

fantastic

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SOMETHING FOR THE WOMAN

BY IVAR JORGENSEN

You're a woman. You've got a husband and a couple of children and a quiet pride in your home and a fair amount of happiness. You don't live on Park Avenue or in Beverly Hills, but you don't want to, really. As long as there's plenty to eat and enough clothing to wear and the full amount of love from the people you love, you're more than satisfied.

Only now they want to take away the foundations of all this. They want you to pull up roots and go traipsing off on a ridiculous hunt for new frontiers. They want you to trade comfort for hardship, security for danger, maybe even life for death.

Why, you demand, should I do it? What's in it for me?

SHE awoke at dawn and her awakening was an instantaneous thing, a sudden and stark transition to sharp consciousness.

And she thought how could I have slept at all? as her hand went automatically across to touch him — and to find him not there. Only the hollowed-out pillow beside her own on the hard floor in the dark, empty room.

She knew a moment of panic; a moment that lifted her and sent her running through the rooms — rooms cold and unfamiliar now in their emptiness — until she saw a streak of blessed light under the basement door.

He was coming up even as she flung the door open and there was something warm and steadying in the dark form of him against the light below. He said, "Nora," said it quietly, as he always spoke. "You should have slept longer. It may be difficult . . . later."

She did not answer, but stood shivering in her white nightgown, waiting for him, for the nearness of him which she needed so badly.

"Are the children awake too?"

"No — I don't think so."

He laughed; the silent chuckle she could feel rather than hear. "The time we had getting them to sleep. But once gone . . ." His thoughts turned to practical things. "The truck just left. I was listening for them so they wouldn't knock and awaken you."

"They took — the trunks?" It was hard to get the words out. They were so final. Nothing left now but their own four bodies and the clothing in which those bodies would be wrapped. So utterly final.

The whole thing had been somewhat like broad steps, one following another, down into a nightmare of quickening panic.

He looked at her there in the semi-darkness and then she could feel his hands touching her cheeks, lifting her head. "The big day, darling. What was it the senator called it? The *new* day. How does it feel to be one of the immortal hundred? That's what we'll be,

you know — immortal."

She was grateful for the darkness as she drew away, turned. "It's chilly. I must get some clothes on."

Alone in what had been their bedroom, she stooped to find her clothing; straightened and drew off the white nightgown; stood there shivering.

A stairway into gradually quickening panic. Not too bad when they had come in twos and threes to look at the house. Not even too bad when the house had been sold, because it was still there and all the familiar things were around her and the future seemed far away.

A little twinge the evening the man came to pick up the car — a slight quickening in her heart. At the last moment she'd remembered Patty's glove in the back seat; had called and gone to the curb to get it — from someone else's car, not theirs any more. Then the man had driven away.

The matter of the furniture had been as painless as such a thing could possibly be. Not a lot of people wandering through, touching, fingering. Just one — a gloomy man, striding in, naming a figure. Sudden, sharp, almost painless.

But they had come finally to haul it away; come with clumping shoes and big, rough, irreverent hands to lift the pieces. With

them had come the panic, and after they had filled the van and driven it away and the rooms were empty, the panic had remained.

The voices of Patty and Tom had helped a little. The laughing and chattering as they ran about, listening to their voices bounce off the naked walls, making a holiday out of everything. Some help, but only pinpoints of light in the darkness of the panic. Tiny stars against the smothering blanket of the night sky.

The night sky. Now, half dressed, fingers stiff, numb, she refused to think of the sky; dared not think of it, lest the pitiful little wall she'd managed to build up would crumble away completely and the panic would pour down on her like a raging flood.

Great Father in heaven. What idiocy have we agreed to? How insane and foolhardy can we get?

The zipper at the side of her dress gave her trouble. She seized upon the trouble like a thirsting person upon a jug of water and struggled, grim and grateful, with the stubborn tab.

But the tab gave and the zipper came smoothly together and she felt she had lost a friend.

The panic.

But held at bay by the shuffling of sleepy feet as Patty wobbled into the room. "Mom. You there, Mom? Why don't you turn on some lights? Time is it, Mom?"

"It's still early, dear. Why don't you go back to bed for a while?"

Fists in blue eyes. Then the sudden dawning. "Mom! This is it! The day! This is the day, Mom!" Patty whirled and danced away. "Tom! Wake up, sleepy head! This is the *day!* You going to sleep right through it?"

The smell of shag tobacco. The glowing pipe. And she knew he was in the room. She hadn't been aware, somehow, of his coming, but now he was there.

She turned, wanting to run to him and hide in his arms. More than anything in her whole life, she wanted to plead for reconsideration of this horrible thing they were about to do — this mad, insane thing.

