

JUDITH
MERRIL

A few writers have made their reputations on a single book; but the number who have done so on one short story is very nearly zero. Nevertheless, within a matter of weeks after her first published story appeared in *Astounding Science Fiction*, Judith Merril was one of the most talked about and uniformly popular writers in the science-fiction field. Its name was *That Only a Mother*; it's a lovely and horrifying little piece, and it set the pace for a career that has so far included editing two anthologies (*Shot in the Dark*—BANTAM—and *Beyond Human Ken*—RANDOM HOUSE), the two Cyril Judd novels in collaboration with C. M. Kornbluth, aforementioned, and one of the few science-fiction novels that can fairly be called a critical success: *Shadow on the Hearth* (DOUBLEDAY). To see the latest from Miss Merril's agile typewriter, look below to . . .

So Proudly We Hail



. . . at the twilight's last gleaming . . .

Great gray plain of poured concrete, level and bare, save for the network of construction at the center. There, ensnared in wood and metal, shadow-shrouded, the clumsy bottom of the tapered rocket rested on the Earth. Far above, the nose pierced the thin air, a bloody beacon in the sunset.

A spiral ramp curved out from the high loading port, sweeping across the concrete to where the human builders of the spacebird lived and worked: twelve hollow cubes poured from the same concrete on which they stood.

Behind one lighted window, scattered groups of men and women lingered over the evening meal. They drummed their fingers, and shifted nervously between each other and the lurid light outside. They talked in quick soft voices, laughed too

loud; sipped steaming coffee, or bit into bread and meat that could not satisfy the hungers they were feeling.

. . . in the rocket's red glare . . .

The words kept running through her head, absurdly appropriate, two solid centuries after they were written by a man who also had to wait till dawn. The old words hummed in her head, replacing the others—the ones she'd saved up for tonight. The ones she had to speak, soon, now:

"I guess I better tell you now."

In the wall mirror, Sue could see her own lips form the words, making precise movements against the set mask of her face. The careful mask of civilized conformity, red-and-white satin out of jars and boxes that could hide the pallor of fear and the blush of desire, both. She could see the words, but she couldn't hear them. She had no way of telling whether she spoke aloud, or whether the shapes in the mirror were only an echo of the intention in her mind.

He didn't hear. In the mirror she could see him too, his head turned from her to look out the window, watching the metal monster where it waited, crouched to spring at dawn.

He doesn't even know I'm here.

The thought came bitterly, perversely reassuring. She gulped at too-hot coffee, seeing over the rim of the cup the familiar thrusting angle of his shoulder, the slight backward tilt of his head.

But he'd know if I wasn't here, she reassured herself, and the coffee was bitter in her mouth.

"I guess I better tell you now," she said again, and this time she knew she spoke aloud. She could feel her mouth moving to make the words: the lips, tongue, teeth, jaw, muscles of the cheek, working habitual patterns of speech beneath the mask. "I guess I better not wait any longer," she said, and watched him start to turn, reluctantly, back toward her.

"Sure, Baby. What is it?"

She knew the suppressed impatience of that tone as she knew, intimately, every sound his mouth could make and every shape it had. His face was in profile, and she saw the pushed-out firmness of the lower lip that could completely hide the sensitivity of the upper; the stubborn set of jaw that made you forget how quickly the forehead wrinkled with

trouble or tension. When she looked into his eyes, she knew what she would find there, too: a veil of tenderness not quite able to conceal the glitter of irritation.

"What is it, Baby?" he asked. "What's the matter?"

She shook her head. "Drink your coffee," she said, grotesquely wifelike. "You won't get any coffee on Mars, you know."

"Huh?" He shook his head once sharply, like a man immersed in sleep or fog. His eyes opened wide, and he looked down at the coffee cup with astonishment; shrugged and picked it up; sipped once, symbolically, not to disagree; then put it down to look away again.

Sudden brilliance flashed through the window, and she turned too, watching over his shoulder while the lights came on outside, to play through the night on the monster. She looked at the man, and past him, to the embodied dream outside, trying to see what he saw, to suffer the same bewitchment. But the dream was his. It was no longer, even by sharing, hers.

... o'er the ramparts we watched . . .

On the ramp, a gang of workmen was loading the last stack of crates into the ship, hauling and pushing, making wide gestures, shouting to each other in a last burst of eager energy.

