



**THE PROFESSOR'S MISTRESS**

**A Novel**

**by Thomas T. Thomas**

“Old boats are like a beautiful woman,” observes a passerby on the dock as he inspects the steam yacht *Galatea*. “They call to you. They entice you. And then they steal your soul.” He calls that feeling “the sickness.”

William Henry Wheelock has achieved his ambition of becoming a professor of classical studies and settled down in a cottage on campus with his wife Jane and young daughter Dani. But Jane is ill-suited to the quiet, academic life and—in a fit of rage ignited by an old misunderstanding—suddenly leaves him for parts unknown. William Henry plods on stoically, teaching his classes and raising his daughter, while the social upheavals of the 1960s change the world around him in ways he doesn’t always understand. Then one day the embattled professor falls under the spell of an older woman, *Galatea*, an antique from the Gilded Age, and his life promises to change completely.

Sequel to the Wheelock family history that began with *The Judge’s Daughter*, this novel follows the next generation through a turbulent twenty years filled with longing, love, greed, deception, and madness.

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THE PROFESSOR'S MISTRESS

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## Table of Contents

### October 1952

1. Putting *Galatea* to Bed
2. The War of the Drums
3. Nights on the Town
4. Letter from Home
5. Homecoming

### Spring 1958

1. Toeing the Party Line
2. Dani's Diary
3. The Shoe That Did Not Fit
4. Bruised Fruit
5. Dani's Diary
6. Every Word a Lie
7. Superman's Downfall
8. Things That Go Bump in the Afternoon
9. Beyond Her Control
10. A Note from School
11. Fear and Loathing
12. Dani's Diary
13. Spring Fling
14. The Stalker
15. The Affair
16. Dani's Diary
17. The Discovery
18. The Accusation
19. Thirty-Six Hours (I)
20. Thirty-Six Hours (II)
21. Thirty-Six Hours (III)
22. Thirty-Six Hours (IV)
23. Thirty-Six Hours (V)
24. Thirty-Six Hours (VI)
25. Thirty-Six Hours (VII)
26. In the Emergency Room
27. Primary Diagnosis
28. Learned at Her Mother's Knee
29. The Daily Call

### Winter 1968

1. Professor of Logic
2. Christmas Dinner at Home
3. The Shadow in the Trees

4. The Enigma in the Library
5. Resolution of the Faculty Senate
6. Hunting Among the Trees
7. Hunting in the Stacks
8. Resolution of the Faculty Senate
9. Reunion of the Old School
10. Return of a Potential Buyer
11. Changes to the Curriculum
12. Resolution of the Faculty Senate
13. The Enigma on the Mall
14. Finding a Kindred Spirit
15. Daughter of the Revolution
16. The Wreck Under the Tent
17. Dani Brings Home a Friend
18. Resolution of the Faculty Senate
19. Eviction Notice
20. Rivals of the Old Firm
21. Sealing the Deal
22. Resolution of the Faculty Senate
23. Work for a Handyman
24. Helping Them Understand

### **Spring 1968**

1. The Paperwork
2. The Elective
3. Watching the Professor at Work (I)
4. Overheard at the *Marat/Sade* Rehearsals
5. The First Rally of Spring
6. Repairing the Engine
7. Watching the Professor at Work (II)
8. Overheard at the *Marat/Sade* Rehearsals
9. Sharing Her Happiness
10. A Trivial Virtue
11. Mending, Bending, and Brazing
12. Overheard at the *Marat/Sade* Rehearsals
13. Blind Date with Fusillade
14. Weak at the Knees
15. Too Much Too Soon
16. Overheard at the *Marat/Sade* Rehearsals
17. The War of the Squirrels
18. Refloating *Galatea*
19. A Night of Watching
20. Overheard at the *Marat/Sade* Rehearsals
21. Testing the Engine
22. Moving Day at the Cottage
23. Time to Wind Things Up

24. Nowhere to Be Found
25. *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*
26. The Leveling of a Lifetime
27. Homecoming

### **Summer 1968**

1. The Reason Why
2. Getting to Know You
3. Extending Her Horizons
4. Dinner with the Family
5. Doing a Deal
6. A Summer Cruise
7. *Bon Voyage!*
8. Crosswise in the Trough
9. Change of Name
10. Filling Up
11. Appreciation for *Galatea*
12. First Hurdle
13. Sister, Wife, Whatever
14. Age Turns to Beauty
15. Alerting the Authorities
16. Appreciation for *Galatea*
17. Couple of Days Behind
18. Halfway Mark
19. First Time in Ten Years ... and Counting
20. A Miss by Less Than a Mile
21. Appreciation for *Galatea*
22. Squall Line
23. Interlude Ashore
24. Scraper
25. Appreciation for *Galatea*
26. Catching Up With the World
27. Change of Plan
28. Georgian Bay
29. Catching Up With the Money
30. Treatment for a Gunshot Wound
31. A Hazard to Navigation

### **Fall 1968**

1. Mother and Daughter
2. Done Roving

There is a smile of love,  
And there is a smile of deceit,  
And there is a smile of smiles  
In which these two smiles meet.