But, instead, she slipped to the floor and sat nursing her knees as she drew on her shoes and laced them. She said, "I could hang the bedclothes over the windows. Then we could turn the lights on."

"Turn them on anyway — when you're ready. The children can dress in the bathroom. Maybe the neighbors would like to see how we spend our last morning."

She got to her feet, turning from him as she did so — afraid he would see the sickness welling into her eyes. And the thought was pounding against the walls of her brain.

Why am I like this — weak and spineless and silent? Why do I suffer so uselessly? Why don't I scream no — no — no — and that would be the end of it? It would be better for all of us.

But she remained silent. She snapped the light switch and the yellow glare against the bare walls swept away the last wisps of unreality the darkness had nurtured. This was the day — the new day. The threshold from which they would leap to madness.

"Mom — can we open the thermos bottles now? We're hungry and you said they were for breakfast."

She hurried from the bedroom, eager for the duty of supervising the meal. "Yes, you may as well. The large one is milk. Use the paper cups and then pour some of it on the shredded wheat under the napkins. You'll find sugar there —"

Tom laughed in the glee of youth and new awakening. "Mom! For criyi! We know how to eat!"

"Well . . . eat slowly. Don't bolt your food."

She opened the smaller thermos and poured coffee into a paper cup and handed it to him. He took it silently and waited until she had poured her own. Nothing was said or indicated, yet she sensed it as being — to him — a toast, a silent drinking between them to the thing they were about to do.

She glanced up now and saw the light of morning on the window pane. With the light came a new sensation — a new dread. Even time itself — she sensed — had joined the dread conspiracy against her and had changed its form. Time had now become a medium of graduating speed like a sled on the south hill in winter; creeping at first, dragging, but gradually increasing its speed until it was rushing inexorably forward toward the end.

Daylight — the last she would see in these rooms — in this house.

The shag tobacco perfumed the air as she gathered up the breakfast things and stacked them in a corner. They would be left there in a neat pile, and later the man who had bought the things would come and pick them up together with the sheets and blankets — to leave the house a mute, forlorn shell.

The relief of Patty's shrill voice. "It's light now, Daddy. Can I go? I'm supposed to say good-bye to Celia. She's getting up early and she's going to be on her porch waiting."

Tom, with importance: "I've got to go too, Dad. I'm giving Eddy my hunting knife. It was over the weight." He spoke with apology because the father had fashioned the knife as a birthday present for the son.

A few ounces of birthday gift

overweight. Great God! On such absurd trifles hang life and death.

"You can each have fifteen minutes — no more. Be back here sharp and prompt."

They were gone in a clatter while she finished with the dishes and went blindly from the room to gather up the bedding and fold it into patterns of absolute precision. He remained in the room where they had eaten their meal and she sensed his uncertainty, his indecision. She waited, holding a sheet spread motionless. Then his footsteps turned toward the basement steps and went down.

Alone, she stood toe to toe with the panic and slugged at it with flailing mental fists. Sobbing in silence, she gave ground.

The sheets and blankets were folded. The breakfast things aligned and realigned. Time rushed in a fresh acceleration and they were on the sidewalk, the car waiting, the neighbors calling good-byes in blurred unfocused words.

Strangely, the big black limousine brought a respite. The limousine was a moment of rest between rounds of slugging it out with the terror. The car was such a lovely, familiar thing; held tight to the pavement by its four big tires. Sane and sensible, bound by the laws of gravity which man had now learned to defy.

The limousine moved away from the curb and the town was astir. Stores were opening; awnings were being rolled down; sidewalks sloshed with hose water that ran into the gutters and carried a dust film on its back as it moved toward the sewer grates.

She saw all these things as they rode through the streets. The awnings and the water and the dust film; the early shoppers picking over the plump tomatoes and the pale celery on display. Saw and savored them with a feeling akin to desperation, because a woman uprooted must have something to cling to and the mind rushes invariably toward the dear familiar things.

Something to cling to. The man has his courage, his keen and dreaming eye. The child has his new love of living, his wonder at the freshly unfolding world, his flower-petal faith in the goodness of all things. But the woman . . .

How about something for the woman?

The thought formed, but only to be ridiculed by the silent hysterical laughter in her mind. Something to cling to. How absurd, when the very watchwords of this new madness were instability and emptiness. The future was the sky, and the sky sat on nothing. The empty sky. The dark and terrible sky. Nothing.

The limousine stopped by the wire gate. The door opened and

she got out. And there it was: the great gleaming space ship with the cluster of busy ants around its base; the doughty, cocky, insane little ants who had built it.