Man and wife, they watched the scene together, and fascination held them both. It seemed impossible that he could sit there, close enough to touch, and still not know how great a distance the rocket had already made between them.

He was hypnotized, she thought, spellbound by the mesmeric movements of the work gang and the flashing lights outside.

He stared out the window, not thinking or feeling, not wanting to know, not letting her tell him. Whatever it was, it was nothing. Nothing that mattered. The rocket outside was proof enough of that: a symbol of rightness triumphant; a tower of silver that would roar skyward on bolts of lightning at dawn, carrying five hundred motes of humanity beyond blackness to the planet Mars. Married couples, mostly, like Sue and himself. Healthy and skilled, trained for the job over years of preparing; big men and big women with brawn and brains and

courage and a sense of humor in time of adversity. The kind of people to build a frontier in the sky and make it thrive.

He had spent his whole life preparing himself for this. His whole life, and the last five years of it with Sue. She'd wanted it as he did . . .

Or had she?

Face it, jerk! He felt her eyes on the back of his head, and had to struggle not to turn around. She was scared, that's all. Worried. Natural enough.

A woman gets that way, that's all. He knew what she was thinking. No sense talking about it, not any more. They'd be in it soon enough, and she'd see it wasn't as bad as her fears had built it up to be.

Or else she'd turn out to be right. It would be bad. A lot of it was bound to be. Okay! Why drag it out? Why make it worse before it happened?

If he turned around now, they'd go all through it again. About the first two expeditions, and what could have happened to them. About the mosses and lichens and red hills of Mars. About living in steel cubicles and breathing through an oxygen mask; Then later, with luck, living in pressure chambers instead. About all the dangers and trials and troubles she could dream up.

He wasn't going to talk about it any more. Not now. This one last night to get through, and then they'd be on board, and once it started, she'd get over worrying. They'd be too busy to worry.

One more night. Nothing at all, after two months. Two months of waiting since they got their OK slips. Nine weeks of watching the strain around her mouth pull her lips into angry lines; of meeting her eyes too seldom; of hearing her speak her love too often. Of talking and reassuring her about the worries she never voiced and wouldn't admit to.

It's your own damn fault! he told himself again. Just once, he'd laughed at her fears. A long time ago, but she didn't forget. She wouldn't, couldn't, admit it any more.

His eyes flickered sideways, to the mirror, took in the stiff mask of her face, and flickered back to the window, to the workmen finishing their job up high on the ramp. The con-

trast was funny, he thought. So funny it tied knots in his belly, and made his eyes burn for wanting to laugh.

. . . oh, say can you see? . . .

Dust whirled in slow eddies of illumination around the blast-revetments that girded the rocket's base. An Earth-breeze stirred the dust, an Earth-breeze that had wandered out of the Puget Sound, across Wyoming, and into Kansas where the concrete plain buried acres of flatland. The breeze sifted faint dust from the prairie all around, on the ramp and the bales and on the work gang that handled them. It whispered through the storm fence, and along the street between the concrete cubes into the cafeteria where they sat.

Sue felt the breeze on her face, and covered the cheek with the palm of her hand to keep the coolth, to hold it for some future need.

But the need is his, she thought. The breeze will still be mine tomorrow. The breeze and trees and grass, and the warm sun on ocean beaches that they'd known together. All hers, now.

"Will!" she said desperately. The name was a prayer.

He groped behind him for her hand. "What is it, Baby?" he said to the air in front of him, to the window, the rocket, the lights outside. He didn't turn around. "Something wrong?" he said.

Yes! The sudden wave of fury took her by surprise. It shocked her body, stiffening her spine; making her toes curl so her feet dug against the floor; winding her hands into tight fists under the table. It snapped her head back, so that when the shock-wave reached him and he turned to her at last, smiling a little sheepishly, her eyes were flashing straight into his.

And there it was again.

I love you, Will! The sudden sharp intake of breath; the reaching-forward feeling in her arms, spreading down through her whole body; the total sense of physical well-being, taking over after the tightness of the anger, that was gone now as quickly as it had come. Five years: five years of closeness, day after day, and it was still the same, whenever they returned to each other from even the most subtle of departures.

"I'm sorry, Baby." he said. "I guess I wasn't really listen-

ing." He sounded tired, as if it took great effort to say so little. But he was trying, anyhow. "What's the matter, Sue?"

"I love you, Will."

