RICHARD YATES

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A SPECIAL PROVIDENCE

A NOVEL

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A Special Providence

Prologue: 1944

On Saturdays, when inspection was over and passes were issued in the Orderly Rooms, there was a stampede of escape down every company street in Camp Pickett, Virginia. You could go to Lynchburg or Richmond or Washington, D.C., and if you were willing to travel for nine hours—five on the bus and four on the train—you could get to New York.

Private Robert J. Prentice made the long trip alone one windy afternoon in the fall of 1944. He was a rifle trainee, eighteen years old, and this seemed an important thing to do because it might well be the last pass he would get before going overseas.

In the echoing swarm of Penn Station that night, feeling lost and cramped and lightheaded, he shouldered his way through acres of embracing couples: men whose uniforms looked somehow more authoritative than his own, girls whose ardor was a terrible reproach to his own callowness. Once he found himself walking straight toward a girl who stood facing him in the crowd, a slender, delicate girl with long brown hair, and as he came closer her uplifted face took on the most beautiful look of welcome he had ever seen. She didn't move, but her eyes filled with tears and her lips parted in a way that

stopped his heart—God, to be looked at that way by a girl, just once!—so that he felt as stunned as a jilted lover when a Marine corporal came jostling past him and took her in his arms.

Prentice didn't want to stare, but he couldn't take his eyes off their greeting: their long kiss, the girl nestling to weep in the Marine's shoulder as her hands gripped his back, the Marine lifting her off her feet to swing her around in an exultant whirl, the two of them laughing and talking and then moving away, scarcely able to walk because of their need to clasp and hold each other.

He was weak with envy as he turned toward the subway, and he tried to make up for it by squaring his wrinkled overseas cap down into one eyebrow and hoping that the tension in his face and the hurry in his walk might suggest, to other observers, that he was bound for a welcome as romantic as the Marine's.

But the subway only swallowed him into the dirty, intricate bowels of a city he would never understand. He was as hesitant as a tourist about getting on the right train; he peered with fascinated distaste at the pallid nighttime faces that hung and swayed around him in the car, and when he came up into the windswept darkness of Columbus Circle he had to walk a few steps one way and a few steps another, craning his head, before he got his bearings.

He had spent most of his life in New York, or near it, but no section or street of it had ever felt like his neighborhood: he had never lived in one house for more than a year. The address now shown on his service record as his home was a walkup apartment in the West Fifties, on a dark block beyond Eighth Avenue, and as he made his way there he tried to conjure a sense of homecoming among the blown news-

papers and the flickering bar signs. He pressed the bell marked "Prentice" and heard the joyous answering bleat of the buzzer that let him in; then he was loping upstairs through smells of vegetables and garbage and perfume, and then he was staggering in the clutch of his mother's hug.

"Oh, Bobby," she said. The top of her frizzled gray head scarcely came up to his breast-pocket flaps and she was as frail as a sparrow, but the force of her love was so great that he had to brace himself in a kind of boxer's stance to absorb it. "You look wonderful," she said. "Oh, let me look at you." And he allowed himself, uneasily, to be held and inspected at arm's length. "My soldier," she said. "My big, wonderful soldier."

And then came the questions: Had he eaten anything? Was he terribly tired? Was he glad to be home?

"Oh, I've been so happy today, just knowing you were coming. Old Herman said to me this morning—you know, the ugly little *foreman* I've told you about? At my horrible *job?* I was singing this morning, or kind of humming under my breath, and he said 'What've *you* got to sing about?' And oh-ho, I looked him right in the eye—this dreadful, smelly little man, you know, in his awful old undershirt, with all these awful factory noises going on—and I said, 'I've got plenty to sing about.' I said, 'My *son* is coming home tonight on *leave.*' " And she moved away across the room, fragile and awkward in her runover heels and her black rayon dress with its side vent held together by a safety pin, laughing at the memory of her exchange with the foreman. " 'My *son,*' " she said again, " 'is coming home tonight on *leave.*' "

"Well," he said, "It isn't really a 'leave,' you know; it's just a pass."

"A pass; I know. *Oh,* it's so good to see you. Tell you what. How about a hot cup of coffee, and you sit down and rest.

Then I'll get ready and we'll go out for dinner. How would that be?"

