

NANCY PRICE

NIGHT WOMAN



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Gratitude is due
Catherine, David, John, Charlotte, and Derrick
as well as
Pam Bernstein, Michael James Carroll, Amy Lockard,
and Barbara Lounsberry.



1

MARY ELIOT STOOD BESIDE RANDAL ELIOT. HOT LIGHTS WERE on them both, but the television cameras watched Randal, and so did crowds in evening dress, filling the Plaza Hotel with chatter.

Cameras recorded Randal Eliot speaking to the mayor of New York . . . Randal Eliot and a Nobel Prize winner . . . Randal Eliot and a movie starlet. They followed him to a head table with close-ups of the cut of his rented tuxedo and sweat beginning to glisten on his bald head.

The cameras were not interested in Randal Eliot's wife. Mary was left to enjoy the scent of her rose corsage. She finished her champagne and felt the secret slither of her best silk underwear against her skin. A famous writer on her left said nothing to Mary; he leaned across her to shake Randal's hand, and Mary was grateful for his cool shade. "So you're the writer who writes in a trance," he said to Randal.

Dinner was the constant appearance of small amounts of delicious food on large amounts of china. Mary had hardly finished her chocolate mousse when the voices of speaker after speaker bounced wall-to-wall on the public-address system,

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praising Randal Eliot's craft, Randal Eliot's imaginative gifts, Randal Eliot's genius.

Mary bowed her head crowned with dark braids and sipped her coffee. Cameras focused on the man to her right, then on the man to her left. She thought that she was glad no one was photographing her forty-seven-year-old face, or talking of her craft, her imaginative gifts, her genius.

Randal rose to accept the prize. They had heard of publish or perish, he said. "Twenty years ago I was a young university instructor, and I was perishing." He smiled at the great room's attentive faces. "I had a wife and four small children, and the head of my university department told me that I would lose my job unless I wrote something, published something. So . . ." Randal paused. "I committed myself for a third time to a mental hospital."

Mary watched Randal. He believed what he was saying. She had listened to this speech of his a dozen times, but never in such a place—never before an audience of New York's reviewers, publishers, editors, critics.

Randal was trembling a little, and his fingers twitched on the tablecloth. "And when I came from the mental hospital knowing I would lose my job, knowing no college or university would hire me, thinking I had never written anything . . ." Randal paused, and there was no sound but New York traffic on the streets below. "My wife told me that I had finished my first novel, *In the Quarters*, before I entered the hospital."

Randal spread his hands above the linen tablecloth as if a manuscript lay there. "I couldn't remember dictating a word to her, yet there it was: the book I'd had in my head. And my subsequent novels have all appeared this way." Randal smiled again. "Electroshock treatments. I recommend them as an effective cure for writer's block."

The audience chuckled.

"But," Randal said, his voice dropping into mock seriousness, "I mustn't forget to thank the Muse, that fickle woman who visits writers by night, by luck, in secret. One must not offend the Muse."

The audience clapped for Randal Eliot, and so did Mary. "Writer of the seventies," another speaker said. "The voice of his generation. The next winner of the Pulitzer Prize."

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Mary stared at hundreds of clapping hands as if she didn't see or hear them. "*Pulitzer Prize?*" she whispered to Randal.

"Heard about it last month. There's a chance. But I only have four books out," Randal murmured, smiling and nodding at the waves of applause.

Suddenly Mary heard an amplified voice braying: "And now I would like to introduce Mary Eliot, Randal Eliot's wife—the woman behind the great writer we honor tonight!"

Mary stood up. The Pulitzer. She hardly saw hundreds of faces above white linen, black tuxedos, brilliant evening dresses. Television cameras were recording her trembling hands and the fury in her eyes.

"Let us applaud the wife who works at the side of Randal Eliot, taking down each word of his magnificent novels before they are lost!"

Mary Eliot bowed to the hundreds of dutifully clapping hands. Her lips were moving. Was she saying, "Thank you, thank you"? No one watched her closely enough to tell.

The cameras turned back to Randal Eliot. Mary Eliot sat down, still shaking.

Ten years later, a *New York Times* staff writer found a film clip of that evening, read Mary's lips, and wrote a famous article on what "Mary Eliot" said at the Plaza on August 5, 1977.

