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A Desirable Woman

for Tanya and David Charlton

She was not beautiful according to the standards of the magazines and moving pictures of the time, and she knew it. But by any standard she was a desirable woman, and she also knew that. She knew it from what she had seen in the eyes of certain men, to which from time to time she had felt something like an echo in herself.

That she was desirable was acceptable to her as a part of the liveliness and also the goodness of the world. It was a gift. But that she was desirable and knew it and accepted it unfitted her somewhat for her role as a minister's wife. It was not expected. She had not expected it herself until her own wits told her it was so. Part of her desirability was her look of knowing more than she was saying, and of being amused by the difference. That, and the utter frankness of her presence. There was in her, even in old age, a declarative force of being that was unhesitating and without disguise.

She was born Laura Stafe. She became Laura Milby. She was in love with her husband and would remain so. Another gift. This was not just because she knew she was desirable to him, as he to her—they had settled that soon enough—but from the beginning she had sensed a goodness in him that she knew she could trust. Later it seemed to her that she had not known such trust was in her until he called it from her and she gave it.

They met at a small denominational college where her parents had sent her because they thought it a safe place to send a girl, and where he had come, after an interval of employment in his father's small lumberyard, to prepare for the ministry. His name was Williams Milby. When they were introduced, she laughed. "Oh! Do they call you Bills?"

His reply, the grin subtracted, she thought was elegant, even courtly: "Not yet, mam. But if *you* call me that, that's my name."

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He was a good-looking young man, regular of feature and curly haired, his countenance so open and unassuming that it might have passed for naïve except for a self-knowing good humor that sometimes lighted it. He attracted her also because the seriousness, even the solemnity, of his vocation already hung about him as a kind of obscurity, and she loved her own power of drawing him forth, in person, out of that shadow.

"What do you want? What do you want for your own self," she asked. "Oh, that! Oh!" She looked straight at him then, and her laugh undisguised them both.

The day after they were graduated they were married. That was 1938.

They went in the fall of the same year, not having known for a whole summer where they would go, to serve a small church known as The Little Flock at a place called Sycamore on the south side of the Ohio River. Sycamore had once been a river port of some note, but was by then merely a ferry landing, two general stores, two churches, a blacksmith shop, a bank, a loose assemblage of houses, and three shantyboats tied up to trees along the river.

The church paid in money "not much more than you could put in your eye," as one of the members forthrightly told them. But it provided also a parsonage of three rooms, with a cistern and pump conveniently at the back door, a garden spot, and at the back of the garden a privy. Thus they were saved the necessity of living out the rest of the Depression on love alone.

They were neither passive nor incapable, neither careless nor low spirited. They made the most of their garden. Their house was cooled by a huge elm that threw its shadow over it on summer afternoons; in winter it was snug. And the little they were paid in money was aboundingly supplemented in kind: a sack of fresh sausage or an old ham, a dressed chicken, jars of fruit or vegetables or pickles or preserves, baked goods or fresh fish or wild honey. These gifts were sometimes brought to them openly for their commendation and their pleased surprise, sometimes left on their back porch when they were not at home.

There was little enough of money at large in Sycamore at that time, but it was rich in the produce of its fields and woods and the river, and to their young preacher and his wife the church members in general were freehearted to a fault.

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The town accepted the arrival of the young strangers, "Brother Milby" and "Mrs. Milby," without surprise. It had expected that they would come, as it expected that they would eventually go. It accepted them formally when the congregation of his church sat down on Sunday morning and listened respectfully to Williams Milby's inaugural sermon. It accepted them less formally by helping them to settle into their house and by giving them things they needed. It accepted them in fact by admitting them into the flow of its talk, the unceasing meandering of its story of itself by which it diverted, amused, and consoled itself.

Small as it was, the town seemed to them to be inundated with self-knowledge. This knowledge moved over it in an unresting current, some of it in stories told openly that eddied with variations from teller to teller and place to place, some of it more darkly and quietly in an undertow of caution, sometimes fraught with the unacknowledged pleasure of malice, sometimes bearing a burden merely of anxiety or concern. It was this subsurface current of gossip that Williams Milby learned to listen to with greatest care, for it told him where needs were.

Needs were everywhere. Sycamore had suffered the poor agricultural economy of the 1920s. It had been hit hard by the Depression of the 1930s, by the severe drouths of 1930 and 1936, and by the great flood of January 1937. But it was a community of farm people and of people related to farmers and dependent on farming. They had never expected to live independently of the weather or to be free of hardship and struggle. They suffered as they had to suffer and did as they had to do. They also knew of one another's struggles, and as they could they helped.