While she bustled in and out of her bedroom, still talking, he sipped at the bitter, warmed-over coffee she'd brought him and strolled around the carpet. The unkempt coziness of the place, full of cigarette ash and sagging, rickety furniture under weak lamps, was very strange after the scrubbed symmetry of the barracks. So was the privacy of it, and the fact that it held, on one wall, a narrow full-length mirror in which he was surprised to find his own naked-looking face above the brass-buttoned torso of olive drab. He pulled himself dramatically to attention, and then, after glancing away to make sure she was safely in the bedroom, he went through a series of drill turns, whispering the commands to himself. Right face; left face; about face; hand salute; parade rest. In the parade-rest position he discovered that she'd left a smear of lipstick on his uniform.

"There," she said. "Now I'm ready. Do I look all right? Do I look nice enough to go out on a date with a handsome soldier?"

"Fine," he told her. "You look fine." And she did look better, despite a sprinkling of face powder down her bodice. She had managed to close the vent in her dress more securely, and she'd carefully fixed her hair.

When they left the apartment he noticed how she crouched and squinted to make her way downstairs—her eyes were getting worse—and out on the street, where she clung to his arm for walking, she seemed very old and slow. At the first intersection she hunched and hurried in fright, gripping his arm tighter, until they were safely on the opposite curb. She had never understood automobiles and always tended to exaggerate their menace: she seemed to feel that any or all

of the waiting, throbbing cars might bolt forward against the light with murder in their hearts.

They went to the Childs on Columbus Circle. "Isn't it funny?" she said. "I always used to think Childs restaurants were dreadful, but this really is the only decent place around here—all the others are so horribly expensive—and I think it's kind of nice, don't you?"

They each had a Manhattan to start with, because she insisted it was to be a real celebration; and then, after studying the menu to make sure they could afford it if they held the cost of the dinner down to chicken croquettes, they each had another. He didn't really want the second one—the heavy sweetness of it threatened to make him sick—but he sipped it anyway and tried to relax in his chair.

Her voice by now had become a rich and tireless monologue: ". . . Oh, and guess who I ran into on the bus the other day! Harriet Baker! Remember the year we lived on Charles Street? And you used to play with the Baker boys? They're both in the Navy now, and Bill's in the Pacific; just imagine. Remember the winter we were so horribly broke, and Harriet and I had those awful quarrels about money? Anyway, that's all forgotten now. We had dinner together and had the nicest talk; she wanted to hear all about you. Oh, and *guess* what she told me about the Engstroms! Remember? Paul and Mary Engstrom, that were such good friends of mine that year? And they came out to see us in Scarsdale, too, remember? And in Riverside? Remember the year we all spent Christmas together and had such a good time? . . ."

It went on and on, while he crumbled his chicken croquettes with the side of his fork and made whatever answers she seemed to want, or to need. After a while he stopped listening. His ears took in only the rise and fall of her voice,

the elaborate, familiar, endless rhythm of it; but from long experience he was able to say "Oh yes," or "Of course," in all the right places.

The subjects of her talk didn't matter; he knew what she was really saying. Helpless and gentle, small and tired and anxious to please, she was asking him to agree that her life was not a failure. Did he remember the good times? Did he remember all the nice people they'd known and all the interestingly different places they'd lived in? And whatever mistakes she might have made, however rudely the world might have treated her, did he know how hard she'd always tried? Did he know how terribly much she loved him? And did he realize—in spite of everything—did he realize how remarkable and how gifted and how brave a woman his mother was?

Oh yes; oh yes; of course he did—that was the message of his nods and smiles and mumbled replies. It was the message he'd been giving her as long as he could remember, and for most of that time he had wholly believed it.

Because she *was* remarkable and gifted and brave. How else could anyone explain the story of her life? At the turn of the century, when all the sleeping little towns of Indiana had lain locked in provincial ignorance, and when in that environment a simple dry-goods merchant named Amos Grumbauer had raised six ordinary daughters, wasn't it remarkable that his seventh had somehow developed a passion for art, and for elegance, and for the great and distant world of New York? Without finishing high school she had become one of the first female students ever enrolled in the Cincinnati Art Academy; and not very many years after that, all alone, she had made her way to the city of her dreams and found employment as a fashion illustrator, with only occasional help from

home. Didn't that prove she was gifted, and didn't it prove she was brave?

