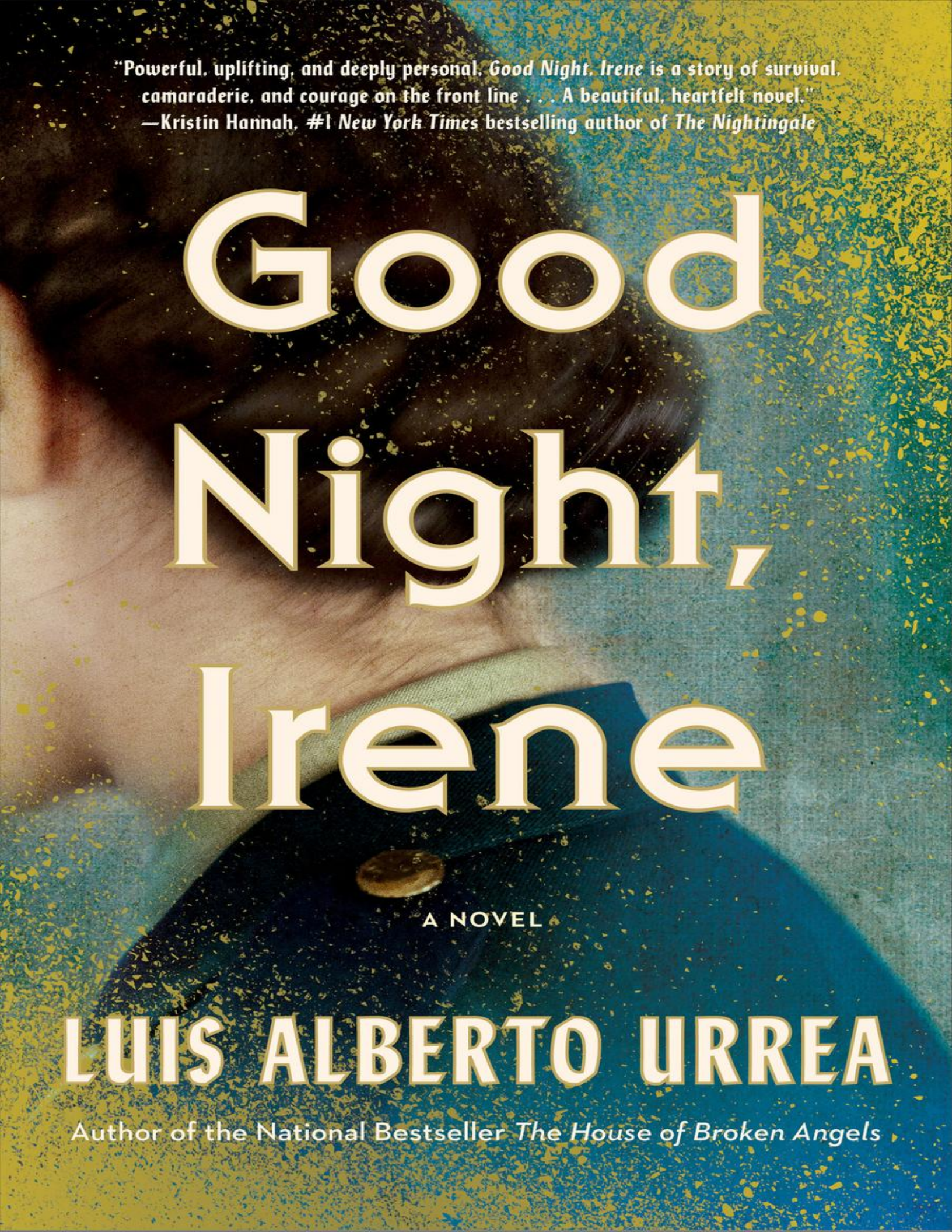
"Powerful, uplifting, and deeply personal, *Good Night, Irene* is a story of survival, camaraderie, and courage on the front line . . . A beautiful, heartfelt novel."
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Good Night, Irene
A NOVEL
LUIS ALBERTO URREA
Author of the National Bestseller *The House of Broken Angels*

Good Night, Irene

LUIS ALBERTO URREA

Little, Brown and Company
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Contents

I dedicate this book to my mother,
Phyllis de Urrea (1916–1990).
She was known in the Second World War
as Phyllis McLaughlin.
She served with Jill Pitts Knappenberger and Helen Anderson, crew of the ARC Clubmobile Cheyenne, traveling the roads and locations visited in this novel.
RIP, heroes.