—*William Blake*

**October 1952**

### 1. Putting *Galatea* to Bed

George and Marian Kirkeby stood on the dock at the Lakeshore Yard, near Byzantium, New York, and watched their ship come in. The couple had driven up from Rochester for the annual ceremony of bedding her down for the winter while the paid crew, Captain Emmet Gallagher and First Mate-Engineer Andrej Haraszthy, brought the steam launch *Galatea* along Lake Ontario's southern shore, a trip of sixty miles from her summertime berthing in Irondequoit Bay.

"I still get a thrill seeing her from the land," George said. "We don't get this view of the grand old vessel—coming into dock like this—when we're already aboard and picking up our guests."

"Emmet's hung out all the bunting, I see," Marian remarked, pointing to the string of pennants flying on the forward stay, from the bowsprit to the top of the first mast, then all the way back to the second mast. "What do they say?"

"Spell it out, darling," he urged.

"You know I'm no good with signals."

"But you should recognize a few by now."

"Well, I see two of those blue-with-white-squares. Is that the 'blue peter'?"

"Yes, and that stands for ...?"

"Peter ... Papa, the letter P!"

"Speaking of blue peters, gosh, that wind is cold!"

"You came out here without your long johns, didn't you?"

"I didn't think wind off the lake in October would be so keen."

"A couple more days like this and we'll be seeing ice on the creek."

"Back to your spelling lesson."

"But *you* distracted *me*!"

"Two Ps together?"

"Well, I see just two flags before them," Marian went on. "The first one's white-and-red, so that's either Foxtrot or Hotel. And the second is white-and-blue, which I'm sure is Alfa. It can't be F-A-P-P-anything, so it must be 'happy.' "

"Very good, m'dear!"

"Now give me the rest."

"After that comes 'ending' and the numbers one-nine-five-two," he said. "Then 'golden,' 'summer,' and 'days' in 1953."

"What a lovely thought, George! Did you put him up to it?"

"I may have had a hand," he said modestly.

As *Galatea* came parallel with the dock, the first mate jumped ashore with a line while Captain Gallagher finished up his business in the wheelhouse. They each greeted the owners with a nod, then went off to confer with the yard manager, Mr. Gibbs.

As George and Marian stepped aboard, he carried the picnic basket that had been at their feet. They went down into the main cabin, where Haraszthy had already put dust covers over the furniture and cleaned out the galley. Further forward, Gallagher had blown down the boiler. Whatever else they might need to do in preparing engine and hull for winter storage could be done once the boat was drawn up on shore.

George retrieved a vacuum bottle from the basket. "May I pour you a libation, darling?"

"Of course. About time, too!"

He unscrewed the cap, which did double-duty as a plain metal cup, and filled it with a clear liquid. He offered the cup to her.

“No ice?” Marian said, taking it. “Mmm, cold!”

“Ice seemed redundant today,” he replied.

“And why dilute the good stuff?”

“Sorry about the olives,” he said. He tipped the container’s mouth toward the light coming in the cabin windows. “They appear to be stuck at the bottom.”

“I don’t see why we bother with them anymore.”

“It’s traditional, darling,” he said. “People would miss them.”

“People don’t miss the vermouth in your martinis—and what’s your recipe now? One drop? Or is it two?”

“I tip the vermouth bottle ever so slightly toward the shaker, being careful not to spill any. Besides, you don’t need any of that wormwood-flavored wine when you serve really good gin.”

“Nobody’s complained yet.”

“Well, Gretchen Meyers . . .”

“Gretchen wouldn’t know a good time if it fell on her.”

“She likes drinks with floating fruit and a little parasol.”

“Enough said,” Marian agreed.

“Excuse me, sir—ma’am?” Captain Gallagher said from the entry. “We’re about to pull her over to the ramp.”

“Do you want us to go ashore?” George asked.

“It might be more convenient, sir.”

So the owners went back onto the dock and walked the long way around, to the other side of the yard and out onto one of the concrete piers flanking the boat ramp. By the time they arrived, the workboat had maneuvered *Galatea* over to the ramp, and Mr. Gibbs’s crew had ropes on her for aligning bow and keel with the notches and supports of her cradle, which was already down in the water.

At the top of the ramp, a tractor started up and slowly backed away, pulling two lengths of iron chain out of the water. The cradle followed, and the men with ropes pulled the hull forward until it settled into the timber skeleton with a series of muffled groans. A few minutes later the long, white hull with its dark-red underbelly was out of the inlet and freely dripping water and a summer’s growth of hanging weed.

“Excellent,” George said, “just like delivering a baby.”

“And what, pray tell, would you know about *that*?”