Randal was brilliant with the brilliance of the Plaza evening. The after-dinner crowd surrounded him with bursts of laughter and animated voices. Randal Eliot, writer of the seventies, was a dazzling talker on such public occasions—he had a genius for that.

Mary watched him finish his second drink, then found a chance to whisper to him that they had a plane to catch early in the morning.

Randal was tired; he willingly trailed his charm through the crowd and out the door. He was silent in the elevator and silent in their room while they hung up their evening clothes, yawning.

Mary said nothing about the dinner, or the speech, or a Pulitzer. She crawled into her twin bed and shut her eyes, grateful for quiet that was as tranquil as a lake of still water.

Randal lay down, but in a few minutes he was on his feet

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again. Mary watched him between half-shut eyelids; she had learned not to sleep when he was awake.

New York's all-night glow lit the ceiling and shone on Randal's bald head as he walked to one wall, turned, turned again.

Pretending to sleep, Mary stayed awake with the memory of the dinner at the Plaza: Randal as the focus of hundreds of clapping hands, hot lights, television cameras, and herself one chair away from the center of attention . . . one step away from a Pulitzer Prize.

Mary, half asleep, dreamed herself cold and calm, her steady gaze moving from face to face across the crowded Plaza room. "You have heard Randal Eliot say he cannot remember writing four novels. The reason he cannot remember is that the four novels are mine. I wrote every word of them: Mary Quinn, the next winner of the Pulitzer Prize, the writer of the seventies, the voice of her generation."

Mary woke from her half doze: Randal had stopped his barefoot pacing to light his pipe. The faint chink and flare of his lighter brought Mary back from her dream of the Plaza crowd's astonished faces: they would have hung before her, a wall of shock, while television cameras homed in on her like one-eyed sharks.

And then there would have been the laughter, the embarrassment, the scramble to remove unfortunate Mary Quinn Eliot from public view.

But she had said nothing that anyone had heard. Mary gripped her bed sheet with cold, wet hands. Crowds and television cameras had left the Plaza long ago. Randal's pipe smoke hung above her bed.

Suddenly Randal grabbed Mary and shook her. "Wake up!" He let her go, turned on a lamp, and rummaged in a desk for a handful of hotel stationery and a pen.

Mary sat on the edge of her bed, aching for sleep. "Take this down!" Randal cried, thrusting the wad of papers and pen at her. "An idea for another book!"

Mary began to record Randal's neatly wound-up plot, and then the characters to fit it. Randal insisted that she read "the theme" back to him over and over again while he changed a word here or there.

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Half asleep, covering page after page with her neat writing, Mary laughed to herself to keep the bitterness away. Plot? Characters? Theme? Randal wanted them down on paper as if they would somehow become a novel, as if a book could be born that way. Poor Randal; he had never written a book.

Mary was cold. She pulled her blanket around her and kept on writing. Somewhere on the pages that littered her bed she would find what she could use . . . something that would make Randal think the work was his.

Randal paced the room in silence now. Mary waited awhile, then turned off the light and lay down. Randal padded back and forth, back and forth.

When dawn came, he sat on his bed, shoulders hunched, pipe out.

Mary could not kiss him, hold him, comfort him. He did not want to be touched.

Randal lay down. His breathing slowed and deepened. Mary closed her eyes and slept.

2

PARIS! LONDON! ROME!" RANDAL SHOVED HIMSELF BACK IN HIS old plastic-covered recliner and grinned at Mary, who was washing his study window. "We're all going—the five of us! September until Christmas!"

Mary stopped wiping the glass dry. "What?"

"I've planned it."

"You aren't going to teach?" Mary stared at him.

"I asked for unpaid leave for the fall semester, so no classes for me until January. We're going!"

Mary turned back to the window. The old Nebraska house had expanses of plate glass, and this one reflected Randal's sunlit desk, multicolored editions of his novels above a worn rug, and Mary, squinting against the light. "If you aren't getting a salary, what will we live on?"

"You haven't seen the letter," Randal said. He was still smiling.

"What letter?"

Randal settled deeper in his battered chair. "My *Net Worth's* going into paperback."

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"Paperback?" Mary's voice sounded stupid in her ears, repeating after him.

"Take a look." Randal held out a piece of paper. Mary took it: a check for thousands of dollars, made out to Randal Eliot.

