

JULY 11, 1937, 7:43 A.M.

So dreadfully wet outside. Water spraying down like Morton's salt in the *Ladies' Home Journal* advertisement. The one with the little girl who clutches an umbrella three sizes too big. *When it rains, it pours.*

The office Kay shares with Al Stillman: a dolphin-gray cell, sensible and efficient. None of the art deco flourishes that have brought fame to the RCA Building's lobby thirty-four stories below. Who needs all that ornamentation anyhow, way up here?

Way up here, where the music blooms. She smiles nostalgically, glancing around in appraisal of the moment.

The black file cabinet; Al's oak desk with its three-footed swivel chair; his Royal typewriter. A few half-typed pages, fragments of someday songs, legs and heads awaiting torsos, faces, and minds. An unfinished letter to Al's cousin in Frankfurt urging her and the *kinder* to get out, to come to America. "It is time, Ester."

It is time. It is 1937. It is summer. A long, soggy summer of waiting.

The clock high on the wall, its red second hand slowly turning. The ebony Bechstein upright piano below. The magazine on the piano, *Popular Songs*, open to the two-page spread that features a photograph of Kay in a plastered bob. "She Is the Envy of Songwriters Everywhere."

Tin Pan Alley puffery. What good, really? A momentary thrill. A

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burst of fireworks and then the black nighttime sky. A lingering residue of smoke.

The office mirrored in the rain-streaked windows, where she stands in a black sheath and heels. Her face reflected in the glass, less fresh than in the *Popular Songs* photograph. Her dark eyes gazing at the sea of umbrellas thirty-four stories below.

Thirty-four stories. Not sixty-six but also not one, three, or ten. In New York City height is eminence, which correlates with the number of people who pretend to be one's friends and the larger number who claim to be *their* friends. Circles around circles all the way to the island's jagged periphery.

The figures cowering under the umbrellas: men, almost all. Their cuffed slacks and black oxfords briefly visible beyond the edges of their umbrellas as they step forward, then retreating again. Working people. Each one, a story. A man starts here and wends his way there. Another begins over there and darts off somewhere else. A life. A burst of activity and then—*poof*. A trace of scent, perhaps—cologne, sweat, garlic.

Men shuffling resigned and courageous to their offices, others hurrying ambitiously into buildings, riding elevators up and down. Hundreds, thousands, millions of individual trajectories: melodic lines. Harmony. Dissonance. Counterpoint. Zigzag rhythms against the unheard ticking of the universal metronome.

But there, in their midst, slipping through and between them: a little girl! A child in a lavender raincoat with a matching broad-rimmed hat. What is she running from?

Kay wipes steam from the glass and peers. *Couldn't be. Same stride . . . similar raincoat and hat . . . Just a girl.*

Her youngest daughter, Kathleen, is in Washington, D.C. So are Kathleen's two older sisters, April and Andrea. They boarded that train more than two years ago. White-gloved, in pearls, Kay waved and blew

a kiss from the platform. She never learned whether they saw that kiss.

Kay shakes away the vision. She is sapped, having worked all night. The Roxyettes will have their boogie-woogie leg-kicker. It is time to go home.

But in this deluge Kay hesitates. She takes her trench coat and clutch, steps into the hall, and locks the door. The elevator dings and whooshes her down thirty-two floors.

She strolls through a carpeted corridor to the projection booth, a closet teeming with metal canisters and sprocketed strips of plastic that magically combine with light to conjure tall, elegant men and women who are always in possession of the *mot juste*, the precise witty rejoinder that the occasion calls for, and the right moves. The projectionist beams, a young buck two years out of college, round black glasses, slicked black hair. "I got it, Miss Swift!" He brandishes a film can. "Just for you they flew it out. Now a good time?"

Crayoned on the can: *Shall We Dance*, Reel One. Kay smiles.

Shall We Dance opened two months ago and closed after a brief run. She delayed seeing it, pretending to be too busy. After all, George was too busy for her, was he not? But she fooled no one, least of all herself.

Then, last night, her phone rang. It was George. What he told her changed everything.

She is frazzled and spent, but it is raining. Better to remain indoors, in the glow of the movie screen, in the afterglow of that conversation. "Now's a wonderful time," she tells Marvin.

He glances at the clock. "We got two hours exactly, more or less."

The International Music Hall: its hollow immensity, its six thousand seats, its four-thousand-pipe Wurlitzer. Desolate and dim, the ultimate monument of music-hall impresario Samuel Rothapfel, and his sepulcher. Poor Sam, with his soaring ambition and his weak heart.