* * *

And this one is especially for Cinderella, who traveled thousands of miles and visited many museums and warehouses and ruins and archives and countries and crematoria with me. And who helped me interview survivors and experts. And who read a hundred drafts.
Everything, always.

Some think we're so brave, but we really don't know enough to be scared. Some people think we're brats…some of us are. Some think we'd be better off at home, where a woman's place used to be…about 200 years ago. Some stare, shake their heads in disbelief. Some cheer, some scream and wave—everybody greets us. Some wolf, some worship, some think you're human and some don't.…You're a Red Cross girl. You're on the chow-and-charm circuit. You're a griping, kidding GI. You're personality on legs.

—Anonymous World War II letter

quoted in Marjorie Lee Morgan's *The Clubmobile—The ARC in the Storm*

I don't understand how you can
pass by and not see her

—"Irene," Joan Manuel Serrat


AMERICAN
UBMOBILL

Part One

This Is How We Remember

1

THEN IRENE WOODWARD escaped New York and went to war.

It was the beginning of October 1943. Irene was twenty-five. She tucked her official letter of acceptance in her pocketbook. She had never volunteered for anything in her life. Along with her letter, her bag held directions on reporting for duty once she got to Washington, her hotel reservation, and her appointment for a physical examination and inoculations at the Pentagon. The War Department had not paid for her train ticket. Nor had the Red Cross. Some of her papers were stamped SECRET. They were hidden at the bottom of her shoulder bag, which rode atop her suitcase, secured by buckled straps. She felt dangerous and at large. No one knew she had signed up, and she had left when nobody was looking. The empress of getaways.

Such intrigue: there had been many interviews. She had snuck to the Atlantic Region offices to be inspected. Her recommendation letters were gathered surreptitiously so nobody in her family would know what she was doing. She had signed on as a recreation worker with the American Red Cross, volunteering for overseas duty. For the duration of the war plus six months, however long that might be—barring injury or review. She was accepted and ordered to attend two weeks of training at American University in Washington, DC.

The air was crisp enough the morning she left New York for her to wear a long-sleeved white blouse under a pale red sweater. That was good, since she didn't want anyone staring at her arms. She was glad she didn't need a scarf. She had made up her eyes with great care—she was quite adept with

concealers. She was sure nobody would notice. It might just look like she had been a little weepy over leaving. Still, for good measure, tucked into her hair, she wore sunglasses, which her friends called *cheaters.* Very dark. Very Bette Davis. Ready if needed.

Her engagement ring was down the storm drain on East Twenty-Eighth Street, halfway between Lexington and Park. The cab had collected her there in the dark. Her ring was probably rolling along the sewer pipe on its way to the river.

Before Irene was a fiancée, she had set out from Staten Island for Washington, DC, the story went, "to find herself." In a family whose eldest aunt was famous for being the first white woman up the Amazon, there was room for such things.

Irene had fruitlessly pursued several different careers in DC, but she was incurably restless and never quite satisfied. She first took a position as a secretary to a congressman. She then scurried to a job selling jewelry at a high-end boutique. Too proud to ask the Woodwards for money, she even tried working as a governess for a prominent family. When she found herself selling tickets in the evening at a burlesque theater and contemplating becoming a waitress in a café, she knew it was time to concede defeat and go back home.

For the last three years, she had toiled away in Mother's antique shop, ultimately managing it for her when she went on acquisition trips. Woodward's Antiques was Mother's crowning achievement and Irene dutifully took up the cause. For the family, the name blazoned across the storefront was almost more important than the goods within. It anchored the women in particular to a certain status in local society, not dependent on

whom they married. They were always Woodwards first, New York matriarchs.