“Why, just the usual—I mean, hypothetical—”

“Oh, hush! Say goodbye for another year.”

“Sleep well, my beautiful *Galatea*.”

And he blew a kiss to the boat.

## 2. The War of the Drums

The outhouse stench had struck the moment his plane from the States landed at Kimpo Airfield in Korea. It was a sense memory of place and time that William Henry Wheelock carried to his dying day. The Koreans fertilized their rice paddies with human waste, politely called “night soil,” and the odor had dug itself into his brain and never let go.

Through all seasons the foul vapors slipped under the flaps of his tent at night. They fought with the taste of his eggs at breakfast and smothered his steaks for dinner. Among the troops it was said that only kimchi could stand up to the smell coming off the paddies, and kimchi was disgusting. The only time the odor seemed to diminish was now, in October, when the paddies froze with the onset of winter. The farmers still spread their steaming muck, of course, but it had a chance to freeze before making headway on the wind.

But now the smell was coming back stronger as his jeep followed the Honton River up to the southern edge of the Iron Triangle between Ch'orwon and Kumhwa. The terrain on all sides was really too hilly and arid for rice farming, but Wheelock knew well enough that night soil could fertilize any kind of field. Perhaps his nose was playing tricks, and the smell only seemed stronger. Over his months in country Wheelock had become a connoisseur of stench, and he could now identify something more. From somewhere close at hand came the sweet miasma of bodies left too long above ground and then buried in shallow graves with too little lime. And—yes!—mingled with the smell of bodies was a lighter, more penetrating aroma that he knew well.

God, he was going to be glad to get out of this country!

“There's one, sir,” said his driver Binns, who could also smell the difference. The man pointed to a dark, square-shaped mound along the side of the road.

Wheelock sighed. “Pull over, Sergeant.”

Operating this close to the nearly static front lines, they went fully armed. In addition to Wheelock's Colt Model 1911 sidearm, he had laid an M1 Carbine across the jeep's back seat with the stock ready to hand. Just in front of it, with stock and barrel reversed, was the standard M1 Garand rifle issued to Binns. The driver also carried a couple of grenades clipped to his belt. Of course, none of this weaponry meant much if they came upon a probing Communist patrol. Still, as the jeep skidded to a stop on the muddy road, William Henry reached back for his carbine before getting out.

The blocky cache was covered by a tarpaulin weighted with rocks and stood much taller than a man. Wheelock could count by the semicircular bulges along its upper edge that it was nine wide by five deep. He could estimate the height of the stack as three tall, because he knew exactly what he was counting: fifty-five gallon fuel drums.

But before he became too excited by the find, Wheelock had to make sure this wasn't an unregistered storage dump of full drums. He lifted the bottom edge of the tarp. Up close and freshly released, the sweetish, knifelike smell of gasoline and the deep, bitter scent of lubricating oil again cut through the stench from the fields. He rapped on a drum in the lowest tier and got a hollow *boom* in return.

They were *empty* fifty-five gallon drums, left by someone at the roadside for the Drum Fairies to come along and collect. ... That would be Wheelock and Binns.

He made a notation on his map: 135/55, with an estimate in yards to the last milepost he and Binns had passed. Now all he had to do was coordinate this sighting with the other pencil notations that stretched from here back to Inch'on. Then he could fashion a truck route that would pick up all the drums in the shortest distance with the least amount of unladen travel. In this way the effort would take the least time and consume the least fuel. It was just a matter of linear programming, really.

Wheelock had landed in country in the summer of 1951, immediately after the Allies had beaten off the last of the Communists' spring offensives around Seoul. On his

collar tabs flashed the gold oak leaves of a major, which he always suspected had been a consolation prize for the unglamorous duty to which he had been assigned. Packed in his luggage were folio-sized page proofs of a book titled *Methods of Operations Research*, co-authored by one George E. Kimball and based on work the man had done for the U.S. Navy during the war. As the text had recently been declassified and was about to go on the presses at MIT, Wheelock carried a mockup of the book pages “rather than carting classified documents all over the Pacific Theater”—as the colonel in charge of Stateside petroleum operations had explained at the time.

The Quartermaster Corps must have figured that a graduate student in the classics, who could read fluently in two dead languages, would find the statistical abstractions of operations research a breeze to decipher. Wheelock tacitly agreed to treat the analysis of resource allocations as just another form of esoterica and plunged himself into the study of probability theory, strategical kinematics, operational experiments in logistics, and gunnery problems. The book was filled with diagrams and tables—some of the latter reminding Wheelock of fragments from Cretan Linear B. Well, at least it had kept his mind occupied while he waited for transportation to the Korean peninsula.

