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IKE AND KAY

James MacManus



Duckworth Overlook

I

May 1942

They had waited three days for the train, stamping their feet against the cold on the platform at Euston Station, peering into the fog that descended on London like a shroud. You could hardly tell the difference between night and day in the blanket of grey vapour that slowed traffic to a crawl, stifled sound and left pedestrians groping their way along streets like the blind.

Charles Dickens would have known this fog, she thought. "London particulars" he called those days when the miasma rolled up the Thames from the Essex marshes and slithered into the city, clinging to buildings, drifting like smoke through open doors or windows clutching at people with slimy hands as they stumbled through the murk.

She slapped her gloved hands together, tightened the Sam Browne belt around her official issue khaki overcoat, and looked at her watch. It was 6.45 a.m. Three times now they had been ordered out of their beds in the pre-dawn darkness to meet the distinguished American visitors on a train that never arrived.

The other drivers, including her good friend Charlotte Montagu, had gone into the station for a cup of tea. It was against orders to leave their official cars, which were parked neatly in a row outside the station. But the train was finally due in fifteen minutes and in the fog no one could see whether the drivers were with their cars or not.

The Americans hadn't wanted to take the train. They had waited impatiently at Prestwick Airport in Scotland for the weather to clear. Only reluctantly had they been persuaded to take the overnight sleeper from Glasgow.

She found the girls happily seated with their tea in the warmth of the crowded café. They waved to her and shifted up the wooden bench to make room. Kay always called them girls but in fact they were mostly women in their late twenties who had wearied of clerical or nursing work and wanted to do something more interesting.

Kay was conscious that she was the eldest at thirty-three, not that it made any difference. They were a cheerful lot, she thought, and they had every reason to be. They had been assigned three- and four-star generals, the most senior commanders in the growing American military presence in London.

The newspapers had treated the generals like film stars and carried long, admiring profiles: General George Marshall and General "Hap" Arnold were the favourites, and fan letters had already begun to arrive at the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square. It was May 1942, five months after Pearl Harbor had brought the US into the war.

Britain had yet to win a battle in a war that was being lost in the Atlantic Ocean. German U-boats were exacting a rising toll among convoys laden with food and fuel for a beleaguered nation.

Rationing had reduced bacon, butter, decent bread and anything but the scraggiest cuts of beef to a memory. Beer was watered down, and gin, whose provenance was often a bathtub rather than a brewery, was the only spirit available in public houses. Now the Yanks were finally coming, and London was eager to see what they looked like.

The BBC had broadcast the news that another military delegation was due to arrive in London that morning. The American ambassador, John Winant, was somewhere at Euston Station too, although they hadn't seen him. They were Motor Transport Corps drivers and their orders were to collect their assigned generals and take them to the embassy. Each driver had been given a name and a small photo for identification.

She had arrived late the day they handed out the assignments and the other drivers had got the most senior officers – and the best looking. They teased her about her American, not even a full general, a two-star major-general with a suspiciously Germanic name no one had ever heard of.

Kay squeezed onto the bench and watched gratefully as tea was poured from a chipped enamel pot into a mug.

"Any toast?" she asked, looking at a Formica tabletop bare of any suggestion of sustenance but for a bottle of HP sauce streaked with its own contents and small wooden salt and pepper pots. A brimming brown enamel ashtray sat in the centre of the table. Everyone was smoking.

"Toast's off – no bread," mimicked one of the girls, nodding towards a thin whey-faced woman in a stained apron behind the counter.

The girl, her friend Charlotte, offered Kay a cigarette and flipped open a silver lighter. It looked expensive and had entwined initials engraved on the side.

"Where did you get that?" asked Kay, inhaling deeply.

Charlotte smiled and shook her head.

Charlotte and she had been friends since both had sat nervously waiting for an interview to join the Motor Transport Corps a year earlier.

The corps had been formed at the start of the war to provide drivers for military top brass and important foreign visitors. There was no pay and the girls even had to buy their own uniforms – except for the standard issue Sam Browne belt. They were mostly recruited through recommendation, a quiet word here and there in London's clubland or in the higher echelons of the Foreign Office.

The result was that the MTC began to be regarded, and widely derided, as a wartime finishing school for young women who wanted a role in the war effort without the boredom of a desk job.

It had been the American embassy's idea to form a special section of the MTC to drive their senior staff. All the major street signs in the centre of the city had been taken down in 1939 in case of an invasion and no one had yet put them back up. No American could find his way around town, and any able-bodied Londoner who could drive had been conscripted.

The vetting for the embassy job had been minimal. The main requirement was a good family background, a clean licence, the ability to drive a large American Packard anywhere in London at a moment's notice, and what was called "a pleasing appearance".

They all knew what that meant: good looks, a shapely figure, something to put a smile on the face of a weary American officer in bombed-out London.

Kay had no idea who had recommended her. An Anglo-Irish family clinging to the remnants of a rundown estate in

County Cork was hardly the required social background, judging by the other girls in the corps. They were all daughters of dukes or generals.

