We rarely went to a bomb-shelter, even when the bombing was heavy and concentrated, because Elsa hated being crowded together with the huddled, frightened people. She said their fear was infectious and so, deferring quite naturally to her wishes, when the siren shrieked its warning we went down into the wine cellar, taking an old gramophone with us to keep our minds busy and our thoughts away from the terror overhead. Sometimes, if Elsa felt kittenish, she and Howard played hiding games in the dimness, and Frederic and

I listened to the old Sir Harry Lauder records and chuckled superciliously, enviously perhaps, at the young people's antics. They seemed so innocent together, like young colts. When I think back over it now, Frederic and I must have been, in our own innocence or ignorance, in a way responsible for the terrible thing that happened soon after.

There was a week or so when the bombings ceased altogether and Elsa, gayer and more at ease than I had seen her for a long time, invited friends in to dinner and bridge afterwards. It promised to be a welcome respite from the monotonous routine the heavy bombings had of late forced us into; and all of us, even Frederic who usually smiled fondly on Elsa's frivolous little plans, were quite enthusiastic about the promised evening of company and pleasure. I enjoyed the dinner immensely for I found the dry wit of those droll, long-faced Britishers rather amusing. Then, while the card tables were being set up, Frederic opened champagne and we toasted each other many times over, trying, I suppose, to escape into forgetfulness and exhilaration.

It was some time later, an hour or so perhaps, when I noticed Elsa had been drinking too much; she was getting careless in her speech, and I frowned at her several times, shocked by her vulgarity and appalled at her cheapness as she stood, leaning heavily against the piano where Howard sat, his fingers motionless on the keys. She was an Elsa I had never seen before and when she finally noticed my frowns, she said loudly, "For the love of God, Eleanor, stop making those awful faces. You look like a nagging old shrew—you and Frederic—you're a good pair. Two old fat tabby cats by the fireside." Her words fell on the silence of the room and someone laughed nervously. Frederic stood up, white with rage and humiliation, "Shut up, Elsa. That's quite enough." He strode toward her, and she dropped suddenly, disgustingly on Howard's knees. "Keep away, Frederic," she slurred drunkenly. "You take Eleanor, and I'll take Howard. We're pairs, you know. We're all pairs." She turned then and kissed Howard full on the lips.

Mercifully, an air raid siren started its wail, and the stunned, embarrassed guests fled from the house to the shelter at the corner. The four of us, the Channings, scarcely moved until they were gone. Then Frederic, a new Frederic in his anger and brutality, screamed hysterically, "Get out, Eleanor. You and Howard get out," and when the two of us stumbled from the room he slammed the heavy doors shut behind us.

I do not know even now, I will never know what passed between them, what revelations were made, what dreams became ashes in that room while Howard and I stood trembling and cold in the dark, frightening stairwell. I remember I was sick with sudden hatred and disgust for this sister who had been my youth and my girlhood

and I retched and gagged several times there in the dim hallway, finally giving way to bitter, painful weeping. I was lost in my grief and bitterness and I did not know the bomb had struck near Channing House until I heard the plaster falling in huge chunks around me, and felt Howard's hand on my arm as he guided me down the trembling staircase. As we reached the bottom, Frederic flung open the heavy doors and shouted to us, like a madman. "She's dead. Elsa's dead. She fell when the bomb struck and now she's dead." There was blood running from the jagged fingernail scratches on his face and his eyes stared out of his head, horribly and starkly, begging us to believe. Then Howard pushed us both out into the street before him. "We shall think of ourselves now, Father," he said. And so we stood together in the deserted square and watched the old Channing House shudder agonizingly and collapse; watched the smoke from the ruins wreath up into the air like shadowy fingers writing a timeless, formless epitaph for the dead and the dying.

SONNET 304

Verse Forms Class, 1948

Why in the cold and hostile winter day
 Should time begin again? Is this new year
 A normal birth of any age, or mere
 Mechanic cutting—that convenient way
 A calendar is made? Oh, rather may
 Not every waiting moment newly bear
 A century of hopefulness and fear,
 For whose maturity we can but pray?
 Today, for me, the old year freshly lives
 And yet a newer one has come to birth.
 The paper map of days is false! Depend
 Upon the heart, a truer calendar, that gives
 The tides and times for me of heaven and earth.
 Now in your love my years begin and end.