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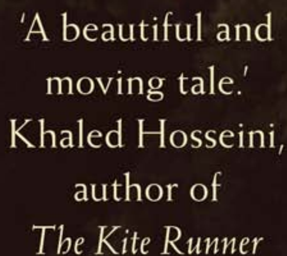

The STORY OF A MARRIAGE

We think we know the ones we love

Andrew Sean Greer

THE STORY OF A MARRIAGE

Andrew Sean Greer is the author of *The Confessions of Max Tivoli*, the story collection *How It Was for Me*, and the novel *The Path of Minor Planets*. He lives in San Francisco.

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THE PATH OF MINOR PLANETS

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stories

HOW IT WAS FOR ME

The Story of a Marriage

ANDREW SEAN GREER

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We think we know the ones we love.

Our husbands, our wives. We know them—we are them, sometimes; when separated at a party we find ourselves voicing their opinions, their taste in food or books, telling an anecdote that never happened to us but happened to them. We watch their tics of conversation, of driving and dressing, how they touch a sugar cube to their coffee and stare as it turns white to brown, then drop it, satisfied, into the cup. I watched my own husband do that every morning; I was a vigilant wife.

We think we know them. We think we love them. But what we love turns out to be a poor translation, a translation we ourselves have made, from a language we barely know. We try to get past it to the original, but we never can. We have seen it all. But what have we really understood?

One morning we awaken. Beside us, that familiar sleeping body in the bed: a new kind of stranger. For me, it came in 1953. That was when I stood in my house and saw a creature merely bewitched with my husband's face.

Perhaps you cannot see a marriage. Like those giant heavenly bodies invisible to the human eye, it can only be charted by its gravity, its pull on everything around it.

That is how I think of it. That I must look at everything around it, all the hidden stories, the unseen parts, so that somewhere in the middle—turning like a dark star—it will reveal itself at last.

The story of how I met my husband; even that's not simple. We met twice: once in our Kentucky hometown, and once on a beach in San Francisco. It was a joke for our whole marriage, that we were strangers twice.

I was a teenager when I fell in love with Holland Cook. We grew up in the same farming community, where there were plenty of boys to love—at that age I was like those Amazonian frogs, bright green, oozing emotion from every pore—but I caught no one's eye. Other girls had boys falling over them, and although I did my hair just like them and ripped the trim off attic dresses and sewed it on my hems, it did no good. My skin began to feel like clothing I had outgrown; I saw myself as tall and gawky; and as no one ever told me I was beautiful—neither my mother nor my disapproving father—I decided that I must be plain.

So when a boy came along who actually met my eyes, who showed up along my walk from school and got himself invited in for a slice of bread, I didn't know what to make of him. I could tell he wanted something. For some reason I thought it was help on his schoolwork, so I always went to great pains to hide my notebooks and not sit next to him in class; I wouldn't be used like a crib sheet. But of course that wasn't what he wanted; he was always good in school. He never

said what he wanted, in fact, not in all the years I knew him, but you do not judge a man by what he says. You judge him by what he does, and one clear bright night in May when we walked by the strawberry patch, he held my hand all the way to Childress. That's all it took, just the briefest touch, in those days when I wore my nerves outside my skin like lace. Of course I lost my heart.

I was there with Holland in World War Two. He loved that I "talked like a book" and not like any of the other girls, and when the time finally came for him to go into the army, I watched him step onto that bus and head to war. It was a lonely grief for a young girl.

It never occurred to me that I could leave as well, not until a government man walked up to our house and asked for me by name. I tromped down in my faded sundress to find a very ruddy and clean-shaven man wearing a lapel pin of the Statue of Liberty in gold; I coveted it terribly. His name was Mr. Pinker. He was the kind of man you were supposed to obey. He talked to me about jobs in California, how industries wanted strong women like me. His words—they were rips in a curtain, revealing a vista to a world I had never imagined before: airplanes, California; it was like agreeing to travel to another planet. After I thanked the man, he said, "Well then, as thanks you can do a favor for me." To my young mind, it seemed like nothing special at all.

"Now that sounds like the first bright idea you *ever* had," my father said when I mentioned leaving. I can't find any memory in which he held my gaze as long as he did that day. I packed my bags and never saw Kentucky again.