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No windows. No street sounds. Rain? What rain? To stroll down the right-hand aisle under these gold-and-aluminum-leafed telescoping ribs, which taper to a focus at the one-hundred-foot-wide stage, is to re-live Jonah's adventure in the belly of Leviathan, swallowed by the sea and a world away from everything.

Leviathan, the Moby Dick of Israelite antiquity . . .

Years ago Kay taught herself to remember dreams. Now a fragment drifts into her mind. She is standing in a crowd before the gangway of an ocean cruiser. The sign, indicating its destination, reads "Nineveh," where she is to perform. Not on the piano. She is to sing. Her dreaming mind conflates the word *cruiser* with the name of the famous tenor, Caruso. A poster on a building across the street showcases her face, under his name. She does not belong there, a woman in a man's poster. She is no Caruso and so, instead of excited anticipation, she feels dread. Her voice is weak and of all the places in the world, Nineveh is the one she most fears visiting. The gates open. Passengers flood aboard the SS *Leviathan* and the next thing she knows she is descending a metal staircase alone, into its bowels.

Another memory, this one all too real: Zilboorg, the psychoanalyst who interpreted her dream of the SS *Leviathan*. His glasses askew on his nose. His tweed jacket falling off one shoulder. She wishes she could erase this image. Undo its existence. But she has no choice. The memory-Zilboorg speaks to her: "Nineveh. Does that evoke nothing for you?"

The memory-Kay shakes her head.

"Nineveh is where God sent Jonah, to prophecy to its citizens. But he refused, and ended up in the belly of Leviathan."

She nods, recalling the story of Jonah that her pious Grandma Gertie used to tell her at bedtime.

"Leviathan," repeats Zilboorg. "The out-of-control sea monster. The id, swimming in the ocean of the unconscious mind. And Jonah,

the ordinary man—or in your case, woman—who runs away from her prophetic powers. Her inspiration, her passion, her aggressive urges, dare I say her repressed sexual urges. The woman whose *voice* is *weak*. But in the end that irrational monster gets the better of her, doesn't it. It swallows her whole. You see, we're all helpless against Leviathan."

Zilboorg. Brilliant, of course. But she longs to forget. To forget his tweed jacket. To forget his glasses. To forget his brown Ukrainian gaze. The tendrils of the past shoot up through the soil of the present. They wrap around your consciousness and tug it down, down into the earth.

She takes a seat in the sixth row of this leviathan, the International Music Hall. Up front and center, the way she has lived her life—perhaps for better, arguably for worse. The lights dim. Marvin switches on the dream machine. And with a sigh of relief Kay feels her dark mood seep away as George Gershwin's unmistakable overture spills into the theater.

Shall We Dance is precisely what she expected, a lighthearted, crossed-stars romp, hardly worthy of his talent. But then, George, like Louis Armstrong, like Scott Fitzgerald, has always refused to think that way. "Why only fluffy entertainment, or only serious art? Can't a great chef grill a hamburger now and then?"

The leading man dances out of the shadows: Fred Astaire, a plain, reedy, middle-aged fellow, neither an exceptional singer nor a gifted actor. His loopy smile and aw-shucks eyes call to mind a down-on-his-heels encyclopedia salesman. But Fred is as nimble and weightless as a kitten. Kay knows him, not terribly well but well enough that she sees not only the screen icon, bigger than life, careless and self-assured, but also, lurking behind that image, plain old Fred, George's dear friend since they were scruffy kids with dreams as wide as a Nebraska cornfield.

Which is where Ginger skips in, the corn-fed Midwestern blonde, the embodiment of a concept of America, the audience whose adulation both George and Fred crave. Together Fred and Ginger float and spin,

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twin feathers in a breeze. They twist, dip, and fly across the screen, acrobats illustrating George's music with their feet and arms.

Fred plays Peter, who has achieved fame under the pseudonym Petrov, a Russian ballet dancer. Peter has two problems: he secretly yearns to tap dance to American jazz and he is infatuated with Linda, the New York showgirl played by Ginger Rogers. Linda oozes contempt for Peter but worships his alter ego Petrov. Familiar thematic territory for the man who composed *An American in Paris* and *Show Girl*: European loftiness, secretly craving American authenticity; the New World party girl worshipping at the altar of Old World sophistication.