His eyes mapped her face, narrowing. There was a tightening at the corner of his jaw. "Why say it like that?" he asked finally. "You sound like it's something to say at a funeral."

"Can you think of a better thing to say at a funeral?"

"You're in a hell of a mood!"

Oh, you noticed, did you? She almost said the words out loud, but the song saved her, still running through her head.

... through the perilous fight ...

"Sorry," she said.

Dismayed, he watched the stars film her eyes.

"What are you crying about?" He hadn't meant to growl like that.

"I'm not." She dabbed at her eyes.

"All right," he said. "Okay. Then there's nothing to worry about, I guess. Everything's just peachy. Hunkydory." He was turning back to the window, when the loudspeaker over the door coughed and croaked at them officially:

"All colonists report for final briefing and examination at nine o'clock. All colonists. White-slip holders, and yellow-slip reserve list, report to the Ad Building in forty-five minutes. Bring all papers and personal effects. All colonists and reserves, nine o'clock in the Ad Building. There will be a warning siren at eight fifty-five."

The speaker coughed once more. Will turned back to his wife and took her hand in his. Now, if ever, he could pull her back with him, into the realization of the dream. Now ...

Her hand was cold in his. He tried to squeeze warmth into it, to let his own thought and hope flow into her through their twined fingers. For just a moment he thought he had succeeded. Then the speaker cleared its throat again.

"Announcement: Provisions have been made for the accommodation of relatives of all colonists during the night. All authorized visitors who wish to remain until take-off may register for bedspace . . ."

He didn't hear the rest of it, because she pulled her hand away, suddenly, jerkily, and he understood what he wouldn't yet say even to himself in words.

"There isn't much more time," she said, in a strange tinny voice.

"Forty-five minutes, he thought. Forty-four now . . . three. "What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded. Make her say it now.

"Well, they'll be . . . the announcement . . ." She blinked her eyes, trying to dry them. "They said nine o'clock . . ."

"I heard it. All right, Sue, what is it? What do you want to say?"

Her eyes, suddenly clear, were wide and warm. Big brown eyes a man could drown in. Looking straight at him, the way she always used to. No faking now. And love . . . crazy love you couldn't doubt when she looked like that.

"I'm not going," she said.

"Yeah. That's what I figured." He felt nothing at all, not inside or out. He could see his hand still holding hers, but he couldn't feel the curl of his own fingers, or the skin of hers. "I'm glad you got around to telling me," he said, and found he could still manipulate his muscles. He disentangled his hand, and pushed back his chair. The legs scraped on the linoleum with nerve-splitting shrillness.

She was watching him, her eyes still wide, but baffled now.

"Where are you . . . ?"

"Out," he told her. "I want to take a walk."

"All right." She started to get up, and he had to hold his left arm, the one near her, tight against his side to keep from shoving at her, forcing her back into the seat.

"Look, Sue," he said very evenly, casually, "I want to be alone for a while."

"But I . . ."

"I'll be back. Okay? I'll see you."

He walked off quickly, before she could answer, or make up her mind about sitting or standing. Walked out of the bright-lit room into the dusk, and paused a moment on the steps to light his pipe. *Smoke your pipe, Will*, he jeered at himself, mimicking. You won't have any smoking oxygen on Mars!

He snorted his scorn, and strode down the steps, onto the ramp, up toward the storm fence. The breeze was cooler now, and it cooled his skin, but not the inferno raging inside him.

He wanted to hate her. He wanted to rend and tear and bellow.

Why? He twisted the blade of agony in the wound. How long? How long had she lied and cheated and tricked him? How long since she made up her mind?

No need to ask that; he knew how long. The night they celebrated; the night the white slips came. But—why?

Why did she have to lie at all? Why make a mockery of everything they'd had before by this last cheap pretense? How could she?

. . . and the angry red stare, the words bursting in air . . . the song had become a part of her by now, changing itself to suit her needs . . . gave proof through the night that our love was still there . . .

She tried to get up. She wanted to go after him, run after him, explain it all to him, but her legs were rubbery and useless. She dropped back into the chair, and sat there, helpless, till she heard a voice over her shoulder.

"Feeling sick, lady?" the busboy asked.

"Oh. No," she said. "No, I'm all right. Thank you." She stood up. Her legs worked all right now. She smiled mechanically at the busboy. "Sorry. I guess you want to get the table cleared."

"We're getting ready to close up," he said. "I can get a doctor if you . . ."

