

## North of Hope—Excerpt

### 1

Frank first laid eyes on Libby Girard at the Sunday matinee a minute before the lights went down. She and Sylvia Pofford came in together, talking a mile a minute, and took seats two rows in front of Frank and over to his left. His first impulse was to point her out to his friend Danny Ash, who was sitting on his right and talking to somebody in the row behind them, but a second impulse told him not to share her with anybody for the time being, not to draw attention to her beauty before he had time to fully appreciate it in the privacy of his heart.

For Frank was stunned by Libby Girard's beauty. She had large, happy eyes and dark hair. She smiled broadly as she spoke. She had a pretty neck. Unable to take his eyes from her as the theater gradually darkened, he considered it something of a miracle that a girl so dazzling should come to live in a town so dull. Sylvia Pofford had told him there was a new girl in Linden Falls and that she was their age, a junior-to-be, but had withheld the fact that she was a knockout. Which was understandable because ever since the primary grades Sylvia Pofford, unchallenged as the class brain, had been regarding herself as the class beauty—a major case of self-deception, in Frank's opinion, Sylvia having a bumpy forehead and an unpleasant way of squinting when a thought crossed her mind.

The newsreel began and Libby and Sylvia continued talking while a woman with polio, who had been taken from her iron lung to give birth to a baby, exchanged smiles with her nervous-looking husband; while the city of Dresden, four years after the war, was shown to be rebuilding itself; and while Ingrid Bergman announced at a press conference that she was leaving her husband and giving up films to marry Roberto Rossellini and retire to private life. Finally a man sitting in front of the girls turned around and told them to pipe down.

The feature was *A Portrait of Jennie*. It was the first movie in at least ten years to make Frank cry. Watching Jennifer Jones come back from the dead and run across the beach and fall into Joseph Cotten's arms, Frank was shocked to realize his cheeks were wet. He wiped them with his fingers, glancing left and

---

right to see if anyone noticed. He was puzzled—frightened even—to find his emotions so far out of control. This hadn't happened at a movie since he was five and wailed so loud at the terrible things happening to Pinocchio that his mother had had to take him home before it was over. Now, at sixteen, he was weeping for his mother. He was shedding tears more profusely, in fact, than at any time since her funeral. Ever since he and his father and brothers turned away from the open grave and headed across the snowy cemetery to their car, Frank had been strict with himself, never allowing himself to stray from what he took to be the straight and narrow path to manhood. He almost never cried or even felt like it. As a movie addict he had sat dry-eyed through any number of sad farewells, death scenes, lovers pulled apart. Why was he crying now?

Jennifer Jones couldn't stay among the living, even though Joseph Cotten loved her. She told him she had to return to her spiritual realm, wherever that was. She didn't get emotional about it. Her smile remained serene and superior, as if Joseph Cotten's desperate pleading struck her as childish. Frank's heart ached for the man because Jennifer Jones was a real dish, the kind of dark-eyed brunette he had always been crazy about. As she released herself from Joseph Cotten's embrace, Frank silently urged him to implore her one more time. Which he did. He sounded as if he might cry. "It's you I want, Jennie, not just a dream of you." She smiled wisely and advised, "There is no life until you find love, Eben. Then life cannot be lost."

Was this true? Surely it was nonsense. Frank had loved his mother, then lost her. His father had loved her—he lost her. His brothers had loved her—they lost her. Frank recognized the words on the sound track as the sort of whipped cream screenwriters were always coming up with in the concluding scenes in their attempt to make the language as impressive as the music. No, he didn't believe a word of it, and yet as the waves came crashing in and the violins came up, Frank's heart pounded as if he'd just been told some wonderful news. He shook with weeping and he bolted from the theater before the lights came on so no one would see his tears.

It was raining. He stood under the marquee composing himself and waiting for Danny Ash. He saw Libby and Sylvia in the crowd coming out. Libby glanced at him, looked away, and glanced again. Frank watched the two girls hurry off in the drizzle, and it was then that he first heard the voice.

*She's the one, Frank. That's why you cried.*

Nonsense, he thought, setting off down the street with Danny Ash. Why should the sight of a pretty girl make anyone cry?

But the voice persisted all the way home.

*She's the one.*

“Sylvia, does Frank Healy have a girlfriend?”