And so it turned out that William Henry Wheelock’s war in Korea had been a war of the drums. A modern army marched, not on its stomach, but on wheels and tracks turned by gasoline and diesel fuel, anointed with lubricating oil. These materials were brought into Inch’on’s treacherous harbor, which was plagued by thirty-foot tides, in small coastal tankers. They were offloaded at a transfer station for petroleum, oils, and lubricants—or POLs, as the armed forces knew them. Avgas went out by pipeline or rail car to the airfields. But fuel for the forward areas went by truck in fifty-five gallon drums and, less often, in five gallon jerry cans. The trouble was, maintaining the POL supply was under the joint jurisdiction of the Quartermasters Corp, the Corps of Engineers, and various units of Transportation.

Everyone wanted to see as much gasoline and diesel moved to the front as quickly as possible. Not everyone saw returning the empty drums for future refilling as a priority. The limiting factor—as Kimball’s book had taught Wheelock to think—was not the supply of fuel, but the availability of empty drums to carry it. Shipping out an endless supply of new drums from the States, even for an organization as rich and wasteful as the U.S. Army, was not an option. Wheelock’s assignment, before he ever set foot in Korea, was to establish a system that would get the empty drums back to the depot with the least effort and inconvenience to all concerned. The system that seemed to work best was for Major Wheelock and Sergeant Binns to drive around the forward areas—the rear of the front, as it were—locate caches of empty drums, and mark them for return.

From the back of the jeep, he took a can of white paint and a flat brush and marked a large I-in-a-circle on the front of the tarpaulin facing the road. That was the agreed-upon mark with his drivers: “I” for return to Inch’on.

“Not too many, are there?” Binns said.

“Enough,” Wheelock replied.

“Fewer than before.”

“What are you trying to say, Sergeant?”

The man stared off to the horizon. “Maybe we’re getting ahead of the game? Fewer caches this month than last. More barrels must be finding their way back to base.”

“We’re still a few thousand short,” Wheelock grumped. “At the very least.”

“But . . . when we find them all, they’ll let us go home, right?”  
 Wheelock thought about that for two seconds.  
 “Nope,” he said. “Not a chance.”

### 3. Nights on the Town

Jane Wheelock stood in her stocking feet before the mirror on her closet door. She wore only a black nylon slip—the one with a line of uneven stitches under her left breast where the lace of the bodice had come apart. What, she wondered, from her diminished wardrobe of party dresses, would she be able to wear this evening? The blue was out, because she had worn that on Monday. Of her two black dresses, one had a tear—she supposed from brushing up against a loose screwhead along the zinc-coated bar, and she hadn’t gotten around to mending it—and the other really did need to go to the cleaners.

Which left the red satin with the shawl collar and plunging neckline. It was the exact color of a maraschino cherry, which set off her pale skin and the reddish highlights in her hair. With the matching pumps, that dress had set Jane back a week’s wages plus tips. It would be perfect—except for a brownish stain the size of her thumb in the fabric of the belt. She didn’t have time to fix it, but maybe she could substitute her old, wide, black-leather belt. The effect of that combination would be striking.

With ten minutes to go before her ride was due to arrive, Jane knelt and began digging through the bottom drawer of her bureau, looking for that belt.

“Mommee!” came Dani’s voice from the doorway. “Mommy, where are you?”

Jane lifted her head above the edge of the bed. “Right here, darling.”

“You disappeared!” the three-year-old girl exclaimed.

“No, I just—ducked down.” Jane dipped her head again. “See? I was looking for something.”

“I thought you’d gone away!”

“No, I’ve been here all along.”

“But you *will* go away.”

“I work tonight, yes.”

“Stay with me!”

“I can’t.”

“Please!”

“Mommy has to go to work,” Jane said reasonably. “You know that. And you get to stay with Mrs. Obmanchikov. She gives you borscht and blintzes, doesn’t she?”

“She smells,” her ginger-haired daughter insisted.

“Danielle! That’s not a nice thing to say.”

“But it’s true!” the girl replied.

“Still, we don’t *say* it.”

“O-kay,” Dani sulked.

“Now I have to finish dressing. Did you go potty?”

“Mother!” The little girl was outraged.

“Just asking. Go put on your shoes and socks. We’re late.”

Jane found the leather belt, slipped on the red dress, and cinched in the waist. She looked like a pirate, but there was no time to change now. She went to help her daughter tie her shoelaces. Then she got her scarf and her long, black cloth coat.

By the time they got out the door of Jane's apartment and down the hall to Mrs. Obmanchikov's, Lou Fiacco was in the driveway pounding on his horn. The middle-aged Russian woman, wife of a professor of Slavic languages whom Jane had never met, or even seen, answered on the first knock.

"Mrs. Wheelock!" The woman looked surprised.

"Hello, Mrs. Obmanchikov." Jane paused. "This *is* the night you said you would take care of Dani—isn't it?"

"You are going out again?"

"I work evenings, you know."

The woman looked down at Jane's feet. "Such nice shoes ... *krasnie*."

Jane thought she had said "crazy" and opened her coat. "They go with the dress."

Mrs. Obmanchikov studied her. "You always look so fancy when you go out."