Mary looked down into Randal's green-gray, glittering eyes. They shifted from her to the row of books on his study shelf—books with his name on them. The check was made out to him. "When did this come?" she said, giving it back.

Randal laughed. "The day we flew from New York. But I've known for a couple of months."

Mary sat on the arm of his chair, her face reddening under its crown of silver-streaked braids. She looked at the old Nebraska house around her without seeing it. Then she gave a small, breathless laugh and pressed her hands to her cheeks.

"Thousands of dollars," Randal said to her. "Wouldn't you like to get your hands on it?"

Mary didn't seem to hear him. "Paperback!" she said. "Think of the people who'll read the book now!"

"Success! Not just good reviews of my novels—success!" Randal cried. Mary opened her eyes to look at the check again . . . put her hand out to touch it . . .

Randal jerked it out of her reach. "We'll take the children and go!"

"The children"? We're all in our *twenties* now!" Beth came from the kitchen. She was flushed with summer heat that made her bright brown eyes brighter still. "Go where?"

He waved the check at her. "My *Net Worth's* going into paperback! Money-money-money! We'll all travel overseas—why not? Paris! London! Rome! Athens!"

Beth didn't look at her mother; she didn't need to. She said she'd never seen a check for that much. "It's *wonderful*—"

"What's wonderful?" Jay came in and Don followed: two blond-haired, shirtless young men in baggy jeans, their pockets sagging with wrenches, clasp knives, chisels.

"Look at this," Beth said.

Mary saw Jay's quick, careful look that had been in Beth's eyes, too. "Something's happened?"

"Your unrewarded father!" Randal cried. "He's finally getting *money* for his books—my *Net Worth's* going into paper-

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back. What does this look like?" He held the check out to Jay and Don.

"Money," Don said.

"No, stupid!" Randal yelled. "It's London! Paris! Rome! Athens! For all of us! The whole fall semester over there! We live in this old dump, but by God, we can travel!"

They all began to talk at once, except for Mary.

Mary went into the kitchen and began peeling potatoes for supper; the children's triumphant, proud voices came to her from the study.

"Lots of excitement here," Don said in a few minutes, coming to take the knife from Mary to finish the potatoes. He'd grown a thick beard since May. Now the handsome boy was a man whose straight nose and green eyes Mary still recognized most of the time.

Mary watched the thin strips of peel fall.

"Dad's got all that money," Don whispered.

"He's high," Mary mouthed at him.

Beth came in. "Are we going?" she whispered to Mary.

Mary shrugged. When Jay came in, he said, "How about it?" in a low voice.

"We don't know," Beth whispered.

Mary sighed and went to help Beth sear pork chops at the stove. Jay said, "How about brussels sprouts?" and started to pick them over at the sink.

Suddenly Randal stood at the kitchen door. "We're going overseas, stupid ass!" he shouted at Mary. "Either that, or I go by myself—or the kids will be happy enough to go with me. You can stay home."

"It's not that I don't want to go." Mary didn't look at Randal's green eyes sparkling with anger.

"It's thanks to me we've got the money!" Randal yelled. "You think I won't take this chance to work in libraries over there? The rest of you do what you want—I'm going!"

The three of them heard Randal slam the screen door. He would bicycle a mile or two; he bicycled every day he could, and went bowling, but he was growing fatter with each year.

"What'll we do?" Beth asked.

"I'll call Dr. Parker while Randal's gone." Mary closed the kitchen door and stood by the telephone a moment, feeling her

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home around her: family voices, family clutter, the fragrance of supper cooking.

She had to wait before Dr. Parker came on the line. "I'm sorry to bother you," she told him, "but I'm worried about Randal. He'll be talking to you tomorrow—he's determined to go overseas from September first until almost Christmas, and he'll fly over by himself if the rest of us won't go with him, he says."

Dr. Parker's reserved voice was more reserved than ever at the length of the telephone lines. "Can you get away?"

"I could. And the children might take time off—"

"I think you ought to consider it," Dr. Parker said.

"Take him thousands of miles away?" Mary said.

"The trip would do him good," Dr. Parker said in his cool, dispassionate voice.

"But what if it upsets him, going back there? Can he stand being in a mental ward a *seventh* time? He might lose his job—"

"Randal's pretty secure at the university, I imagine," Dr. Parker said. "With his reputation. I'd suggest you let him do what he wants. I'll give you the name of a good doctor in England."