“Are you kidding?”

“I wonder if he’d be a good boyfriend for me.”

Sylvia made a sound like spitting. “Boys our age are such children.”

The two girls, drinking Orange Crush on Sylvia Pofford’s front porch, were planning Libby’s debut as the new girl in the junior class. It was evening. The rain had stopped. Their conversation was broken by long silences, for neither girl was yet quite free of the spell cast over them by *A Portrait of Jennie*. Across the street the slow-moving Badbattle River was purple and pink. A short way upstream a rapids produced an endless gurgling sound. The voice of Fred Allen drifted out from the radio in the living room, where Sylvia’s parents were sitting with books in their laps.

“But he’s smart, you said.” Coming out of the matinee, she had asked Sylvia about the tall, dark-haired, bleary-eyed boy standing under the marquee.

“As and Bs,” said Sylvia. “Mostly Bs.”

“And he’s out for football.”

“Second team.”

“And he’s handsome,” said Libby.

“For a child. He’s only sixteen.”

“Well, we’re sixteen.”

“But he’s such a mama’s boy. You’ve got to date seniors, Libby. Or older. Boys our age are so dull. Bob’s got a cousin coming through next weekend on his way east to college. He’d be a good one for you.” Bob was Sylvia’s boyfriend—Bob Templeton, senior-class president, first-string quarterback, the only son of the only doctor in town. Libby had been introduced to Bob and thought it a superb match, both he and Sylvia being humorless and immensely impressed with themselves.

“What good’s a boyfriend in the East?” Libby asked.

“You’d have him to write to. You’d be the only one in our class writing to a guy in college, except me.”

“No, I need a boyfriend close by.”

“Next year Bob’s going to Cornell.”

“Next year I’ll be married.”

“Libby!” Sylvia was shocked. It was Sylvia’s frequently declared opinion, handed down by her mother, that the only girls who married before graduation were either pregnant or mentally handicapped or both.

Libby added, for effect, “I’m giving the boys of Linden Falls one year, then I’m choosing.” She loved shocking Sylvia. In the city a statement like this had had no shock value, because there she’d had no girlfriends like Sylvia. Her crowd in Minneapolis had come from families much like her own, except that very few of the other fathers drank as much as Libby’s father. There hadn’t been one college degree in the entire set of parents. Sylvia was the daughter of an attorney and a librarian. She was a pianist, an honor student, and a snob. She had five new dresses in her closet ready for the first five days of school. She had everything Libby lacked, except looks.

From the moment they met, Sylvia had assumed the role of Libby’s sponsor or patron or whatever you’d call someone as knowledgeable and possessive and bossy as Sylvia. Libby was lucky, and knew it. She’d been hoping for just such a friend to be her confidante, her rumor monger, her partner on double dates; someone smart, sophisticated, and not as attractive as herself. Libby was not duped by this instant friendship. She was well aware that Sylvia had befriended her for her looks, aware that Sylvia believed—didn’t everyone?—that the next best thing to being beautiful yourself was going into partnership with beauty.

Libby drained her bottle of Orange Crush, wiped her mouth, and tossed off another one, for effect: “If I don’t have a baby before I’m nineteen, I’ll feel like I’ve wasted my life.”

“Libby! You talk like a farm girl. The farm girls around here have babies like that.”

“My mother says have your kids early and grow up with them.” Actually these had been the words not of Libby’s mother but of a friend’s mother in the city. Libby’s mother, a downcast woman occasionally beaten by Libby’s father, refrained from making general statements about life.

“Bob and I are having two babies when he’s out of medical school and I’m out of law school.”

This was followed by a long, respectful silence before Libby spoke up. “Frank lives in a nice house.”

They could see the front of the Healy house from where they sat. It was half a block downstream, a high old house with balusters missing from the porch rail.

“It’s nothing special inside.”

“You’ve been in it?”

“Birthday parties when we were little.”

At that moment, the Healys' front door opened and a woman wearing a broad-brimmed hat and a white dress emerged. She was accompanied by a man in black.

"That's Father Lawrence and his housekeeper Eunice Pfeiffer. They eat supper at the Healys' a lot. Eunice cooks."

"Is she a widow?"

"Eunice? Are you kidding? She was born an old maid."