On the bus ride to California, I studied the mountains' ascent into a line of clouds and saw where, as if set upon those clouds, even higher mountains loomed. I had never seen a sight like that in all my life. It was as if the world had been enchanted all along and no one told me.

As for the favor the man asked of me, it was perfectly simple: he just wanted me to write letters. About the girls around me in the shipyard and the planes and conversations I overheard, everyday rituals: what we ate, what I wore, what I saw. I laughed to think what good it would do him. Now I can only laugh at myself—the government must have been looking for suspicious activities, but he didn't tell me that. He told me to pretend I was keeping a diary. I did my duty; I did it even when I left my first job to become a WAVE—only a few other girls from a community like mine—spreading Noxzema on our pimply faces, the girls' rears shaking to the radio, getting used to Coke instead of rationed coffee and Chinese food instead of hamburgers. I sat there every night and tried to write it all down, but I found my own life lacking; it hardly seemed worth telling. Like so many people, I was deaf to my own stories. So I made them up.

My life wasn't interesting to me, but I'd read books that were, and that is what I put down, with details stolen from Flaubert and Ford and Ferber, intrigues and sorrows and brief colorful joys: a beautiful work of fiction for my country held together with silence and lies. That is, it turns out, what holds a country together. I did my job well, in the handwriting my mother had taught me, tall and loyal and true, signed with the special slipknot *P* for Pearlie I invented at the age of nine, mailed to Mr. William Pinker, 62 Holly Street, Washington, D.C.

What did you do in the war, Grandma? I lied to my country, pretending to tattle on friends. I'm sure I was just one of thousands; I'm sure it was a clearinghouse for lonely hearts like me. Imagine the ad jingle: "Be a finker . . . for Mr. Pinker!"

Then the war ended, as did the factory work for women and our jobs as WAVEs. I had long since stopped writing my notes to Washington; there was so much else to worry about and I had my position doing piecework sewing to pay for meals. And one day, alone down by the ocean, I walked right by a sailor on a bench, sitting with his book facedown like a fig leaf on his lap, staring out to sea.

I knew very little about men, so I was startled to see such despair on his square handsome face. I knew him. The boy who'd held my hand all the way to Childress, whose heart I had, at least briefly, possessed. Holland Cook.

I said hello.

"Well hi there, Sarah, how's the dog?" he said amiably. The wind stopped, as if, like Holland, it did not recognize me. Sarah was not my name.

We stayed there for a moment in the oyster-colored air, with his smile slowly sagging, my hand holding the flap of my coat to my throat, my bright kerchief tugging in the wind, and a sickness building in my stomach. I could have moved on; merely walked away so he would never know who I was. Just some strange girl fading into the fog.

But instead I said my name.

Then you recognized me, didn't you, Holland? Your childhood sweetheart. Pearlie who'd read poetry to you, who'd taken piano lessons from your mother; that was the

second time we met. A sudden memory of home, opening like a pop-up book. He chatted with me, he even made me laugh a little, and when I said I had no escort to the movies that Friday and asked if he would come, he paused a while before looking at me, saying quietly, "All right."

I was shocked when he turned up at my rooming house. The low-watt bulbs revealed a weary man, hat in his hands, his skin a little ashen, his elegant necktie loosely knotted. He claimed, years later, that he couldn't even remember what he or I wore that night: "Was it the green dress?" No, Holland; it was black roses on white; its pattern is framed and hung in my memory alongside our honeymoon wallpaper (pale green garlands). I thought he might be drunk; I was afraid he might collapse, but he smiled and offered his arm and after the film took me to a nice restaurant out in North Beach. At dinner, he hardly ate or spoke. He barely looked at me, or noticed the stares we got from other patrons; his own gaze was fixed on two cast-iron dogs that sat before the unlit fireplace. So after we had taken the streetcar to my corner, and it was time to say good night, I was surprised when he turned very quickly and kissed me on the mouth. An electric jolt of happiness passed through me. He stepped back, breathing quickly and buttoned his jacket to go. "I have to see a friend," he told me sharply.

"Holland," I said. He looked back at me as if I had jerked a string. "Holland," I repeated. He waited. And then I said the right thing. It was the only time I ever did: "Let me take care of you."

His deep eyes awakened. Did he think I meant to remind him of our time back in Kentucky, that I offered

the soft threat of the past? A dark line appeared between his eyebrows.

He said, “You don’t know me, not really.”