Charlotte's father was "Sir Somebody in the Foreign Office" and her mother was a lady-in-waiting to Queen Elizabeth at Buckingham Palace. They lived in a flat in Eaton Square which Charlotte said was the smartest address in London. There was a large country house in Yorkshire and a scatter of titled uncles, aunts and cousins.

"We're all hons, frightfully grand, but frankly it's a pain," she'd said to Kay after their interview. "The gossip columns never leave a girl alone. You're lucky not to have been saddled with all that. I rather envy you."

They were drinking gin and tonics in the Red Lion pub off Whitehall. Kay had described her childhood in southern Ireland where what had mattered to her parents was whether she could handle a 4.10 shotgun and take her pony over a dry-stone wall at full gallop.

"It was fun, but we were given precious little time or encouragement to learn anything," said Kay.

"Fancy being given a shotgun when you were twelve!" said Charlotte. "All I got was a bloody bicycle. That and a governess who taught us deportment and a ghastly woman who showed us how to dance with a young gentleman without treading on his toes."

Charlotte got up and began to dance around the pub with an imaginary partner, twirling around and saying in a loud voice, "If while dancing the waltz in close proximity with your partner you become aware that he is becoming aroused, you must leave the dance floor immediately and offer him a glass of water."

Kay burst out laughing and then covered her mouth as she saw people around them beginning to pay attention.

"She didn't say that!"

"Cross my heart, doll. I was fourteen and had no idea what she was talking about. I think Mummy thought we were too posh to be told the facts of life."

Charlotte had raven hair which was swept back in waves from a high forehead according to the fashion of the day for those who could afford it. Kay was a little jealous. Waves meant a perm, and that in turn meant the expense of a hairdresser. Like most women she made do with pinning her hair back beneath a headscarf.

Charlotte was not good-looking in the conventional sense; in fact there was nothing conventional about Charlotte at all. She was an inch over six feet tall and defied the drab wartime dress forced on most women by rationing. Charlotte's colourful silk scarves, linen blouses and long pleated skirts told the world that she had no need of clothing coupons.

What Charlotte liked was attention. She dressed, talked and acted to attract. She addressed her friends as "doll", explaining that it was a nickname her nanny had given her in the nursery. Her high cheekbones, well-rounded figure and a smile made more suggestive by lurid red lipstick had certainly attracted the attention of almost every man in the Red Lion when they'd walked in.

No one spared a glance for Kay. Not for the first time she reflected that the pale good looks and slender figure that had won her a modelling contract at the Worth fashion house two years earlier were not what men looked for in a woman.

Charlotte sat down. Everyone in the pub was now looking at her. She leant over to Kay, glancing around with comic exaggeration, and whispered, "They drink sherry at 11 o'clock in the morning, you know."

"Who?" asked Kay.

"Who do you think? Then they move onto gin and Dubonnet. The Queen is often squiffy by lunchtime."

"No!"

Charlotte put a finger to her lips, sat back, raised her glass and then laughed. She was always laughing; she never seemed to take anything seriously. Kay liked her the moment they met.

After the third gin Charlotte had said, "You may be an Irish peasant, but I'm going to make sure you get this job. I need someone like you around – the rest of them are so bloody dull."

Charlotte probably had used what she called her posh connections because they had offered Kay the job. For a woman in London in 1941 it was a chance to give up the squalor and horror of work as an ambulance driver – all broken bodies and blood everywhere – and do a job that was just as useful. At least that's what she told herself. It certainly sounded more fun.

Three blasts on a high-pitched whistle told the drivers their train was arriving. They drained the last dregs of their tea, ground their cigarettes into the ashtray and fished compacts from their handbags for a quick dab of powder onto pale cheeks. Lipstick and nail varnish were forbidden but, as Kay noted, the regulation did not seem to apply to Charlotte.

The drivers trooped onto the platform and lined up as the train arrived. The tall, gaunt figure of the ambassador pulled back the sleeve of his coat, looked at his watch and stamped on the platform to warm his feet. A crowd of journalists and film crews jostled for position behind a roped-off area.

Kay smoothed the skirt of her uniform while the others fussed with their belts and peaked hats. A crowd of passengers were coming down the platform with the Americans in front,

four generals with peaked caps showing rank in the stars sewn onto their shoulder epaulettes. She recognised her man immediately from his photo, shorter than the rest with that wide mouth and ears that stuck up either side of his cap.

There was a moment of confusion as the officers paused to shake hands with the ambassador. Other passengers trudged past the group, anxious and weary after the overnight journey. When the crowd had cleared, the drivers looked around.

The platform was empty. The journalists were following the ambassador out of the station and crowding around his large limousine as the generals got in. Amid a burst of flashbulbs they drove off into the fog.

The girls walked back to their cars laughing at the absurdity of a three-day wait for just a glimpse of the men they were supposed to be chauffeuring around London.