"Oh, no," said Libby sadly. She hated hearing about people who never got themselves matched up with anybody, and that was why at sixteen she'd already had seven or eight boyfriends and would have as many more as it took to find the right one to marry. Despite the unhappy example of her parents, the single life was her idea of hell on earth. "Doesn't it break your heart to think she'll never have a family?"

"She's got one," said Sylvia. "She's mother hen to Frank. When Mrs. Healy died, Eunice Pfeiffer sort of took over both their lives, Frank's and his dad's. My mother says it's her age. Her mothering instinct is real strong. It's really tragic."

"Why tragic? It sounds nice for Frank."

"No, that's what's tragic about it. She's trying to make Frank"—she paused, carefully choosing the word—"perfect."

"And is he?"

"Yeah, he's the kind of boy every girl's mother points to and says, 'I'd like to see you get interested in him—he's the perfect boy for you.'"

"So what's wrong with perfect?"

"Who wants a perfect boy when there's real boys around? I mean you'll never catch Frank Healy dancing or necking or anything. All he ever does is make model airplanes and work at the egghouse. He wouldn't go to the Loomis Ballroom if you paid his way."

"What's the egghouse?"

"Schultenovers' Egghouse. They do something to eggs. Eunice Pfeiffer got him the job. He started out the summer cutting grass, but everybody's lawn dried up."

"Is that his dad?" A tall man was following the priest and the old maid out to the street, where they paused to talk.

"Yeah, Martin C. Healy. You know what? He practically lives in the basement."

“How come?”

“Who knows? Frank says there’s rooms they haven’t used for years.”

Father Lawrence and Eunice Pfeiffer strolled off down the street, and Martin Healy went back inside. The priest’s black suit blended into the twilight, but Libby was able to keep the white dress in sight for a long time.

“When did his mother die?”

“Years ago. Frank’s been strange ever since.”

“Strange? How?”

Sylvia pointed to her forehead, indicating a mental case. Libby knew this wasn’t true. The eyes of Frank Healy, as seen this afternoon under the marquee, were deep and steady and wise.

Again the girls fell silent. The white dress turned a far corner. The rapids bubbled. Dusk grew dense. Then a screen door slammed and they saw Frank, in swimming trunks, cross his front lawn and cross the street and wade into the river. He was carrying a football. He went in slowly, up to his waist, then stopped and stood still, facing downstream, as though in a trance. He kept moving his right hand back and forth, palm down, over the surface of the water.

“What’s he doing, Sylvia?”

“Who knows?”

He turned and threw the ball upstream. It was a remarkably long throw, and the ball splashed in the water nearly opposite Sylvia’s house. Waiting for it to float down to him, he lowered himself into the river until nothing but the top of his head was visible. Then he stood up again. He did this a number of times, dipping down and standing up. Was he bathing? Evading mosquitoes?

Again and again he threw the ball. An ingenious method for a boy alone to play catch, thought Libby. Again and again, waiting for the ball, he went through his dunking routine. Then he threw the ball up onto the bank and walked upstream, where the water was deeper. By the time he reached a point opposite Sylvia’s house, he was in up to his neck, and he stopped walking. He went under. He stayed under so long Libby became frightened. She stood up and said, “He’s drowning.”

“He’s not drowning,” Sylvia scoffed. “He practically lives in the river.”

“But he isn’t coming up!” Libby ran across the lawn and stopped at the street. Still he didn’t appear. She ran to the river, slipped off her shoes, and waded in. The water was up over the hem of her skirt when she saw him surface downstream. It was nearly dark now, and he didn’t notice her. He was facing away, standing trancelike

again, in the same place as before, moving both hands around and around over the water. Libby, too, stood still, the current pressing around her legs, mosquitoes whining around her hair. She wanted to call to him, but didn't because he seemed involved in a ceremony of some kind. After a while he turned and splashed quickly to shore, picked up the football, and ran to his house.

Libby stepped out of the water and onto the grass. She called good night to Sylvia and walked home carrying her shoes and wishing she had spoken to Frank in the water. She wanted to know why he just stood there and what he was thinking. And why there were tears in his eyes after the movie. And what it felt like to have only one parent. And how you could be a mama's boy if your mother was dead.