But it was in the antique shop where Irene met her notorious beau, the son of a prominent political family. After a few exquisite dates of champagne, lovely dinners, and flowers for her mother, Irene's family decided he was exactly what she needed. Mother began her campaign, reminding Irene that she wasn't getting any younger, though she was only twenty-three when he proposed.

Irene was fond of him, but she had no plans to marry anyone. She had seen her mother's marriages and wasn't interested. She was living in Mother's pied-à-terre, a tidy second-floor apartment in a brownstone, where Mother stayed only for special occasions or when she was on an antique-buying expedition for her shop on upper Broadway. Irene understood that no one in her family would have approved of her moving in with her beau. It would have been a scandal for the ages. So she didn't. Which, of course, stiffened her resolve to sneak him into the apartment whenever she could.

She had accepted the proposal only because the Woodwards had pressured her. It wasn't about the money—money was gauche, after all. Though nobody minded his money, of course. It was merely left out of the conversation. The point was the social register. The consequence of his connections. The father who was high in the ranks of naval officers advising FDR. And this one, the son, was destined to be a politician of profound merit. The family itself wanted to be his bride, she thought. As for her fiancé, he had his own family to contend with—they expected a good wife, from their kind of people. She had managed to put off the actual wedding for two whole years, and now this.

They would not approve of her escape, and that made her grin just a little in the cab's shadows. They would be appalled yet not overly surprised. She

was infamous for her exits—once by leaping out her second-story window to escape the worst of those stepfathers, landing in the Staten Island snow and tromping downhill to her secret grove in the woods. But most infamous, after the shouting battle with Mother that followed this event, was the next Saturday, when Irene emptied Mother's cashbox in the pantry and went to the city to catch a Ford Trimotor to West Virginia to visit her aunt Sarah, whom she called from the Charleston airport after landing. She was thirteen years old. No one noticed she was gone until Aunt Sarah phoned Mother to ask how long the child intended to visit.

Irene laughed softly.

The nuns on Staten Island had once told her to step outside herself. What was that supposed to mean? Step where, exactly? She'd ignored them. Just as she'd ignored their recommendation that she write *Jesus* on a piece of paper and tuck it into one of her shoes so that every step was an automatic prayer. She wasn't even Catholic. But here she was, stepping out.

The cab carried her away in the dark as the edges of night caught fire in the east and smoldered red in between the buildings.

She rode in silence.

The cabbie dropped her off at Seventh Avenue. She strolled toward Penn Station, trying to look elegant wrangling her bags. She was greeted along the street by eighty-four columns made of slightly pink granite. Already this morning the vast interior, designed along the lines of the Caracalla Roman baths, rang with a silver thunder of feet and voices and announcements and slamming doors. She was going to miss New York.

The sun had sped into the sky behind her. Light poured down from the ceiling portals onto the echoing floors. It seemed ancient in there, a strange cathedral. She was forever seven years old when she entered. It was haunted by old men and by young boys hawking newspapers. The parade

passed: many hats and many accents and odd languages she hadn't yet heard. Soldiers and sailors slumped on the benches and smoked. The wagons of luggage being pushed by Negro gents in uniforms could have been military caissons. She stared at her beloved labyrinth. What Minotaur awaited her? *Oh Irene, stop being so goddamned precious.* Those were the words he had spoken to her with composed disdain the night it all broke.

She surrendered her suitcases to a uniformed porter inside the main hall and carried her leather shoulder bag and purse slung from the same shoulder, one over the other.

She had in her bag the latest copies of *Vogue* and *The New Yorker*—the one with the newest John Cheever story. She didn't always understand the stories, but they filled her with a delicious melancholy. Also in the bag were her notebooks, pencils and pens, a tin of raspberry pastilles, lipstick and powder, combs, and Papa Hemingway's novel about war. The bag was heavy. Beneath all of these items, buried safely deep, lay her official papers. All around her now were the smells of roasted nuts and popcorn and coffee and cigars and pipes and cologne and Chesterfields.

The porter led her outside to the boarding area between trains. What could have been the voice of Zeus, if he'd come from Queens, bellowed from the speakers above: "Train 107, now boarding on track three." The porter muscled her suitcases into the baggage car.