"What a charade," said Charlotte. "I hadn't even finished my tea. Anyone want another cuppa?"

The other drivers shook their heads and walked briskly back to their cars. Charlotte looked enquiringly at Kay, who also shook her head and said, "I think we should get to the embassy."

Kay followed Charlotte's tail-lights until she lost her somewhere near Marble Arch. The only way to drive with any safety in the fog or nightly blackout was to keep close to the pavement where the kerb stones had been painted white. She wondered how their generals were getting on in the ambassador's car. The embassy had insisted on an American driver for security reasons. The man knew nothing about the wartime streets of London, many closed by bomb damage, and had probably got lost on his way back to Grosvenor Square.

Kay liked her job. The big American car drew admiring looks on the streets. She told herself she was making a contribution to the war effort. Traffic accidents in major cities had soared since the imposition of the blackout and the

mindless decision to turn off traffic lights at major junctions. Her duty was to deliver anyone the American embassy designated safely and on time to their destination.

It was straightforward, easy work and, if she was honest, for all the status conferred on a young woman by a wartime uniform, it was rather boring. There were times like this, kerb-crawling through the fog, when she missed the excitement of driving an ambulance with bells ringing and lights flashing. The danger of driving through streets engulfed in fire wasn't the reason why she'd given up ambulance work. It was because she found she spent more time driving body parts to the mortuary than the wounded to hospital. She had become one of the horsemen of the apocalypse, delivering death rather than saving life.

Kay looked at her watch and worked out she would be at the embassy in a few minutes. She would be introduced to her general and given movement orders for the following day. The drivers were never told how long their charges were staying in the country. They were given a schedule for the next twenty-four hours and no more.

Where the American visitors went and who they saw was a secret. Kay, like the others drivers in the Transport Corps, had signed a document pledging on pain of death not to reveal any details of her work. It had made them all feel very important to start with, but the fact was that most of their work involved waiting for hours on end outside offices and military camps.

And that was what her life amounted to now. Driving and waiting, night and day, through blackout, fog, rain, hail or whatever weather the capricious English climate chose to summon from the heavens.

It was a good way, if not to forget, then at least to take her mind off her guilt and regrets.

Richard was overseas with his regiment somewhere in North Africa. He was an Irish American from upstate New York, a dashing officer well over six feet tall with warm brown eyes and minty chewing gum breath. To the fury of his family he had gone to Canada to join an armoured unit. It was his way of getting into the war, he'd said. He had hardly put the engagement ring on her finger before she'd found out through an anonymous note from "a well-wisher" that he was married.

He had wept real tears when he'd confessed. He swore that the marriage had been a sham to please their parents, that he was almost divorced and that she, Kay Summersby, was the only woman he had ever really truly loved.

Kay wondered whether men were born bastards or their mothers made them that way in revenge on the testicular tribe. Either way, she knew that women were born to forgive them. And she had forgiven him, or rather she had fallen in love with him, which was almost, but not quite, the same thing.

That had been a year ago and the awful thing was that she could barely remember what he looked like now. It had all been so quick. A few months of hurried kisses in darkened doorways, stolen nights in country pubs with creaky beds, a proposal on the steps of the Albert Memorial beneath the forbidding gaze of Queen Victoria's adored husband and then discovery, confession, forgiveness and a final night of redemptive lovemaking in a mildewed room near Victoria Station. Then he was gone. She well knew the truth of the popular saying at the time: *A quick fling, a diamond ring, then you wait for the phone to ring.*

And the phone never did ring. She got letters, of course, all spidery handwriting crammed onto the regulation two pages

of thin army-issue blue paper carefully folded into envelopes stamped *Read By the Censor*.

He was in a tank somewhere in North Africa with his Canadian unit and talked of the heat, the flies, the endless desert, the stars at night scattered across the sky like sequins on a velvet cushion, anything but the war itself.

She smiled when she read the line about the stars. He said his Irish side gave him a love of words and poetry. There had been two or three letters a week to begin with, but they had dwindled recently.

She swerved to avoid a drinker who had emerged into the fog from a darkened pub and walked straight onto the road. She blew her horn, breaking another wartime regulation. Drivers were not supposed to sound their horns at any time of the day or night. Much of London slept by day as people got little enough sleep most nights with the air-raid sirens and the bombs.

In truth she didn't miss Richard's letters. They had just made her feel guilty. She had written back, of course, but doubted that the carefully phrased words of love ever reached a tank unit somewhere in the North African desert.

She didn't even know for sure he was in Africa. She just knew there had been a lot of fighting in the desert that spring. She looked at the announcement of casualties in *The Times* every day, but he was only a junior officer. She wasn't sure they would carry news of the death of an American second lieutenant who had somehow managed to join the British Eighth Army in the desert.

In fact she wasn't really sure of anything about Richard except that he loved her in that careless way that men do and that she had fallen in love with him, or rather with a pair of warm brown eyes and kisses that tasted of mint.