Her first great mistake, and she often said afterwards that she would never understand what had possessed her, was to marry a man as ordinary as her Indiana father. Oh, George Prentice might have been handsome in a quiet way; he might even have been a little dashing, with his fine amateur singing voice, his good clothes, and the salesman's expense account that made him welcome at some of the better speakeasies in town. It was undeniable too that a girl pressing thirty-four wasn't apt to get many serious proposals; and besides, he was so steady, so devoted, so eager to protect her and provide for her. But how could she have been so blind to the dullness of the man? How could she have failed to see that he thought of her talent as a charming little hobby and nothing more, that he could get tears in his eyes over the poetry of Edgar A. Guest, and that his own highest ambition in life, incessantly discussed, was to be promoted to the job of assistant divisional sales manager in some monstrous and wholly unintelligible organization called Amalgamated Tool and Die?

And on top of all that, as if that weren't enough, how could she have foreseen that as a married man he would disappear for three and four days at a time and come home reeking of gin, with lipstick all over his shirt?

She divorced him three years after the birth of their only child, when she was thirty-eight, and set out to become an artist of distinction—a sculptor. She took her son to Paris for a year of study; but that particular year turned out to be 1929, and the shock of economic necessity brought her home in a little more than six months. From then on, her artistic career became a desperate and ever-thwarted effort

played out against the background of the Great Depression, a hysterical odyssey that she always said was made bearable only by the "wonderful companionship" of her little boy. On the slender combination of alimony and child support that was the most George Prentice could spare, they lived at first in rural Connecticut, then in Greenwich Village, and then in the Westchester suburbs, where they were always in trouble with the landlord and the grocer and the coal dealer, never at ease among the oppressively neat families that surrounded them.

"We're different, Bobby," she would explain, but the explanation was never needed. Wherever they lived he seemed always to be the only new boy and the only poor boy, the only boy whose home smelled of mildew and cat droppings and plastilene, with statuary instead of a car in its garage; the only boy who didn't have a father.

But he had loved her romantically, with an almost religious belief in her gallantry and goodness. If the landlord and the grocer and the coal dealer and George Prentice were all against her, they would have to be his enemies too: he would serve as her ally and defender against the crass and bullying materialism of the world. He would gladly have thrown down his life for her in any number of ways; the trouble was that other, less dramatic kinds of help were needed, and none came. Pieces of her sculpture were sometimes shown in group exhibitions and very occasionally sold, for small sums, but these isolated triumphs were all but lost under the mounting pressure of hardship.

"Look, Alice," George Prentice would say on the rare and dreaded occasions of his visitation rights, plainly forcing his voice to sound calm and reasonable. "Look: I know it's important to make sacrifices for the boy—I agree with you

there—but this just isn't realistic. You simply have no business living in a place like this, running up all these bills. The point is, people have to live within their *means*, Alice."

"All right. I'll give up sculpture, then. I'll move to the *Bronx* and get some wretched little job in a *department* store. Is that what you want?"

"No, of course that's not what I want. I'm simply asking for a little co-operation, a little consideration—damn it, Alice, a little sense of responsibility."

"Responsi*bil*ity! Oh, don't talk to *me* about responsibility . . ."

"Alice, will you please keep your voice down? Before you wake the boy?"

Life in the suburbs came abruptly to an end with a frightening lawsuits for unpayable debts when he was nearly thirteen; and it was three years later, after a series of increasingly cheap city apartments, that Alice made a final plea to her former husband. She would never be a burden on him again, she promised, if he would only agree to finance Bobby's enrollment in what she called a Good New-England Prep School.

"A *boarding* school? Alice, do you have any idea how much those places cost? Look: let's try to be reasonable. How do you think I'm going to be able to put him through college if I—"

"Oh, you know perfectly well the whole question of college is three years away. *Any*thing can happen in three years. I could have a one-man show and make a *fortune* in three years. I could have a one-man show and make a fortune six *months* from now. Oh, I know you've never had any faith in me, but it happens that a good many other people do."

"Well, but Alice, listen. Try to control yourself."