"Thank you. I try to keep up appearances." Jane would not tell this woman, the biggest gossip in the apartment house, that the only work she could find was as a cocktail waitress. Anyway, it was none of her business.

The horn sounded again.

"That's my ride." Jane urged Dani forward, but the girl clutched her hand and hung back.

Mrs. Obmanchikov took Dani's other hand and drew her through the doorway. "Come, *devochka*. Tonight we make potato pancakes."

Dani smiled uncertainly up at her, turned to give her mother a worried look, and went inside.

"Good-bye," Jane said as the door closed.

Downstairs, she opened the passenger door of Lou's car for herself and slid onto the bench seat.

"We're going to be late," he said.

"You always say that. We never are."

"Jimmy gets off at six sharp, whether I'm there or not. If the bar's unattended, the county could lift our license. Then both of us would lose our jobs."

Lou was the night bartender at the Ace of Spades. He was always worrying. Harry Benson, the owner, was the worrying kind, and he made it infectious. Because the bar was so close to campus, they got scrutiny from both the Byzantium Police Department and the University of Lake Ontario administration. The first thing Harry had taught Jane was how to spot fake identity cards and to be polite but firm about refusing to serve the underage boys and girls.

Now Jane briefly considered what it would be like to lose this job. The hours were bad, and she usually did not get home until after two in the morning. The pay was good, compared with her previous jobs, but the tips—according to Sheila, the other waitress, who had been running drinks for twenty years—were only so-so. That was because of the clientele. "College kids and academic types are lousy tippers," Sheila told her. "But there *are* compensations."

The compensations were that the two women seldom had to deal with the really sullen, hard-core drunks, never had to hide out during bar fights like you got with the blue-collar set, and didn't worry much about taking physical abuse. The students were too shy to pinch Jane's bottom, while the professors were too refined. And at least the company was adult. After a full day of caring for a toddler, even a child as bright as Dani,

Jane yearned to get out of the house, to chat, however briefly, with people more than two feet high, to dress up and feel pretty, and yes—if the job called for it, if she felt like it—to flirt a bit.

But there was no one to flirt with this evening. The Ace emptied out sometime after nine, and by midnight Lou had sent Sheila home. At one o'clock, when they were the only two people left in the place, he said to Jane, "Let's lock up."

"We're open for another hour, aren't we?"

Lou walked down to the small front window and looked out past the blue-and-yellow neon glow of the Pabst sign. "Stoplight's gone to flashing red at the corner. Not a car in sight, passing or parked, for two whole blocks. And no pedestrians, because they've rolled up the sidewalks."

Jane giggled, then sobered. "Harry won't like it."

"Harry won't know," Lou said, dead serious.

"Another hour's pay ... I need the money."

"You vouch for me. I vouch for you."

She started to say that was cheating, but Lou had already turned off the sign.

While he cashed out the register and stacked chairs on the tables, Jane washed up the last of the glasses, dumped the peanuts back in the tin, and swabbed down the length of the bar. Then he took her out back to the car and opened the passenger door for her, like a gentleman.

When they reached the street, however, he turned left instead of right.

"Where are you going?" she asked. "I live the other way, remember?"

"We've got time, don't we?"

"Time?" Jane was confused.

"Before you pick up the kid."

"Sure, but since I'm going home early ..."

"I thought we could go over to my place."

"Oh?" Jane froze on the seat. "Why would we do that?"

Lou's right hand came off the wheel, settled on the cushion between them, and scuttled sideways, like a crab, toward her left leg. She put her own hand over his, to stop him. She was suddenly conscious of the diamond on her third finger, winking dimly in the dull light from outside. She felt the weight of her engagement ring and wedding band.

"I've seen how you look at me," he said tightly.

"And what kind of look is that?" she asked.

"Like you want it—like you want me."

"I'm a married woman, you know."

"And he's been away how long?"

"Lou ... you're a coworker ... a friend."

"I could be a lot more," he said, but his hand was already pulling back.

"I know you could," she sighed, "but that would spoil it."

"Just for the night. Just this once."

"That would make it even worse."

"Yeah." In the come-and-go light from the streetlamps, she could see that he was biting his lip. "I guess so."

After he turned the car around, Jane let him drive until they were almost in front of the apartment house.

“Lou?” she said quietly. “No offense?”  
“Sure. None taken.”  
“In a way, I’m kind of flattered.”  
“I’m ... glad.”  
“Pick me up tomorrow?”  
“Sure.”

#### 4. Letter from Home

The other memories from Korea that Wheelock would carry to the end of days were the texture of the paper, color of ink, and complete text of every letter he received from home during his tour of duty. While he loved his wife Jane with every fiber of his being, William Henry had to concede that their relationship was on a wholly physical plane. While he himself was literate—almost hyper-literate—and adept at putting his thoughts and feelings on paper, addressing them in imagination to his absent wife, Jane turned out to have no such ability. When he was not physically present, or within the sound of her voice or a local phone call, she apparently felt little need to remember or communicate with him. So Wheelock treasured any awkward and ungrammatical scrawl she might dash off and send his way, hoarding those few lines against the periods when she gave him nothing.