Also, by their own modest standards and by their skills and thrift, they throve. Because none of them had ever been overly prosperous, their losses were never great. It was not the sort of place where people took large economic risks or contracted large debts. It says much for the hardiness of the place that its population increased during the Depression, as young Sycamoreans who had gone to the cities to prosper returned home to survive.

There were the Wallis twins, Goebel and Noble, elderly sons of an ancient mother, bachelors forevermore, good farmers, both independent and neighborly, who did according to their reasons which often were both unexpectable and unobjectionable, and

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who drove into town every Saturday afternoon in their like-new Model A, in which they sat side by side, dressed in like-new tan work clothes starched and ironed as stiff almost as tin.

And there was Mrs. Etta Mae Berry, an elderly widow for whom the truth was ever too tame. One day, as she was scattering corn for her hens, a big airplane flew over so low that it blew her dress practically over her head and she could hear the people talking inside. And she was never sick because she always looked for germs in the dipper before she drank; if she saw any she skimmed them out with a spoon.

There was Uncle Lute Wisely, born a slave, who remembered everything, and now, too old to work, he moved, as he said, in winter from fire to fire and in summer from shade to shade. There had never been many of his race around Sycamore, and now, all the younger ones gone north, he was the last.

There was the family of Bernice and Red Callahan who were sitting at dinner when a big snake fell through the ceiling onto the table, causing, but only indirectly, much breakage of chairs and other furniture and some bodily injury.

On one of the shantyboats lived the perhaps married couple, Lizard Eye and Zinnia Creed, joyfully Frenchified by the Sycamoreans as "Mr. and Mrs. Lizzard." Zinnia Creed was widely esteemed for her language, which was purely her own. When she picked blackberries, the chiggers broke her out all over in whelps. Sometimes the summer apples got all swiveled up before they could be eaten. There was a famous day when she had come to town for a gallon of coal oil, and the lecrik went off and every light bug in Jones's Merchandise went out all to-wunst. She had seen two cars meet in a headlong collusion. She loved, moreover, to refine her pronunciation by adding r's to words such as "crush" and "crunch" and "push" so that they came out "crursh" and "crurnch" and "pursh." Virtually everybody in Sycamore had learned Zinnian and spoke it on every appropriate occasion.

Of these and others, as church members or as not members, the Milbys were given knowledge.

You could usefully think of the consciousness of Sycamore as the continual, continually wandering story that in one way or another included everybody, carrying them through time like the current of the river.

Or, usefully also, you could think of it as graduated depths in

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that flow. At the top was the convivial talk, open and unembarrassed. Below that, quieter and darker and less free, was the talk that issued from fear and envy, cherished grudges and resentments, meannesses, suspicions, unforgiven or unregretted wrongs. This was not so readily heard by newcomers, but the Milbys stayed long enough (they stayed until after the end of World War II) to hear most of it, if not all. It proved itself continually to be present, to be regrettable, and sometimes to be worried about.

Below that, much quieter and darker, and yet to the conscience of the young minister most present of all, was the depth at which the community suffered its mortality, error, pain, and grief. How many among the older wives or widows had buried a child struck down by a winter illness or an epidemic, who now remembered in silence?

As the knowledge of this depth of suffering grew upon her, Laura understood, as she had not before, the gravity of her husband's calling, for she saw that it was to this suffering that he was called. As he sank inevitably into it or as it rose inevitably out of its depth, its quietness and darkness, to meet him, she saw not only the gravity of his calling but its authenticity. For Williams Milby had the gift of comforting. He carried with him, not by his will, it seemed, but by the purest gift, the very presence of comfort. And yet even as it was a comfort to others, it could be a bafflement and a burden to him. His calling, and the respect accorded to it, admitted him into the presence of troubles he could not mend. When old Mr. Jones McKinney, who had been sick for a long time, finally died, and afterwards his old wife, Aunt Ruth, would hear him calling her in the night and would get up and go to his bed and again find it empty, what could any living mortal do for her that would be of any use at all? A living mortal could do only as Williams Milby did: go and sit with her while she mourned, and then leave her in her mourning, for no living mortal could sit with another time without end. It was plain to him—and Laura knew this—that he was always hopelessly in debt to his own ministry, for he could not give all that he wanted and longed to give. He was needed, even so, and what he had to give, and more, was continually asked of him. People were glad to see him coming. They called him to come. They were glad to have him around when they did not need him, just for the assurance that he would be at hand when they did need him.

And as Laura had earlier given him her trust that until then

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she did not know was hers, now she granted him a sort of honor that was not personal, not hers or his, but honor to his vocation that he had not known was his until he began to fulfill it.