"But what if Randal—"

"You can't be your husband's psychiatrist," Dr. Parker said crisply.

Mary bit her lip. "Oh, can't I?" she cried. "Then who will? Are *you* going overseas with him to watch him and get him to the hospital in a foreign country?"

"Sometimes chances have to be taken." Dr. Parker's calm voice was more distant than ever.

When he said good-bye, Mary put down the telephone, her hands shaking. Supper simmered on the stove. The children were waiting in her small study upstairs where a fan stirred papers on the desk.

"Are we going?" Jay said when Mary came in. He ran a hand through his curled-tight blond hair; he was tall and skinny and strong.

"Randal says so. It's his money," Mary said. "But what about graduate-school tuition for you and Beth, and capital for Don's business?"

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"We'd see London and Italy and Greece!" Beth said.

"But I want to start the new store . . ." Don said. "And Carla—I'd have to go without her . . ."

"Love, love, love," Beth teased Don.

"Go before marriage gets you!" Jay said to Don.

"Carla could house-sit," Don said. "If Mike hadn't got that grant, maybe he could have gone with us."

Mary leaned back in her desk chair, thinking of Michael, the missing child, the eldest. "Mike's the happy anthropologist with the chance of a lifetime—he wouldn't want to trade three years in Africa for this."

"You talked to the doctor?" Beth said.

"Just now. He doesn't think there's any danger," Mary said. "Randal sees him tomorrow."

"If Dad got out of that chair of his—out of his rut—maybe it would help," Jay said. "He's getting fatter than ever, and he's not interested in anything."

"He doesn't even go out in the garden. He used to wander around and ask what Jay and I were planting," Beth said.

"He never could remember plant names," Jay said.

"He's writing," Mary said.

"Scribbling on the backs of used envelopes," Jay said.

The children glanced at each other. Mary went downstairs to finish making supper. After a while she heard Randal return.

"Come and eat!" Mary called to Randal in his study. She was sitting at the table with the children when Randal flung open his door.

"There's five dollars missing from ~~my~~ billfold!" he shouted.

Blank looks settled on the faces around the table.

"You said I could take it to buy another paintbrush," Don said.

"And you haven't even *started* painting the porch floor!" Randal's green eyes glittered.

Nobody answered. They waited quietly. "I don't want any supper—throw it out," Randal said, and went back into his study, slamming the door.

Don and Jay ate their own suppers, and Randal's, then went down to the basement with a thump of big feet. Mary was clearing the table when Randal opened his study door and

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advanced on her. "You've raised your children to break promises! Don promised to do the painting. Is he doing it? No!" He was so close that Mary could smell the wine. Spit hit her face: he was drunk enough to slur his words. "Smartass! Bitch who thinks she's so smart! Piece of shit!" He slammed the study door behind him.

Mary went to the kitchen. Beth was shaking food scraps from the sink drain into a trash sack; she looked at Mary and rolled her eyes at the ceiling.

Mary laughed and let anger go. She went through the garage's useful clutter to sit on the patio bench and stretch her tired legs.

High above her the old Nebraska house stood against stars: high gables, lighted windows. Don and Jay were working on Jay's motorcycle; their hammering joined insect sounds in the summer night. Children shouted in the park across the street.

There was a rustle in the side-porch grapevine: a sparrow had her nest there, and was settling for the night. Then the kitchen's screen door slammed deep in the garage, and Beth's white shirt glimmered as she came toward Mary.

"What've you got?" Mary said.

"Hot cat," Beth said, putting the old tom Waldo down in the grass. She joined Mary, and they sat for a while in the faint radiance of the park light.

"I love it here in the dark," Beth said, scooping up Waldo. She sighed. "What about going overseas?"

Mary's eyes were on Randal in his study window. His bald head shone in the lamplight. "I think about graduate-school expenses for you and Jay, and money for Don's new shop . . . and whether Randal will keep well over there."

"If only Mike were going too . . ." Beth sighed. "He was so far away when he was only teaching at Yale—now we can't even *phone* him. Letters take *weeks*."

"He won't know we've gone, not for a long time."

"A remote village in the middle of all that Africa—I find it on the map and try to believe Mike's there, but I can't. I write and write and don't even know if he's getting the letters."

The two sat quietly in the dark, thinking of Michael.

Finally Mary said, "It scares me to think of Randal going