The space ship — and panic flooded in.

Oh, no. Not in there. Not trapped and smothered in that monstrous gleaming coffin. No.

The children were silent. They'd seen the ship before, but she knew it was not a thing to become familiar with. No matter how many times it was seen, its majestic lines, the prophetic tilt of it, the things it implied and stood for, would always engender an awed silence.

She was aware now of the crowds watching through the wire fence. The lucky ones who would stay on Earth. She moved along, unresisting, in the directed sweep of the chosen hundred families. The mad ones who would go.

They had erected a platform of adaptable steel tubing and planks because this was a great occasion and the important people — the politicians, the great-brained planners, the spotlight-seekers, the video-screen crowdiers — would want a place of vantage.

Seats had been provided for the chosen hundred where they could face the platform and listen while the orators told them how lucky they were. Distinguished speakers — one after another — got up be-

fore the microphone to confess envy and wax remindful of native heritage, pioneer blood and similar inanity.

She sat listening and there was paradox in the fact that she hated it and yet prayed that it go on and on. Anything to postpone the final walk down the cement ribbon and up into the bowels of that shining nightmare.

She began counting. First the number of people on the platform, then the number who had spoken, subtracting and trying to translate people and words into minutes and seconds of reprieve.

But common sense took over to destroy this pitiful subterfuge. As though the space ship waited upon a shallow wash of words! As though the sweep of sun and planet and asteroid could be held spellbound and waiting by the whisperings of top-hatted ants on a wooden platform.

The equations had been worked out, the molten metal cooled into lean, space-riding patterns; the snarling atomic furnace had been lighted and was, even now, keening in blue-hot agony. The ship would roar away upon a split second timed to the march of galaxies, not the flow of windblown eloquence.

She turned her eyes down the long cement ribbon and a wall grew across it; across the avenue

to the ship and across her mind; a wall molded steel-strong of the formless panic she'd lived with day and night.

I can't do it. I can't get into that flying coffin and be blasted up off the Earth. I'm a woman with all a woman's frailties and none of the strengths a few rare and wonderful women have been given. They liken us to pioneers crossing Early American plains with oxen and covered wagons. A lie. A trap for the stupid. No matter what hardships they bore, their feet were always close to the Earth they lived on and died on. The solid Earth. Something to cling to. A final warmth to be buried in.

I can't do it.

She would have to tell him; tell him soon, because the talking had ended. The president and the mayor and the senators had gotten up from their chairs and were filing down the steps of the platform. They would go first along the cement ribbon toward the ship and the pioneers would follow.

Already the one hundred chosen families — the ninety-nine husbands with their rare and wonderful women — were getting up from the chairs in respect for the president and the dignitaries. All the brave children were silent, awed with this final moment.

Patty and Tom stood close to each other, staring again at the ship, and the smell of shag to-

bacco was on the breeze.

He stood beside her, his keen dreamer's eyes, narrowed and finely crow-footed, testing the sky for a sign of good fortune. His mind was already up there — far away.

But he lowered his eyes as the crowd surged forward, leaving a space around them that was comparative isolation. He reached over and took her hand in his and she could see that his mind and heart were not among the stars but there on the ground beside her and very close. He smiled.

The smile went down into her face and from there into her own heart along with the quiet words he spoke. "Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

She should have laughed and had an answer as she had always had an answer when he had spoken thus before — before the panic. But she could not.

"It's true. I've been meaning to tell you. That thing over there is only a space ship. This is nothing but a blasting field. Where we're going and what we're planning to do isn't very outstanding beside the really important thing — that I love you. Loving you is the only complete and satisfactory job I've ever done." The clutch of his hand was tight and warm with her own inside. And she knew what his next word would be before it came.

(Continued on page 162)

SOMETHING FOR THE WOMAN

(Continued from page 73)

"Okay?"

She smiled and answered him with the word she always used.

"Okay."

Then they were swept forward with the crowd, and the isolation vanished. From the habit of months and weeks and days she sought again for the panic.

But it had vanished also.

Strange, she thought. But then she knew, with a giddy sense of joy, that it was not strange at all. The panic had been replaced,

shouldered out by something she had somehow allowed herself to forget. Something for the woman. The only thing, after all, to which the woman can cling. The thing that was formed when the woman was formed. Love.

She danced along with the crowd and heard Patty and Tom laughing, and now the ship loomed above them. She looked up into the bright sky against which a million spinning worlds were forever anchored. The solid, steel-riveted, eternal sky. She looked at the space ship and laughed.

Hello, you. Be a good monster and take us out to Mars.