"I'm just fine," she said. "I'm sorry."

She walked out steadily, and stood on the steps, shivering. In all the darkness around her the only thing she could see was the area of garish brilliance centered on the rocket. It hurt her eyes, and she turned from it till gradually her vision acclimated to the pink-fringed grayness that had followed the gory sunset. She could make out shapes of other buildings, and then the near part of the ramp; bits of the storm fence; and finally a few scattered figures.

Which one was Will she did not know. If she'd known, she wasn't sure any more that she'd have gone to find him.

Will! she pleaded, Will, come back! I haven't told you yet. Will—please!

He said he knew. Maybe he thought he knew. But he didn't.

And maybe it was best that way, still. Maybe it was best for him never to know. To go hating her, as he did now. To leave without regrets.

You're going to Mars, Will. Alone. I can't go, Will. Don't you see? They wouldn't let me go. They turned me down . . .

But he didn't see. He couldn't. Because she hadn't told him. The words had deserted her. The words, the shining words, drilled daily for two months to march past her lips in shining ranks tonight; the treacherous, useless words had abandoned her in her hour of need.

She giggled, shivering again, wondering what to do. Silly to stand here in the cold, thinking melodramatic thoughts.

But if she left, he might not find her when he came back. The light went out in the cafeteria window, and she stood there, undecided. She opened her handbag, and reached down to the bottom, fingering the pink slip under the compact and the handkerchief. Too dark to read here if she took it out, but she didn't need to look at it. It was burned into memory behind her eyelids.

"Susan Barth," it said in neat typed letters on the mimeoed form. "3-45-A-7821. Disqualified. Medical Requ 44-B-3. Calcified node. Left lung."

That was all. Two lines of type on a pink slip, and the end of marriage, the end of plans and hopes and all that life meant to her.

And now it was ending again. A different end: the end of loving and lying; of hoping against hope; of hating. And waiting. For her, that is.

For him, for Will, it was the end of waiting only, and the beginning of the dream. The beginning of hate, maybe, too.

They'll tell him, she promised herself. They'll tell him later, on the rocket. Or after they land. It wasn't as if he'd go through life not knowing. He'd find out. No need to tell him now. It would be easier for him this way.

She went down one more step, and let herself look at the rocket. The workmen were still there. The metal dragon swallowed all they fed it, stolid, indifferent, letting itself be stuffed, for now, with bits and pieces of paraphernalia, oddments of fiber and metal, of glass and wood. But all the while it waited, knowing the feast that was coming soon, brooding and hunger-

ing for the living flesh that would feed it this night. Resting and planning for the moment of dawn when, with its belly full, it would belch fire and vanish from the earth.

... and the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air . . .

No sense waiting. It was better not to see him. She stood there, staring and shivering.

The wire of the storm fence was tearing his fingers and his hands. He made himself relax his clutching grip.

Coward! he raged futilely. Cheat and coward!

"Nervous, buddy?"

He whirled, his torn hands clenching into welcome fists, the muscles of his arms literally aching for trouble.

"Maybe," he said tightly.

It was one of the colonists, a man he knew by sight but not by name; a stocky, sandy-haired character with too many teeth in his smile. "Came out to get away from the wife a minute," the man said cheerfully. "Yakkety yakkety yak, that's all I get. And every other word about what a tough time we're in for. Your wife like that?"

"I—haven't got a wife."

"No kidding? I didn't know they were taking any bachelors. If I'd of known that . . . Clara and I got married because both of us wanted to go."

"That's tough!"

"Yeah—Say! what'd you mean by that crack?"

"Beat it, Shorty," Will said coldly. "Unless you're looking for trouble." His knuckles itched with the urge to erase some of the expanse of tooth from the man's idiotic smile.

Shorty flushed, hitched up his belt. "I could use a little," he offered, "if you got some to spare."

They faced each other stonily for a few seconds. "A-a-a-h—skip it!" Will said, and turned back to stare through the fence again.

"Dame trouble?" Shorty asked, too sympathetically.

Will shrugged.

"That's too bad." The other guy was going to go when he was good and ready, not just because Will told him to. "Another guy, huh?" The sympathy was laid on now, too obvi-

ously. But even Shorty seemed to know when he'd gone far enough.