"Thank you ever so," she said, and tipped him fifty cents.

His skin was the color of night. She noticed how careful he was not to touch her hand when she dropped the coins in his palm. "Bless you, miss," he said. "And God bless America."

On a propaganda poster attached to a nearby column, a GI straddled a rough peak, waving the American flag. WAR BONDS.

"We're going to win this," she said.

“You know we are.”

“No matter what.”

“It’s how we do,” the porter said.

The conductor at train-side stepped to her in his jaunty cap and took her elbow, looking like her uncle Will, gold specs and all. He helped her up the steps into the car. She hurried to a bright window seat on the left side, the best side if one wanted to see the woods and glimpse water heading south down the line. She wanted to see the small continent of Staten Island to bid it adieu. Her village of Richmond, with its haunted Revolutionary War–era houses. The island’s scruffy hulk shrugging its shoulder below New York always seemed friendly, like an old man having a cup of coffee on his stoop.

She savored the chaos she’d left behind at the apartment. Key under the mat, as ever. Not even a note. All her photographs removed from their albums. What clothes and shoes she hadn’t packed gone down the trash chute.

He’d walk in, sense something amiss. Open a drawer. Sit down at the table and have a glass of scotch. Now she saw how ridiculous he was, how predictable. He would grow rageful, realizing he’d been bested. There would be a silent period, a few days, followed by a concerned yet reasonable-sounding telephone call to the Woodwards. He’d ask Mother if she’d seen Irene. And if Mother wasn’t there, he’d try their country home up in Mattituck, on Long Island. He wouldn’t relent. His suspicions would begin with the family itself—he’d be certain there was a plot to embarrass him. She smirked. She hadn’t told them, either.

She placed her shoulder bag on the seat beside her to dissuade overly friendly gentlemen from sitting. Pulled her cheaters from the nest of her

dark hair. It was curly today. She hadn't torn at it with her brush for once. Dropped the glasses in her bag.

Outside her window, sparrows and pigeons patrolled the platform, pecking at crumbs. Skirmishes broke out over peanuts. A rat swiped a peanut and dived off the platform. Irene loved her city. Her heart might tear away like paper when the locomotive chuffed. She knew there would be a stone-walled tunnel, she knew that suddenly they would break out into full daylight, and there would be trees flickering with sunbeams.

Bells clanged and she checked her face in the window. "You'll do," she said aloud to her reflection. She had hazel eyes and was tired of explaining what color they were.

A small thrill when the conductor called "All aboard!" and slammed the door of the car and the whistle sounded and the great train heaved like a beast and groaned away from the gate.

All the Woodward men had gone to war. Why not one of the women? Besides, it was the Red Cross. Not even guns. She put death right out of her daydreams. She prided herself on her ability to do this—unpleasant ideas flew away as if she were tossing cats out the back door. One does not wallow.

Staten Island soon appeared as they rocked down the line—she never spotted Old Richmond Town before it was all behind her.

By the time they crossed the state line, she understood that she was really doing this. She imagined women from all over the country leaving home and heading for DC, drawing inexorably toward her, bringing their stories and excitement and joys. She had mostly lived among difficult Woodward matrons and a few men. No childhood playmates, really, save

for her terrible boy cousins from up on Long Island. What hilarious savages! It had delighted her that they all stormed around in cutoff dungarees and climbed atop old railcars in the field and drove the bodiless chassis of Jack Dashiell's Model T they called *The Platform,* with chairs and an old sofa tied to it. Jack was a suitor who'd pursued her a bit the summer after high school. He'd bought the jalopy for a sawbuck. They all got drunk off the bottles of bourbon that Uncle Will hid in the barn, and they smoked his stogies. They taught her to spit. She never once wore lipstick or a skirt in that gang. They had won a baby alligator for a dime at a ring toss on Coney Island, and had gallantly given her the heavy little box. Irene could feel the creature scratching inside all the way home. She kept the monster in her bathtub until Mother flushed it away. Forever after, the boys' code name for her was *Gator.*

Boys were still her favorite people, notwithstanding the fiancé.

