

## FLOUR FOR JACK AT LAST

"I'm from out of town, you know," she said.

I looked up, mildly startled. She was speaking to me; there was no one else. We were waiting for the elevator on the ninth floor of the downtown San Francisco Holiday Inn.

I gave her a half-smile, intended to discourage. I too was from out of town, in the city on business. I wasn't in the market for new friends.

But the brief smile seemed to satisfy her that I could be confided in. She nodded as if I had spoken, and continued. "No, I've never been to San Francisco before, but of course I've always wanted to—my brother Jack, you know, he was here in '43, and my friends too, of course, Betty and Tom and Louise, they've all been here, and they all said it was beautiful, and it is, of course, and I'm so anxious to get out and see it. This is my first day here, you know, and I have a lot of things I want to do—this elevator is a slow one, isn't it? Maybe it will give Jeannie a chance to catch up. I'm here with my friend Jeannie, and she is as slow as cold molasses, and I told her I wouldn't wait for her, but this darn elevator will make me a liar, won't it? Because here I am waiting."

She flashed a perky smile at me. Although she had not moved from my side,

she seemed to be in continuous motion. A faint rustle came from her flowered dress as she talked, and the tight gray curls clustered over her head bobbed up and down. Her plump bosom rose and fell rapidly with her breath.

I pressed the down button of the elevator again, although the red down light already glowed. Maybe the elevator was stuck somewhere.

"That's a pretty suit you've got on, dear," she said. "You must be on a business trip; tourists don't carry briefcases, do they? I was a secretary before I got married but you know, I don't think I ever saw a woman carry a briefcase back then. Times change, don't they?"

"Um," I said.

A birdlike smile flitted happily over her face in response. "You know," she said, "Jeannie wanted to go to Los Angeles for our vacation, but I held out for San Francisco, because really, you can see Los Angeles on TV anytime, but you hardly ever see San Francisco. My brother Jack loved it here in San Francisco, and ever since he wrote me how beautiful it was I've always wanted to come here, because Jack and I were always pretty close, you know, and he wrote me that I would love it here, and he was right, of course. I would have come out sooner, but Jack was

killed in World War Two. He was stationed here before he was shipped overseas, and he planned to live here after the war, but of course he was killed on one of those tiny islands out there by Tahiti or someplace, so he never did live here and besides I got married and stayed in Wisconsin, so probably it would have been a long time before I could have visited here anyway."

The elevator came. She paused for breath as we stepped inside. The doors closed and the elevator creaked and started its slow descent.

"I knew Jeannie wouldn't make it," she said after making a tsk sound between her teeth. "I don't understand how she can move so slow. Yes, Jack was killed. And now the Japanese are our friends and everything, but you know every time I see a picture of a Japanese I have to wonder if he was the one who shot Jack—he was shot by a sniper, you know, he never saw it coming. I don't think that was very fair, do you? The Japanese must be very sneaky people. Jeannie drives a Toyota, and it does get good mileage and all that, but I bought a new car last year and it's a Chevrolet and it runs good enough for me. I just don't feel right about buying Japanese, do you? I don't think Jack would have liked it."

"Um," I said gruffly. I worked for Mitsubishi.

The elevator stopped on the fourth floor. The door opened but no one was waiting. They had probably given up and taken the stairs. The elevator waited for them anyway.

“Of course it’s not like Jack was my only brother,” she continued. “I have two other ones, but Jack was my favorite before he died. He sent me a present from Hawaii when he was there on leave, one of those muumuus—of course I didn’t wear it but it shows what a nice boy he was. If Jeannie doesn’t hurry she’ll miss the bakery tour. Well, I’m not going to wait for her. Jack wrote me about the sourdough bread here and he said it was wonderful, and he was going to send me one of those starter kits, but he was shipped out before he could. I suppose they still sell them, and if they do I’ll get one now. But what I really want to do is buy a little bag of flour. Of course I know it sounds silly, but it will make me feel better, because you know I never did get around to answering Jack’s letters—I was so busy, you know, in school and all, and then there was this boy, I didn’t marry him as it turned out—he married someone else— but anyway I always felt a little bad that Jack was killed before I could. So after I buy my bag of flour on the bakery tour, we’re going on the harbor tour, you know the one that goes right under the Golden Gate Bridge—I hope Jeannie

will make it—and I'm going to scatter the flour under the bridge into the bay, in memory of Jack. We never got his body back, you know, the army lost it somewhere, so I don't have his ashes, but I think that the flour will do just as well, and besides he did say he loved the bread in San Francisco."

The elevator lurched as we arrived at the lobby. She darted out before the door was fully open, throwing me a last birdy smile over her shoulder. She skimmed through the lobby, her head swiveling from side to side. Looking for Jeannie, probably.

I hope Jeannie made it. A solemn ceremony needs a witness. Jack deserved it, you know.