Determinedly unresponsive, Will suffered himself to be jovially slapped on the back, and listened gratefully as he heard the man's footsteps recede into the distance. When he looked around again, he could no longer find the lighted square of window that had marked the cafeteria building. Just a huddle of squared-off silhouettes against the dark gray sky. In the center, on top of the Administration Building, a clock glowed a warning.

Twenty-five minutes till nine.

He had to go back. He told her he'd come back.

Another guy? Well, what about it? Why not? Another guy! It was the only possible answer, and he'd needed a grinning ape like Shorty to show it to him! Two months of worrying and wondering, noticing all the little changes, all the things that weren't quite right. Telling himself she was frightened. Telling himself he was wrong. Keeping the knowledge just below the surface of his mind. It spewed up now in all its rottenness, leaving him weak and clean.

It was the only possible explanation.

Will knocked his cold pipe against a fence-post, and put it back in his pocket. He considered slowly, surprisingly calm, what he wanted to do with the rest of the time. Nineteen minutes more, the clock told him.

Was she waiting, still?

Did he care?

He felt cool—indifferent or numb. It didn't matter which. He'd promised to come back. What difference did a promise make, to her? Another man—was she with him now, sharing the lovely joke? Telling him she loved him? Telling him she was free at last?

Will turned his back on the storm fence and the rocket. He paced slowly the hundred yards down the ramp. He didn't want to see her. He wanted to tell her that he understood. If there had been any emotion in him at all, he'd have wanted to denounce her, shame her, spit on her; what he might have felt now was not anger, but a bitter cold contempt.

Only he felt nothing.

. . . Oh, say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave . . .

The song still ran insanely through her head, and now she knew why, remembering the moment of getting the envelope, of opening it, of looking and seeing the two slips of paper, his and hers—white and pink. White for success and pink for failure. The song had been playing on the radio then, while she stood in the middle of the kitchen and stared at the incongruous slips of paper that didn't match. The first time ever that things hadn't somehow fitted together for her and Will.

Bit by bit, while the song played through and finished, and somebody started to make a speech, the meaning of it had penetrated to the vital centers of her consciousness.

I'm not going . . . the statement was complete at last, the lesson fully learned . . . I can't go.

She didn't show Will the slips that night. She had to think it through first, decide what to do, how to tell him. Because as soon as the lesson of failure was thoroughly learned for herself, another piece of knowledge took shape within her.

If she told him, he'd stay too. He'd stay at home, and go out to stand in the yard on starry nights. He'd stare at the sky, smoking his pipe, the way he always did—the way he always had—but it would be different. He would stand alone, and his hand would not touch her arm, nor would she be with him. And when he came back into the house, his eyes would avoid her, and he would hate.

You're going, Will, she promised in her heart when she understood that much. It's the thirst of your soul, and I shall see that you drink, though it drains me!

Well, she was entitled to a little melodrama in her private thoughts, and the phrase gave her strength to act.

Next day she checked with the medics. "Calcified node." Just a little hardened-over spot that would never give her any trouble on Earth—but could kill her on Mars.

"I don't care," she told them, pleading.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Barth. You understand we can't use passenger space on the rocket for anyone who isn't as fit as possible to survive the rigors of colonization . . ."

They were kindly, sympathetic, understanding—but firm.

By that night, she had the duplicate slip ready—the one

that wasn't good enough to get her on the ship, but looked enough like Will's to convince him if he didn't question it. She showed him both, and they went out for dinner and got a little tight together, celebrating!

After he was asleep, she crept out of bed and went outside to stare at the sky herself. She sat on the soft grass and cried; and when he woke up too, and found her missing, and came out looking for her, he thought he understood. He carried her back inside, and was gay and tender and funny and strong. They made cocoa in the kitchen while he talked about the dangers they would face together, making a joke of them, reassuring her, promising all his strength and support to help her through.

That was the last time she cried. After that she schooled herself, night and day, to feel nothing but her love for Will, to do nothing, say nothing, be nothing but a perfect living lie designed to give him what he wanted if it killed them both!

And now at last it was safe to tell him. Safe because it was too late for him to change his mind. He wouldn't stay back now.

But now he didn't want to hear. And maybe—

Maybe it was better that way.

Where is he? Why didn't he come back? He said he would . . . For the first time she thought: *I may never see him again!* The words had no meaning in her mind, but she doubled over as though she'd been hit in the middle.

It's better this way, she told herself, straightening up painfully. Better for him . . . "Will! Here I am!"

He'd almost walked right past her. "Will . . ."