She had meant to return to Richmond, to their elegantly shabby Victorian with its unsteady reading porch. It was halfway down the street from St. Patrick's. Her childhood bedroom was still there, above the porch—the Irene Museum, with her worn encyclopedias and books on the shelves, her stuffed animals slumbering on her bed. She had sought shelter there several times over the years. And why not—down on the shore, the island had a view of the Grand Citadel across the water. She walked the shoreline and looked at her favorite buildings: the Empire State, the Chrysler. The ferries were the friendliest boats she'd ever seen. There was enough child in her yet to hope Kong would be atop the skyscrapers, swatting biplanes out of the sky. The thrill of seeing the Statue of Liberty out there—especially in rain. But there was nothing dearer to her than the woods below their house.

Irene idly picked at her fingernail polish. Every time she had come back home, she remembered, she had snuck away to the woods. Just like the days

of her childhood, when daily she defied Mother, or whoever Father was at the moment—the latest in a series, this one Hungarian—and marched away with a favorite book. She had a routine, stopping to peer into the haunted rooms and basements of the abandoned old houses as she walked downhill in her shorts and sandals. She imagined war might be like this. Ambling. Filling notebooks with her own great thoughts. Perhaps some smoke drifting through the trees.

A man behind her sneezed like an air-raid siren. His seatmate said, “Christ, Benny!”

She tuned them out.

A convoy of trucks waited for them to pass at a crossroads; tanks rode upon flat trailers as far as she could see. It was all war, all the time. She wondered what her uniform would look like.

The whistle shrieked and she opened her eyes. They slowed, clacketing mightily and squealing. A Podunk Jersey town swung toward them on the right and the conductor rocked down the aisle clicking tickets. The rustling of newspapers intensified as men in brown suits spread out to set a bulwark against invasion, saving their islands of space against other men. Fedoras all around.

“Going good?” the conductor said to her. His walrus whiskers were white.

“Staying elegant,” she replied.

He punched her ticket and tucked it into the back of the seat. “Well, hot dog,” he said, ambling away with his knees braced against the seats along the aisle.

Out the window, the usual klatch of irritated-looking fellows stood on the platform. Irene had been hoping for a sister-in-arms who might be taking the train to DC. Someone who might offer some conversation. No one remotely like her was out there.

But then there was a soldier. He was taller than the men around him, his hair skull-short and topped by a jaunty garrison cap set at an angle over his left eye. She thought he was forty, though he could have been twenty-seven. Some colorful ribbons were pinned to his chest. When the herd climbed the steps into the car, she pulled up her full charge of power and aimed it at the doorway. One of her cousins used to say she could land the boys easier than catching a catfish with baloney bait. She was a glorious flirt and had a hypnotic gift for making men feel important even when she was secretly laughing at them. It was her power and her protection.

What was more difficult was how to make a man move past her, preferably in silence. Some of the gents from the platform now paused at her seat, casting their eyes at her shoulder bag expectantly as they waited for her to clear space, then huffing or rattling their briefcases as they shuffled away. Worse than rebuffed: ignored.

You are an insufferable brat, she scolded herself. *I am not,* she retorted.

The soldier came on board and she locked eyes with him. She raised a finger, then dipped her chin toward the seat beside her. He nodded once and pulled off his cap, tucked it into his uniform belt. He had a limp and walked with a cane, which she hadn't noticed on the platform. His uniform bore a Purple Heart medal. All down the aisle, people patted him or mumbled pleasantries to which he nodded without a smile. He shook their offered hands without looking at them.

Irene cleared her bag out of his way and he lowered himself into the seat. He kept his leg extended into the aisle, leaning the cane between his thighs

against the front edge of the seat.

"'Preciate it," he said and closed his eyes, laid his head back.

She caught herself staring at him. He had the stillness of a statue. There was a scar at the corner of his eye. A glitter of tiny whiskers on his Adam's apple.

Then the conductor appeared and nudged the soldier and handed over a newspaper. "There you go, Sarge," he said. "Today's *Herald.*"

"Thank you, sir."