I told him that didn’t matter, but what I meant was that he was wrong; I knew him, of course I knew all about him from that time in our constricting little hometown: the grass behind the schoolyard we used to poke with a stick, the path from Franklin to Childress cluttered with witch hazel and touch-me-nots and railroad vine, the ice shivering in a summer pitcher of his mother’s lemonade—the lost world that only I remembered. For here we were so far from home. The one we could never regain. Who could know him better than I?

I acted instinctively. All I wanted was to keep him there on the shining streetcar tracks. “Let me take care of you again.”

“You serious?” he asked.

“You know, Holland, I’ve never been kissed by any boy but you.”

“That ain’t true, it’s been years, Pearlie. So much has changed.”

“I haven’t changed.”

Immediately he took my shoulder and pressed his lips to mine.

Two months later, by those same cable-car tracks, he whispered: “Pearlie, I need you to marry me.” He told me that I didn’t really know his life, and of course he was right. Yet I married him. He was too beautiful a man to lose and I loved him.

The first thing people noticed in my husband was his looks. Tall, dark, with a comforting smile that seemed to hide nothing: the kind of effortless beauty that cannot be marred by strain or illness, like something beaten out of gold, so that even if you bent it or melted it down it would always be a pure, beautiful thing. That's how I saw him, ever since I was a girl staring at him in our classroom. But I was not alone; it was how everybody saw him.

Beauty is a warping lens. He had the kind of looks that are always greeted by grins and handshakes, extra glances, stares held for a moment longer than usual; a smile and a face not easily forgotten. Even the way he held a cigarette, or leaned over to tie his shoe, had a certain masculine grace that made you want to sketch him. What a distorted, confusing way to live. To be offered jobs and rides and free drinks—"It's on the house, sweetie"—to sense a room changing as you move through it. Watched everywhere you go. To be someone people long to possess, and to be used to this feeling; to be wanted so immediately, so often, that you have never known yourself what you might want.

And he was mine, of all incredible things.

What would I have told you about my husband, in those young days of our marriage? Just that he had a lovely baritone. And liked his whiskey neat. That he would lend a stranger twenty dollars if he seemed like the right sort of fellow; and later, when we had a son, he carefully tracked his health, and called the doctor whenever we were worried, and tenderly soaped Sonny's legs in the bathtub as if everything were good. Always well dressed and smelling of leather and wood, like a favorite coat or a

fine piece of furniture. He liked to smoke but hated to be seen doing it—a holdover from his soldier days—and I would come upon him, in our married home, leaning against the frame of the patio door with a lonely expression, right hand dangling emptily inside, left hand trailing smoke: exactly the position of California leaning against the Pacific. He kissed me goodbye every morning at eight and hello every evening at six; he worked hard to provide for us all; he had nearly lost his life for his country. Loyal, decent, a soldier: American virtues. All that is true, of course, though it gets no closer to the real man. They are simply the things one would set upon a tombstone. They have, in fact, been set upon the tombstone of Holland Cook.

Just after our engagement, Holland's aunts arrived at my rooming house. Alice and Beatrice, not really his aunts, in fact, but elderly twin cousins who, when he came to San Francisco, announced they were his mothers now, and arranged themselves in his life like cats unhelpfully placing themselves in the folds of an unmade bed.

They took me out for an elegant lunch and they told me that I needed to know something about Holland before I married him. It was a beautiful setting. We sat in a special area of a department-store lunchroom, after being turned away by two others; it was four floors up from Union Square with a great stained-glass ship floating overhead and waiters, old men in jackets, buzzing everywhere, back in the days when department stores had rotunda art galleries and libraries of books to buy or rent.

Imagine a time when you could rent a book from Macy's! I sat in that glittering room with those pinched old women staring at me with odd, sad expressions. I was young and scared to death. "We need to tell you about Holland," one of them said—I hadn't yet learned the trick to telling them apart—and the other nodded. "He's real ill. I'm sure he hasn't told you."

"He's ill?"

They shared a glance—I was too young to know what it might mean—and Alice said, "There isn't a cure."

"It's gotten better, but there isn't a cure," her twin repeated. I would later learn that the difference between them was that the elder had a birthmark, and the younger's heart had been broken, thirty years earlier, by a married man. As if that, too, might leave a mark.

I looked down and noticed I'd eaten all the beautiful popovers.