"Oh . . . hi!"

Casual. Just like that. As if it was any night, and he'd gone for a walk. As if there was still a tomorrow.

For him, there was. *I gave it to you, Will. Give me credit for that at least . . .* And immediately, she was ashamed of the thought. What difference did blame or credit make now?

"I guess we might as well say goodbye." His face was a cold stone carving in the dark. "No sense in you hanging around till dawn," he said. "You told them, didn't you?" he asked. "I mean, I take it I'm the last to know?"

All right, he was mad. She didn't have to fight back. "I'd

rather stay," she said, forcing the words through the dryness of her mouth. "But we can say goodbye now if you'd rather." "I would."

He grinned, a tight stretching of lips across teeth that gave away the bravado of his nonchalance completely. "So long, Sue," he said, and one corner of his mouth quirked up. "It's been nice to know you."

He put his hands lightly on her shoulders, leaned forward and kissed her once, chastely, on the forehead.

Oh, no! Not this way, Will! Oh, no! Her own hurt, anger, sorrow faded to vanishing beside what she now understood of his. "Will, please," she said steadily. "Listen to me a minute. I want to tell you . . ."

"Maybe you better not, Sue."

She swallowed slowly, moistened the caked dryness of her lips, blinked back the burning in her eyes, and started again.

"I think it's better if I do. I'm . . . I was dis . . ."

"Maybe I don't want to hear it!" he exploded; and she saw his face tighten, his jaw tremble; felt his fingers bite into her shoulders as he struggled to maintain a semblance of calm.

Silence again. Frozen silence while the narrowed slits of his blue eyes locked with her wide brown ones.

"I . . ." She opened her mouth, but it was no longer possible to make the words come out. At last she managed a sort of croaking parody of speech: "Will, I . . ."

"Skip it!" he said, and then with sudden gentleness: "It's all right, Baby. I understand." A spasm of bitterness twisted his mouth, bellying his words; and he said again fiercely, "Just skip it, that's all!" Then the hands on her shoulders slid down her back, and his aching hunger crushed her too close for a breath to pass between them. For a moment, too close even for her own breath to leave or enter. But what need of breath, with his mouth covering hers, and the passion of a lost life-time compressed into one everlasting moment?

He understands! For the little spell of the embrace she believed it, wanted to believe it. But as his arms released her, some cooler portion of her mind stood back in helpless laughter, mocking the kiss, the passion, her will to believe, and his stubborn refusal to listen, all at once. He understands! What

did he think he understood? He had no way to know the truth. His anger proved he didn't know it.

I hate you! she thought, as she shifted her weight to regain her balance. *I hate your wonderful guts for wanting to go so much!*

"All right," she said quietly. "I'll skip it," and she smiled for a last time. This was a good way to say goodbye. The best she could have hoped for. No need to add anything now. He knew, he had to know after that kiss, that whatever her reason was, she loved him still and always. She watched him whirl around and stride away, and realized that she was going too; a part of her at least would be with him forever, wherever he went.

Six angry steps away, he turned back long enough to say: "And tell him for me, he better be worth it!"

Line up here. Get your papers stamped. Shots. Another line. Over here now. Final phys. ex.: no communicable diseases. Line up here now. Got your slips? Strip again. Standard issue coveralls. Clothing to be deposited in these containers, will be returned to next of kin. Shots. Another paper stamped. Final psych. ex.:

"You see, it's a bit unusual, Mr. Barth, for a husband or wife to decide to go ahead when the other's been disqualified."

Smile. No, that's not right. Just act the way the man expects you to. Think it out later. Line up here. Stamp that paper! Hold that line!

"... disqualified!"

They were all through now, and an hour to go before take-off. Someone came around with coffee and some pills. Sedative? Stimulant? He didn't know. He swallowed the pills, gulped the coffee.

Disqualified?

But she never said . . . she didn't . . . she had a white slip just like his.

He stood up, to go find someone who would know, and remembered the psychofficer's words and doubtful attitude. If he asked any questions now, if they found out he hadn't known . . .

But he had to know.

Disqualified? What for? There was nothing wrong with her. Wrong . . . something wrong . . . what was it?

There must be someone around who'd know. He couldn't go if . . . couldn't go? But if she needed him . . . ?

You, you stupid little fool! he thought. What did you think you were doing?

"I love you, Will," she'd said. And he'd snarled back at her.