Wheelock had married Jane Dobray at his father’s house in central Pennsylvania during the winter months of early 1949. She agreed to have him only on condition that William Henry go back to school and make something of himself, rather than selling Buicks and Chryslers to farmers and shopkeepers—his job after demobilization from the war in Europe. William Henry had finished his remaining undergraduate courses, which the war had interrupted, that same spring and taken his baccalaureate degree. And then, before their little Danielle was born later in the year, Wheelock started graduate studies. By the time his reserve unit was called up for Korea, he had completed coursework for his doctorate of philosophy—always in the classics, with emphasis on Greek rather than Roman art and literature—and was choosing among possible topics for his dissertation.

All the time William Henry was studying, Jane worked to put him through school and keep their small family together: store clerk, office telephonist and receptionist, checkout at the local A&P—whatever paid a good hourly wage while he attended classes by day and sat up through the night reading dead texts in Greek and analyzing them in sometimes even deader prose. When the baby came and Jane could no longer work, they subsisted on his stipend as a graduate teaching assistant. Sometimes they slipped on the rent payments and let the phone company disconnect them for a month or two. Together they ate tons of macaroni and cheese. Jane openly fretted about money and compulsively counted the pennies in her purse, but she never regretted choosing William Henry for a husband, or his hope of becoming a college professor one day. Still, it was only when he was called up again and had an army paycheck to send home that Jane’s and the baby’s living situation improved.

When William Henry and his driver arrived back at the POL depot in Inch’ on, he was still cherishing his wife’s last letter: she had covered the whole side of one page but with handwriting that was loopier—Jane’s word for it—than usual. So it came as something of a surprise when the company clerk, Donnelly, called out, “Hey, Doc! You

got a letter!” as William Henry passed his desk. Donnelly was waving a light-blue, entirely civilian-looking envelope.

“Really?” Wheelock said. “Maybe it’s from my congressman.”

“Yeah, your draft board made a mistake,” Binns quipped.

“The typing’s not good enough,” Donnelly sniffed.

Wheelock took the envelope. The weight of the characters was irregular, the sign of a hunt-and-peck typist striking with uneven pressure. Some of the closed loops were also filled in, indicating a poorly maintained machine. The return address was from his own apartment building in Byzantium, New York. He thought on that for a moment. Had Jane ever learned to operate a typewriter in any of her jobs? If so, he wasn’t aware of it. And the address the sender used for him was barely adequate to work its way through the Army Post Office system, because it showed the wrong theater of operations. If there had been a Wheelock anywhere in Europe, then he would be holding this letter right now instead of William Henry. So far as he knew, Jane had never made that mistake.

Wheelock glanced pointedly at Binns and Donnelly, who were standing on either side of him, studying the envelope as he was. William Henry walked off to his own desk to read the letter. He slit the top of the envelope, and a half sheet of the same blue paper came out, covered with the same uneven typewriting.

Dear Mr. Wheelock—

This is hard letter for me to write to soldier overseas who has not seen his dear wife in so long time. I know you must miss her terribly, but you must not feel like that. Your wife is not good woman.

Every night for weeks she dresses up to nines and goes out. She is always going with same man, driving away in big automobile and leaving your daughter Daniela with me to take care of. She never returns before midnight and sometimes not until small hours of morning with her dress sometimes torn and the smell of liquor about her. Your wife says she has job, but I don’t know what kind of job makes you to drink and rip your clothes and cavort with men. At least not honest job.

I sit babies only for the sake of your little girl, only because I love her and I respect you. Not to help this woman who wrongs you. For her God has made a special circle of Hell.

Come home soon and save your marriage.

Your friend,

There was no signature. Wheelock turned the paper over, but there was no note, no other marks. He studied the outside of the envelope again. He read the letter over three times.

And all the while his mind whirled, battered by the hurt and humiliation of these accusations. His brain frantically tried to absorb the shock of finding out, simultaneously, that Jane, as loving and caring as he remembered his wife to be, was now acting like a prostitute, and his marriage, as much as his emotional stability depended on it, had just vanished like a desert mirage under the edge of a dark cloud.

Or ... was she? Had it? What was the truth here? And did he have to accept this letter at face value? Almost reflexively, Wheelock began to fight the letter's implications with the deductive logic in which he had trained and which now formed his daily work.

Someone, who apparently lived in his apartment building, had written the letter but neglected to sign it, refusing to declare himself—or, more likely, herself. And why? For fear of disclosure and retaliation? From whom? From Jane—who would never see the letter, who was never meant to know of it? Or from William Henry—who could do what, exactly, from half a world away? Or, rather, was it because the mischief-maker was a coward, pure and simple?