At Sycamore, then, Laura grew with her husband into a life that probably neither of them had expected. She grew also into knowledge of the church's function of iteration. The church house itself, she now saw, was a place consecrated to the proclamation over and over again of things in which most of the members more or less believed but in which they generally were not greatly interested, and which they helped to make uninteresting by their lack of interest. It was a place where nearly all of the women seemed to feel at home, and where many of the men clearly were not at home. In bearable weather the men would stand outside before the service began, holding themselves until the last minute in one another's company and the unconfined light and air of mere day.

For nearly the whole congregation, or for all of them, and especially the men and children, there was a disconnection between the little white clapboard church with its steeple and bell, its observances and forms of worship, and the world's daily life and work. It was as though the building itself, in its emptiness between services, contained along with its smells of old paper and stale perfume a solemnity that the people entered into and departed from, quickening it for a few hours a week with the stirrings and smells of living flesh, but could neither inflect with the tone of their daily preoccupations nor transpose into their actual lives. This was a disconnection perhaps exactly coextensive with the disconnection they felt between Heaven and Sycamore, eternity and time. Laura recognized these disconnections in the people because she felt them, and labored over them, in herself.

Thus she mapped in her mind the cracks and flaws in the lives of the church and the place. She had been a studious girl, and beyond that a thoughtful one. Since before she'd had much to ponder, she'd been in the habit of pondering. She was a conscious, thoughtful believer in the Gospel that her husband had bound himself to offer and defend, even to obey and enact—that is, to suffer. But the things that she struggled with he seemed to accept with a silence that included a measure of resignation. He could be quiet because in some depth of himself he *was* quiet. She recognized this as his strength, his very faith, at the same time that it fretted her.

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Of the pair, hers was the mind that was restless and questing, enticed and disturbed by mysteries. That the world was as it was did not save it from her sense that it might in many ways be different. It seemed to her both tentative and final, unshakable and woefully fragile.

Her husband's ministry, as he conceived it, was not only to the church but to the whole community, and this often involved a thanklessness hard for her to bear. Not only did he stand up week after week to say and to offer again what he and generations of ministers before him had said and offered before, with no dramatic amelioration of this world as a result, but also he made himself answerable to any and every sufferer within a radius of five or six miles. Any sufferer who was in need or want of him could summon him, even by the ringing of the telephone in the middle of a stormy or frozen night, and he would go.

And when, having done all he could do to help a family through a quarrel or an illness or a death, performing services he was not paid for and could not have been paid for, he might never hear from them again, let alone see their faces even for the courtesy of one Sunday among his hearers, Laura felt herself wounded with sorrow for him and anger at them for their ingratitude.

"It's not right!" she cried to him once, breaking for that once into his silence about it. "It's *just not right*!"

"No. It's not right," he said quietly, and he gave her his smile with which he sought to quiet her. "But it's all right."

And yet she knew his own need for comfort, for shelter, for her herself, and for the welcome it was her need, in turn, to offer to him. They did not fit together like the two halves of one apple. Sometimes they were flint and steel, and the sparks flew. But they needed to fit together, and they were trying to. Often they did. They were a good couple. Out of the sometimes far estrangement of their differences, their need to fit together would draw them back to each other again. That was their desire. And desire would then freely have its way with them.

And so desire, her own and his, was one of the subjects of her thoughts. She saw the danger of it. She saw the beauty and the preciousness of it. She saw even the necessity of it, for it imparted beauty and motion, life itself, to the whole world: the desire to be at one with another, the desire to be pleased in living together,

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seemed to her at times to infuse with light the bedrock of the earth.

To know this was a passion with her. She felt herself to be most alive when she felt it alight within herself. It was this light in herself that strangely made her self matter little in comparison. It had the power, in fact, to cause her self entirely to disappear. And so she was mortified, most deeply thwarted in her instinctive tenderness toward the life and light of this world, when she was confronted, as she often was, with the belief, at large among their church people and in Sycamore itself, that desire merely was lust. It was not an adequate mitigation that she knew surely that desire sometimes was lust, and that the dearest, pleasantest desire, especially for the women, sometimes led to suffering.

"But they think desire is no different from lust," she said to her husband. "Think of the loneliness of that. Think of the terrible loneliness of it!"

"Where do they get that idea?" Williams asked, though he knew.

"They think Jesus said so. 'Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery already in his heart.'"

That a great suffering of shame and loneliness did surround that saying and its history they then acknowledged in the look they gave each other.

Williams Milby laughed, and his laughter granted standing to this acknowledgement, and it made room for her dissent that he knew was coming. He said, "If he meant desire, he has caught us all. I speak of course only for us men."