Despite the pat story line, tears pool in Kay Swift's eyes when Fred croons to Ginger that he will never forget her, the way she wears her hat, the way she sings off-key. And again when, in the finale, he sings the title song to a troupe of Ginger Rogers look-alikes, from which the real Ginger emerges like Aphrodite from the sea. As Fred and Ginger sashay, swirl, and reel with romance, an invisible hand reaches into Kay's gut, or is it her heart, and gives it a squeeze.

Invisible but not unfamiliar. Through these characters, this music, these songs, a lanky man with dark hair and a disarming nonchalance speaks to her. To her alone, soliloquizing on his past and present, his longings and misgivings. The same man who phoned her last night, changing everything.

Again she feels her mood slipping. A dissolve-to-darkness answers the opening fade-in. What is this knot in her gut? As if someone punched her. Something is wrong. Somewhere. *It's about him. It's about George.* She rises and stumbles to the street for air.

She spots a black DeSoto taxi, the new model, the Airflow, with its oversized, swept-back grill that guzzles rain and air the way a largemouth bass gulps water. She waves and the cab lumbers to the curb. Its portly driver

splashes over. Water dripping from his cap, he tugs on the chrome passenger door handle and holds an umbrella for her as the long door swings rearward. Kay places one high-heeled foot onto the running board and ducks into the velveteed passenger compartment. The door clunks closed. She leans forward, slides open the window to speak to the back of the driver's head, and mumbles an address.

“Yes, ma'am,” and the car rumbles off, water spraying from its tires.

Still she struggles to breathe. *Something is wrong, awfully wrong.* She sinks into the bench and closes her eyes.

George flew to Los Angeles following the box-office failure of his magnum opus, *Porgy and Bess*. Kay urged him not to go. New York City was home. He owned the city but by the same token, it owned him. George knew this. He did not like it.

He clasped her hands: “It’ll be swell, Kay. Fred’s kicking up a storm out there. Someone needs to save him from himself. Ginger’s begging me. It’s been too darn long.”

Seven years ago he had plucked Ginger Rogers out of a chorus line and anonymity for *Girl Crazy*. One leg-and-arm-flinging, give-me-my-break moment, supported by musicians Benny Goodman, Gene Krupa, Glenn Miller, and Jimmy Dorsey in the pit, transformed Ginger into a star. And then, in a New York second, she abandoned Broadway and Gershwin for Hollywood. Now, desperate for the unforgettable dance numbers only he could pen, Ginger was yodeling and waving to him from the Pacific coast. And George’s ears were pricking up.

As he looked into Kay’s cloudy eyes his face softened. His smile fell away. “I’m goofy for you, kid. You know that.”

She let her cigarette fall and smashed it with her toe. “Then why the hell are you flying off, George?”

He waved as if greeting someone in the sky. "This isn't a pair of wings, Kay. This is a tin can rolling down the road."

But it was a pair of wings.

He touched her cheek. "Besides, you deserve a break."

"Whatever you say, George," she said bitterly. "You're the genius."

Now, from her handbag in the back seat of the DeSoto, Kay fetches her monogrammed ivory and silver cigarette holder, a gift from George. She lights a Marlboro, cranks her window down a slit, and sighs. Rain mists her face as she smokes.

She knew even then that what George longed for he would not find in Los Angeles: his boyhood, the sense that his future lay before him, escape not just from New York but from a variety of entanglements. From Kay herself. *How did it come to this?*

Somewhere a horn honks—once, thrice—a slightly underpitched A-flat. Below it, like a supporting bass line, the rumble of tires against asphalt, an occasional shout.

"Watch it, buster!"

"Extra! Extra!"

She looks. A newspaper boy on the corner. A crowd has gathered around him. They reach excitedly for the information he is peddling. *What has happened?*

Another horn, lower, F-sharp. She cannot help identifying the tones. She was born that way. She smiles, remembering the rubber-bulb taxi horns George brought back from Paris. He sat at the piano in his Riverside Drive apartment playing his new composition and shouting "Now!" when she was to toot one or the other. A bold touch, evoking the bustle and chaos of the French capital through off-key honks. His was not the Paris of Puccini-esque garrets and Monet's soft-hued Gare

St.-Lazare but the urban jungle of towering ironworks and exuberant primitivism.

In the distance, the rising howl of a siren, calling to mind another of his sonic gags, the klezmer-style clarinet wail at the beginning of his earlier *Rhapsody*. And in that lament, so much humor, so much melody, so much pain.