"Ha! Control myself. Con*trol* myself . . ."

The school she chose was not exactly a good one, but it was the only one that offered to take him at half tuition, and the victory of his acceptance filled her with pride.

His first year there—the year of Pearl Harbor—was almost unalloyed in its misery. Missing his mother and ashamed of missing her, wholly out of place with his ineptness at sports, his cheap, mismatched clothes and his total lack of spending money, he felt he could survive only by becoming a minor campus clown. The second year was better—he gained a certain prestige as a campus eccentric and was even beginning to win recognition as a kind of campus intellectual—but in the middle of that second year George Prentice dropped dead in his office.

It was a stunning event. Riding home on the train for the funeral, he couldn't get over the surprise of hearing his mother weep uncontrollably into the telephone. She had sounded as bereaved as a real widow, and he'd almost wanted to say, "What the hell, Mother—you mean we're supposed to *cry* when he dies?"

And he was appalled at her behavior in the funeral parlor. Moaning, she collapsed into the heaped flowers and planted a long and passionate kiss on the dead man's waxen face. Recorded organ music was droning somewhere in the background, and there was a long solemn line of men from Amalgamated Tool and Die waiting to pay their respects (he had an awful suspicion that her histrionics were being conducted for *their* benefit). And although his first impulse was to get the hell out of there as fast as possible, he lingered at the coffin for a little while after the conclusion of her scene. He stared down into the plain, still face of George Prentice and tried to study every detail of it, to atone for all the times he had never quite looked the man in the eye. He dredged

his memory for the slightest trace of real affection for this man (birthday presents? trips to the circus?), and for the faintest glimmer of a time when the man might have known anything but uneasiness and disappointment in the presence of his only child; but it was no use. Turning away from the corpse at last and taking her arm, he looked down at her weeping head with revulsion. It was *her* fault. She had robbed him of a father and robbed his father of a son, and now it was too late.

But he began to wonder, darkly, if it mightn't be his own fault too, even more than hers. He almost felt as if he'd killed the man himself with his terrible inhuman indifference all these years. All he wanted then was to get away from this sobbing, shuddering old woman and get back to school, where he could think things out.

And his father's death brought another, more practical kind of loss: there was no more money. This was something he wasn't fully aware of until he came home the following summer, not long after he'd turned seventeen, to find her living in a cheap hotel room for which the rent was already in arrears. She had put all her sculpture and what was left of her furniture into storage, and the storage payments were in arrears too. For months, with a total lack of success, she had been trying to re-establish herself as a fashion illustrator after a twenty-year absence from the field. Even he could see how stiff and labored and hopelessly unsaleable-looking her drawings were, though she explained that it was all a question of making the right contacts; and he'd been with her for less than a day before discovering that she didn't have enough to eat. She had been living for weeks on canned soup and sardines.

"Look," he said, only dimly aware of sounding like a ghost

of George Prentice. "This isn't very sensible. Hell, *I'll* get some kind of a job."

And he went to work in an automobile-parts warehouse. On the strength of that they moved into the furnished apartment in the West Fifties, and the "wonderful companionship" entered a strange new phase.

Feeling manly and pleasurably proletarian as he clumped home every night in his work clothes, he saw himself as the hero of some inspiring movie about the struggles of the poor. "Hell, I started out as a warehouseman," he would be able to say for the rest of his life. "Had to quit school and support my mother, after my dad died. Those were pretty tough times."

The trouble was that his mother refused to play her role in the movie. It couldn't be denied that he was supporting her—she sometimes had to meet him outside the warehouse at noon on payday, in fact, in order to buy her lunch—but nobody would ever have guessed it. He kept hoping to come home and find her acting the way he thought she ought to act: a humble widow, gratefully cooking meat and potatoes for her tired son, sitting down with a sewing basket as soon as she'd washed the dishes, darning his socks in the lamplight and perhaps looking up to inquire, shyly, if he wouldn't like to call up some nice girl.

And he was always disappointed. Night after night was given over to her talk about the contacts she was certain to establish soon in the fashion world, and about the fortunes still to be made out of one-man shows if only she could get her sculpture out of storage, while the canned food burned on the stove.

Once he found her posing for his admiration in a stylish new dress, for which she'd spent more than half the week's