"No—thank *you,* son."

The soldier opened the paper.

"How was it?" the conductor said.

"Hot, sir."

The conductor looked down as if expecting more. "Pacific?" he said.

The soldier nodded. Once. "Palm trees," he said.

The conductor patted his shoulder and moved on down the car.

The soldier studied the paper.

"So," Irene said. "You're a sergeant."

Another nod. She smelled bay rum and tobacco.

"All aboard!" and the conductor leaned out of the car, hung on with one hand, waved at the engineer, and swung back up and slammed the door. They rolled on.

Irene stared at the soldier until he looked over.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said.

"Does everyone want you to?"

"Don't you?"

She turned away. "Is that what happened to your leg?" she asked, looking out the window.

“What leg?” He laughed through his nose, a bitter puff, then leaned over to knock on his leg, which made a hollow sound. “Metal,” he said.

Choosing audacity, she said: “Show me.” Audacity always worked.

He was surprised but pulled up his pant leg. “Shiny, huh?” he said.

She put her hand on his forearm. “I’m sorry.” She glanced at his leg and gave him the full-color gaze.

Apparently he was color-blind. He went back to the paper. “It’s okay, lady. I had an extra one.”

“Did it hurt terribly?” She hated herself for asking.

“Morphine. Breakfast of champions.” He opened to the sports page.

Irene saw Spud Chandler and Stan Musial in the sports headlines. She wasn’t sure why she kept coming at him. It was like a compulsion. “Baseball fan?” she said.

He raised the paper closer to his face.

“I need your advice,” she said.

He grunted.

“I’m on my way to the war. There. I said it.”

He put the paper down. “Jesus.”

“That’s what I wanted to tell you.”

Now he couldn’t help himself. “What branch? WAC? WAVES?”

“Red Cross.”

He seemed to relax. “Bedpan commando. Still, nursing’s tough duty.”

“Not nursing.”

“Oh yeah? What, then?”

“Clubmobiles.”

He frowned. “The hell is that?”

“Mobile service. Comfort, moral support. As I understand it, we’ll be backing the troops in the field. We make coffee and donuts. In trucks.”

“You what?”

“Coffee. And donuts.”

He laughed.

“Clubmobiles,” she explained. “A Red Cross club…on wheels.”

“Donuts.” He shook his head. “I heard it all now.”

She didn’t appreciate his tone.

Again, he raised the barrier of the paper between them. “Good luck, sister.”

Irene turned away. *Fine, be rude.* Outside her window, backyards and junkyards and loading docks and small scraggly forests and narrow roads and smokestacks. Slouching hills. Factories behind sagging fences. A barbershop with its pole rotating on an empty street. Great parts of the world seemed to consist of water towers and cars waiting at flashing crossing lights.

“Have you any advice?”

“Sure,” he said. “Don’t do it.”

“Thank you for your insight.” She crossed her arms.

“Cover your ass, how about that?”

“Sorry to bother you.”

“Look, it’s no place—”

“For a girl?”

He gave up and crumpled the paper in frustration.

She turned toward him. “I intend to serve my country,” she said, “and this is what they’ll let me do. I have never made a donut in my life. I don’t know how to drive a truck. And the coffee I’ve made has been known to incapacitate its victims. So tell me, Sarge—you’re an expert. How will I do?”

His head dipped slightly. “Swell,” he said. “You’ll do swell.” He took a deep breath and let it out. “Look, you won’t hear the shot that gets you. So stay un-gettable.”

The train was slowing now. The whistle and the bells sounded and the conductor came through shouting out the name of the town. She knew she’d never remember it.

The soldier grabbed his cane and shifted around on the seat, trying to pull his metal leg out of the way. “This is my stop,” he said. “Going home to see Mom.”

She suddenly loved him. “Good luck,” she said. “Any words for me?”

“Listen,” he replied. “If you get to come home, you will be so grateful you won’t realize at first that you survived. But once you know you survived, you’ll only be starting to understand.”

He braced himself against the back of the seat in front of him and wrestled himself into the aisle.

“Understand what?” she said.

He just stared at her and walked off the train.