"Speak for us all!" she said. And now to her own surprise, she felt her tears, for suddenly it was to her as if she were lifting from herself a nearly unbearable weight. "Speak for us all! If he meant desire, he has caught every one of us."

When Williams spoke again he spoke quietly, but his voice had changed, borne upward and unsteadied in his throat by an emotion like hers, for now he felt his great love for her, his great desire for her, pressing like a wind at his back. "You don't think then"—he was testing, teasing her, beckoning her forward—"you don't think then that desire is necessarily the same as lust?"

"No! Lust is selfish. It seeketh its own. Desire without selfishness, with self-denial, is only praise. It is even love."

She had more to learn of the cost of self-denying desire.

In those days, in Sycamore as in all the country around, there

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was an honored practice known as "feeding the preacher." The housewives of the church, or most of them, held it as an unbreakable law, for they had never known it to be broken, that the preacher and his wife, and their children if any, would be fed dinner and supper in some household of the congregation every Sunday. It was as though the preacher's lesson which was never altogether learned and his comforting which could not sufficiently be given were to be compensated by this hospitality in earnest of a tribute never adequately paid. Part of the organization of the church was the order in which the duty of feeding the preacher was passed around from household to household.

This ceremony of feeding the preacher was a dear privilege to Williams and Laura, for it opened the countryside to them as it was opened otherwise only to the veterinarian. And the veterinarian certainly never received anything like the hospitality that was accorded to the Milbys. It was as if they perhaps were angels who appeared perhaps in the guise of a young minister and his wife. Whatever their hostess had that was best was laid before these strangers, who would always be strangers to some extent because set apart by the minister's calling, which required that he and his wife should be sheltered, so far as they could be, from whatever was harshest in the speech and thought and experience of their hosts. The same compunction withheld also knowledge of the extremer pleasures. The list of things the Sycamoreans did not do "in front of the preacher" granted to the preacher a front as wide as a three-horse team. It took the Milbys a long time to learn of the community's music-making and its dancing, from which it was a mark of piety to stand aloof, and about which it was a mark at least of decorum to say nothing to the preacher.

Whatever was set on the table at those Sunday meals thus was offered somewhat in apology, but also with the unspoken confidence and pride that it was the best available, and the Milbys learned to expect with about the same confidence that whatever was set before them would deserve the praise they would give in return. The food was heaped on the table, and they were urged to eat as if they were being fattened for slaughter, or as if it were the known practice of ministers and their wives to eat only on Sundays.

In the hours between the big dinner and the lighter supper after which they would return to church for the evening service, Williams and Laura discovered two difficulties that they had to exert their ingenuity to deal with. The first was the onset of

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drowsiness after the noon meal. The second was the possibility that in trying to fulfill their hosts' expectation of a proper Sunday conversation, they would run flat out of anything to say.

"I hate to say *anything* to keep from saying nothing," Williams said. "I look at you for help, and you say for the tenth or twentieth time, 'What a wonderful dinner!' and I say for the tenth or twentieth time, 'Oh, yes, it was wonderful!' It's funny now, Miz Milby, and you can laugh, but it wasn't funny then."

Both of these dangers they learned to avoid by the one expedient of asking to be shown something outside the house—and usually, since most of their congregation were farmers, they would ask to be shown something on the farm. For this they learned always to bring their overshoes. And it was this that brought them into the presence of the place, the country itself, and that taught them their people's ways of belonging to it and living upon it. They found that the farmers generally were proud of their farms, whether justifiably or not, and were ready, often eager, to speak of what they knew. Williams and Laura asked questions and learned and remembered, for they realized that they were being taught where they were, and more profoundly than they had expected to know.

They were not city people exactly, but they both had come from big towns. They had never known before a whole community in which everybody knew everybody, and the life of which went all the way to the ground. The community or neighborhood known as "around Sycamore" was a small place divided into many smaller places—farms and fields and woodlands—each of which, if you asked or if you waited to hear, had its unique, inseparable attachment of memories and stories.

And so on those Sunday afternoons in their unending sequence, when the weather was fit and sometimes when it was not, the Milbys followed their guides through barns and lots, fields and woods, and along the wild streamsides. They were shown flower beds, gardens, crops and animals in all the stages of the year. And so within a year or two they came into the intimate geography and life and worklife of the place. On the Kentucky side of the Ohio there at Sycamore the bottomland was rather narrow, and the farms were not large. The primary intent of the farm families they visited was to live from their land. Every farm produced a few acres of tobacco. Almost every farm had a small herd of beef cattle, and many had a flock of sheep as well. But

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