"He's had a hard life," Alice cut in, and it made no sense to me. "The war, his mother's death—" and then she broke off in a sob, staring out the great windows that looked down on a monument: Dewey's triumph in the Pacific.

I asked them what exactly was wrong with him. The younger aunt put her hand on her lips, like an old statue, and told me it was bad blood, a crooked heart, that there was no cure for it.

"But," I said, "but I'll take care of him."

"We heard how you took care of him in the war," Beatrice said.

"Yes," I told them carefully. "Yes, me and his mother."

She looked at me with a shrewd eye. I was at that age when you believe all kinds of upside-down things, including that your elders are innocents and fools, and that

women in particular are children, to be treated gently and kindly, and only you—who have, after all, kissed a soldier back from war—know anything of the world. So while I heard those women speaking in their haughty accents, I was not really listening to the words.

"Miss Ash," the older aunt said and then used my first name: "Pearlie. We're relying on you. Don't you let him out of your sight. You know how he loves some excitement, and it'll kill him for sure. I don't like him taking our old property, out in the Outside Lands, it makes me nervous, but I guess it'll do him good, far away, out near the ocean air. He won't need to go downtown, or worry over the past. His family should be enough, Pearlie. You should be enough."

"Well of course." I could not guess what worry they meant. I was distracted by our waiter, a colored man, who was approaching, smiling at me, with a folded napkin in his hands. "I don't know about any old trouble. We aren't interested in frivolous things. That is not what he fought the war for." I spoke very carefully; I thought I'd mention his war experience, as a kind of proof against this idea of weakness.

Alice, though, had got quite worked up over something. She was inhaling in long, loud breaths like a cave at high tide and stared directly at the table in front of her. Her sister took her arm and she began to shake her head. Her jewelry blinked in the gray sunlight. Then she said something that I decided immediately I hadn't heard right, because it was so absurd, so crazed, and before I could get her to repeat it, we were interrupted. It was a friend of theirs, a woman in a fancy hat with a pheasant quill, asking the Misses Cook about the Daffodil Festival

and whether they thought there would be more flowers this year or fewer. Fewer, it was decided, because of the winter weather. As they talked, the waiter arrived, opened his napkin before me, and presented, burnished as bronze armor, a pile of hot popovers. It was so good in those days to be young.

If you clenched your right hand in a fist, that would be my San Francisco, knocking on the Golden Gate. Your little finger would be sunny downtown on the bay, and your thumb would be our Ocean Beach out on the blue Pacific. They called it the Sunset. That's where we lived, with our son, in an old property set like a rough stone among the thousands of new houses put up for returning soldiers and their families, in a part of the city no one really built on until the war was over. Then hills were flattened; soil was laid down over the sand; and they built a grid of streets and low pastel houses with garages and Spanish roofs and picture windows that flashed with the appearance of the sun, all in rows for fifty avenues until you reached the ocean. It felt outside of everything. Once, the *Chronicle* published a map of nuclear damage to San Francisco if it were hit, with rings of rubble and fire. The Sunset was the only district to survive.

When we first moved in, there were so many empty lots that sand always glittered in the air, and it could bury a vegetable garden overnight. Above the sound of the ocean, one could sometimes hear the early-morning roar of the lions in the nearby zoo. It was nothing like the rest of the city, no hills or views or bohemians, nothing Italian

or Victorian to make you take a photograph. A new way to live, separated from downtown by more than just a mountain with one tunnel. It sat on the very edge of the continent, with fog so dense and silver you hardly ever saw a sunset in the Sunset; any glowing light was often just a streetcar emerging like a miner from that tunnel, making its satisfied way out to the ocean.

It was a Saturday. It was 1953, and weeks before we had all watched on television as President Eisenhower and Richard Nixon were sworn in as the first government we could remember neither to be led nor haunted by FDR. We watched that inauguration, full of worries about the Korean War, race issues, the Rosenbergs, the Communists hidden everywhere around us, the Russian bombs being prepared and inscribed like voodoo charms with our names: Pearlie, Holland, Sonny. We watched. And told ourselves:

Help is coming.