That the writer had only rudimentary command of English was obvious. Diction and syntax suggested a person of foreign extraction, an immigrant, of which several lived in his building. William Henry thought of Ahmed Sayyedin, an elderly Arab scholar, but he was a quiet man who spoke to no one—besides, how likely was he to “sit babies”? Mrs. Laquelle upstairs, a bone-thin black woman from sub-Saharan Africa, spoke better English than Wheelock did himself, and she was native in French. The Obmanchikovs—he a professor of Slavic literature, she a housewife—were Russian expatriates, dignified people, whom he was sure would never stoop to this kind of vicious gossip. So the letter writer must be someone who had moved in after Wheelock had left for Korea.

This person, whoever it was, claimed to be babysitting Danielle while Jane went out in the evenings. And Jane was said to be coming home late, although the exact hour was not given and the time might well be exaggerated. These were presented as facts.

The rest was supposition. The writer said Jane drove off with a man, but this man was never identified or described. It was reasonable to assume that, if she had taken a new job at further than walking distance, Jane would need a ride. Wheelock had left her with an apartment and an income, but not enough money to buy a car. If the driver was always the same person, then it might as easily be a coworker as a boyfriend, given that this escort was punctual enough to allow Jane to arrange for a babysitter. An affair was therefore presumed but not shown to be fact.

As to what kind of job might require Jane to wear fancy dress, drink liquor, and occasionally get her clothes torn or disheveled ... well, Wheelock himself could think of several. She might have found work as a fashion model—Jane certainly had the face and figure for it—in a dress shop that stayed open in the evening for private showings. Or she might have joined an amateur theatrical group—they were popular in university towns—with evening performances that naturally meant staying out late. Either job might involve Jane's having to change her clothes quickly and, occasionally, rip them. And either might involve the presence—although at some remove—of liquor.

Jobs like that did not even have to pay real wages. Jane did not need the income, not with his army paycheck to see her through. However ... what Jane's definition of actual “need” might be, or how her and Dani's situation might have changed since he went away, William Henry had no way of knowing.

Finally, was Jane, by nature, a “not good woman”? After two years of marriage he could say that he knew his wife. She was loyal. She was loving. She was honest. She would not hurt him, even if she thought she could act in secret and get away with it.

William Henry Wheelock weighed the letter and its contents. The details were found wanting. The story was thin and mostly based on conjecture and assumption. The allegations were contrary to what he knew to be fact. And, most damning of all, the

writer had chosen to remain anonymous. That meant Wheelock was automatically barred from following up, from asking questions and seeking clarification—except by publicly confronting his wife with what was most likely a tissue of lies.

But still, deep in a corner of his mind, there was doubt. Could one person truly know another? Could any man really be sure of his wife? Especially a woman as bright and beautiful as Jane? Left alone for more than a year?

He put the letter back in its envelope. But he did not throw it in the wastebasket, where someone else might find it. He did not burn it, as it deserved. Instead, he put the letter in his desk drawer and turned the lock on it. And there it would wait.

## 5. Homecoming

When Willie came home the following spring, Jane took her daughter to meet his train at the station in town. As the local pulled in from Syracuse, Jane scanned from window to window on each of the cars, methodically searching for his handsome face under the peak of a dark-green uniform cap with the gold insignia in the center. She didn't find him there, or among the streams of men climbing down from the vestibules.

Jane was turning this way and that, frantically searching the thinning crowd on the platform, when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Daddy!" shouted little Danielle at her side.

"Hello there!" said a familiar voice behind her.

Jane turned to find her tall, fair-haired husband, who instead of an army uniform was wearing a gray felt hat and khaki-colored raincoat, but he still wore Willie's face with its strong nose, long jaw, and sad, scholarly eyes. It was now a deeply tanned face that had a few more lines around the eyes and mouth, but it was his own.

"You're not in uniform," she said, confused.

"I'm not in the army anymore," he replied. "They discharged me yesterday down at Fort Dix."

Before Willie could explain further, she dropped her daughter's hand and grabbed him. She wrapped her arms around his neck, planted her mouth on his, and hung on tight.

He responded with a bear hug and a deep, hungry kiss.

After an eternity, the pressure released and their lips parted.

"Whew!" she said.

"It's good to see you, too."

Then Jane took her family home. She let Dani play in the living room, closing her ears to the occasional bang and crash and the resulting howl, while she diligently made love to her husband all afternoon.

At half past five she rose, had a shower, and began dressing for work. She had taken her strapless, black taffeta dress with the chiffon skirt out of the closet and was holding it against herself for inspection when Willie rolled over and opened his eyes.

"Where are you going?" he asked, somewhat sharply.

"I have to go out," she said vaguely.

"But where?" he asked.

Jane turned to face him, still holding the dress. "I'm going to work."

His face held the beginnings of a scowl. It was more than the face of a man losing out on a final bout of lovemaking. Willie's expression had turned opaque and distant. The way he paused was suddenly cautious. And he looked—just a little bit—scared.