Maybe he could see her now. Maybe she'd stayed over after all. Maybe—somebody around here would know.

. . . whose broad stripes and bright stars . . .

The hands of the clock were stripes, and the numbers were stars, and so she couldn't tell the time, and didn't have to know how long she had yet to wait. She edged over to her side on the narrow cot, trying not to make it squeak, not wanting to disturb the women on the other cots in the big room.

Are they asleep? she wondered. Or were they, too, turning over soundlessly, staring out the window at the clock on the Ad Building next door.

It was nineteen minutes after four. She must have slept a while after all. She remembered now, the roman candles and flaring sky-rockets of her dream, and right after that remembered his words again: ". . . tell him from me . . ."

She couldn't lie still any longer. She got up, walked the length of the room on tiptoe, barefoot, carrying her clothes. There was a bathroom at the other end. She went in, and closed the door, locking herself in with the sink and mirror and the blinding overhead light. She got into her clothes, rumpled and wrinkled from lying on the floor where she'd dropped them in the dark, a few hours ago.

Cold water on her face, and she was used to the light by then. The mirror was shock enough to wake her up. She fished in her bag for the compact, and felt the pink slip under it, and what difference did it make? She wouldn't see him, not to talk to. He wouldn't see her at all.

But if she went out now, and got there first, she could stand right near the gate. She knew which one they'd use. She'd almost be able to touch him as he went past.

Almost an hour till dawn. Probably other people had the

same idea, though. She went out quickly, walked past the cafeteria where the light was on again, and people were drinking coffee, eating quick breakfasts.

It wasn't too late. She found a place with the other early-waiters, near the gate, and edged forward every time she saw an opening. By the time the band showed up and began tuning instruments, she was right next to the gate itself. When they started to play, she had to check the beginnings of hysteria. Everybody else started singing, so she sang too:

"Oh, say, can you see, by the dawn's early light . . ."

Only it wasn't dawn yet. Not quite. When it was, the monstrous ship would be gone. It would be full of people, then, and Will would be one of them. Part of the human sacrifice that would slake the dragon's thirst, and make it go away . . .

The priests were coming now, herding the sacrifice along. Priests in business suits: presidents and professors and news-papermen.

Right behind them came the captives, all alike, five hundred heads, five hundred sets of arms and legs, all in the same white uniform, marching unmanacled, willingly, to their doom.

They marched past her, right under her nose, and some of them were smiling. Some were cowards, and they cried. She felt most sympathetic to the ones who just walked deadpan straight ahead.

A few of them looked at her, or right through her, as if they sought some other face or figure in the crowd that pressed behind her. One of them opened his mouth when he walked by. He seemed to speak, or try to speak.

His name was Will. He had seen her; he had said something. He . . .

He doesn't know! He hates me! He thinks . . .

She couldn't remember what it was he thought. Something bad. Awful.

There was something she had to tell him, explain to him, to make it all right. Something he said to me . . . what was it?

What did he try to say when he walked past? She closed her eyes, remembered the face, the shape of the mouth, tried not to hear the sounds around her, or the band, or anything;

just to hear what he'd been saying with his mouth that special shape.

She knew the shape; knew each and every shape his mouth could make. The word was "Baby." Another word was "love." But that was wrong. She was putting the shapes together wrong, because he hated her now.

Faint edge of light over the horizon, and the band was still, and one of the priests intoned a prayer.

And a shrill siren screamed, and screeched again, and the air was full of thunder, and people shouting.

"Stand back!"

"Get back, there, you!"

"Blastoff . . . zero . . . Back!"

They pulled at her arms and legs, and somebody grabbed at her middle too, but they couldn't hold her. She was free now. Racing forward, running hard, before they could catch her.

They weren't following any more.

They were afraid, she thought. Poor fools, afraid! They thought it was better to stay behind and live. They didn't know. Maybe for them it was better, poor fools, poor dears, let them live.

She had to let him know. Had to find out. What did he say, she say, could say, would say?

Baby . . . love . . .

"I love you, Will!" she whispered as the blast rent the air, and concrete shook under her feet with the final savagery of the dragon's pouncing departure. Then flame washed through her, and she fell on the trembling ground, and lay still, watching, looking straight up to Will, who could see her, surely, through the flames on which he stood.

The last thought she had was blessed awareness: they'll tell him. He'll find out.

And the last thing she heard was the end of the song: ". . . of the free, and the home of the brave."