People have an idea about the fifties. They talk about poodle skirts and bus strikes and Elvis; they talk about a young nation, an innocent nation. I don't know why they have it so wrong; it must be the consolidation of memory, because all that came later, as the country changed. In 1953, nothing had changed. We were still so haunted by the war. Fluoridation seemed like a horrible new invention, and the Woolworth's on Market a beautiful one. In those days, the firemen still wore leather helmets; William Platt the Seltzer Boy still left fizzing bottles on our doorstep, waking me with the ring of glass on concrete; the milkman still drove his old-fashioned wagon with gold script on the side—Spreckels Russell—and, impossible as it seems, the iceman still pulled blocks out with

his medieval tongs like a dentist doing an extraction on a whale, making his rounds for those last households without a refrigerator. The rag man and the knife man, the fruit truck and the coal truck and the dry cleaners, the fish man and the Colonial Bread man and the egg lady—all came down the street with their echoing cries of "Rags bottles trash!" and "Grind your scissors! Grind your knives!"; a sound that's gone forever. No one had ever heard anything wilder than a big band, or seen a man grow his hair longer than his ears. We were still trying to figure out how to live in a war after a war.

It was a medieval time for mothers. When he was three, my boy, Sonny, was playing with his loving father in the backyard when I heard shouting. I came running to find my son collapsed in the bower vine. My husband picked him up, rocking him in his arms, hushing his frightened boy, telling me to call the doctor. In those days, they had no idea what caused polio or what to do. The doctor told me it was "brought on by summer"—a magical diagnosis for a city without a summer. His treatment was leg splints, bed rest, and hot towels, which I applied carefully, and our only other solace was church services where weeping mothers held up photographs of children. It wasn't a time of freshness and freedom. It was a time of dread; the war was easy compared to this. It's a wonder we didn't run screaming into the streets and set fire to one another's houses.

Instead, we hid our fears. Just as my mother hid a lock of her dead brother's hair in the throat of her high-collared Sunday dress, in a pocket she had sewn there. You cannot go around in grief and panic every day; people will not let you, they will coax you with tea and tell

you to move on, bake cakes and paint walls. You can hardly blame them; after all, we learned long ago that the world would fall apart and the cities would be left to the animals and the clambering vines if grief, like a mad king, were allowed to ascend the throne. So what you do is you let them coax you. You bake the cake and paint the wall and smile; you buy a new freezer as if you now had a plan for the future. And secretly—in the early morning—you sew a pocket in your skin. At the hollow of your throat. So that every time you smile, or nod your head at a teacher meeting, or bend over to pick up a fallen spoon, it presses and pricks and stings and you know you've not moved on. You never even planned to.

"It is equal to living in a tragic land," a poet once wrote, "to live in tragic times."

Yet I have to admit I loved our house. I had chosen it, after all; in defiance of the aunts, I had pressed Holland to take that old Sunset property, and at first it was the fulfillment of our dreams. A house with a yard; a bedroom my son didn't have to share; carpets and folding blinds and even a place behind the bathroom mirror for Holland to drop his razor blades. It was a miracle: a house that had thought of everything before me. You could never have convinced me, back when I was young, that all the real moments of my life would happen in that vine-covered house, just as a telephone installer can't tell a young couple that their happiest and saddest news will come through that polished phone. It's hard to think, even now, that the sweet ebony milkmaid that Holland's aunts gave us in the first year of our marriage and that sat on the bookshelf would watch with its painted eyes every vital decision I ever made. So too the bamboo

coffee table. And the "broken pot" that Sonny had made from a drinking glass, masking tape, and shellac. The yarn cat, the broken mantel clock. They watched the whole six months of that affair, and in the hour of my judgment they will surely be called together to account for things.

As for what Holland's aunt told me on that afternoon of tea and popovers, I had decided long before to forget it. Marriage was all that cluttered my mind, and the new house, and the care of my child. I could not pay attention to the memory of an old woman shouting, in her muffled voice:

"Don't do it! Don't marry him!"

It was 1953. It was a Saturday.

Four years of happy marriage had passed, and the aunts were still in our lives. They'd grown stouter over time, and somehow their sharp-chinned heads seemed huger than ever, Duchesses from *Alice in Wonderland*, fussing with their enormous hats as they sat telling me a story at our kitchen table. Beneath it, hidden by the apple-red oilcloth, lay my little boy.

"Oh Pearlie, we forgot to tell you about the murder!" said Alice.

Beatrice was in the act of putting on her hat, pin in hand like a harpooner. "That terrible murder!"

"Yes," said her sister.

"You ain't heard?" asked Beatrice with a worried expression. "Up north?"