“Dressed like that?” he asked in a tone that said he might not believe her answer.

“I didn’t want to tell you in my letters, because I thought it might worry you, but I have a job serving drinks at a bar downtown.”

“Oh,” he said. Then again, with relief, “Oh!”

Jane tried to figure out what he had been thinking—what he had been fearing—and she didn’t like her conclusions.

“It’s just a job,” she said defensively. “Like being a waitress, but with alcohol.”

“I didn’t think you would need a job,” he said. “Wasn’t my army pay enough?”

“It gets me out of the house.” She shrugged.

“In the evening,” he said slowly.

“That’s when people drink.”

“Why don’t we stay in tonight?”

Jane shook her head, “I’m on the clock. They expect me.”

“This is my first night home,” he said reasonably.

“But what would we do if I stayed?”

He smiled and patted the bed.

“Didn’t you get enough of that already?” she asked.

“Then let’s go dancing. You’ve got the dress for it.”

“But Lou will be coming by for me in ten minutes.”

“Lou?” She didn’t like the way his eyebrow arched.

“He’s the bartender. He always drives me to work.”

“Tell him you just quit, that you’re going dancing.”

“But ...” Jane discovered she did not like being ordered around by her husband.

“But I don’t have a sitter for tonight. I thought you’d be taking care of Dani. Still, if you really want to go out, I could call Mrs. Obmanchikov. She—”

“No!” William Henry said sharply. “Not her!”

Jane was perplexed. “Well, why ever not?”

“I’ve changed my mind. Let’s stay in.”

“This is too confusing.” She raised her arms and slid the dress down over her head. “I’ve got to get going.”

“Stay with me,” he said, pleading now.

“Sorry, fella. You just botched it.”

“When will you be back?”

“Don’t wait up,” she said.

\* \* \*

Three weeks later, Jane learned that Willie had put a down payment on a house without first talking the matter over with her. It was more of a cottage, really, one of three identical structures nestled into a stand of second-growth pines on the university campus, just north of the library. Jane was going to protest but, when he showed her the cottage, she fell in love with it immediately.

It had walls of cream-colored matchboard, more like a summer place than a real house, and a peaked roof of rain-darkened wooden shakes. The door and the shutters on the windows were painted a deep green—the same color that the groundskeepers painted fences and signposts all around the campus. It was charming and quaint and everything she had dreamed of. But still, Jane felt she had to put up a fight.

“Aren’t these cottages reserved for faculty?” she asked.

"I'm going to be faculty," he said, "soon enough."

"That's not certain, is it? You haven't finished your dissertation."

"My thesis advisor is very encouraging. Besides, the administration already took my check."

"We can't afford it," Jane said, but she put her hand out for the key.

"When you figure how much we were paying in rent, it makes financial sense."

"What if you get a professorship someplace else?"

Jane opened the front door onto a small parlor. The house was unfurnished, of course. Light patches on the walls showed where the former occupants had hung pictures. Jane decided they would have to repaint the whole place inside before moving in. The windows had drapes made of cheap cotton in a faded cabbage rose pattern, and those would have to go as well. There was no carpet, but the floor boards were good, blond oak with an inlaid strip of some other, darker wood—maybe cherry—running around the edges of each room. The floors needed a good scrubbing and waxing, too. Jane could see she had her work cut out for her. But still she had questions.

"What happens if we have to move later?"

"Well, then we'll have an asset to sell."

"Back to the university," she pointed out.

"That's in the deed papers," he admitted.

They toured the separate dining room, the small but adequate kitchen, which had a range and refrigerator included in the sale, the tiny spare room downstairs, which would make a sewing room for her—or, more likely, a study for Willie—and the two bedrooms at the top of the narrow, twisting stairs that curved up and around the fieldstone fireplace. Its chimney was the center post of the house and would keep them warm and cozy through the winters.

"It's totally impractical," Jane said.

"But ...?" he prompted.

"I love it."

### About the Author

Thomas T. Thomas is a writer with a career spanning forty years in book editing, technical writing, public relations, and popular fiction writing. Among his various careers, he has worked at a university press, a tradebook publisher, an engineering and construction company, a public utility, an oil refinery, a pharmaceutical company, and a supplier of biotechnology instruments and reagents. He published eight novels and collaborations in science fiction with Baen Books and is now working on more general and speculative fiction. When he's not working and writing, he may be out riding his motorcycle, practicing karate, or wargaming with friends. Catch up with him at [www.thomastthomas.com](http://www.thomastthomas.com).



Photo by Robert L. Thomas

### Books by Thomas T. Thomas

#### *eBooks:*

The Children of Possibility  
 The Judge's Daughter  
 Sunflowers  
 Trojan Horse

#### *Baen Books and eBooks:*

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 First Citizen  
 ME: A Novel of Self-Discovery  
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