

Ponty Bayswater

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Ponty Bayswater was ninety-one when he finally changed his name. Christened “Pontius”—an old Alabama family name on his mother’s side—all his long life he had dodged the blows and taunts of playground bullies, dolled-up teenage girls who wouldn’t get near him, and business colleagues who assumed he had some “in” with a Christ-bashing mission. It didn’t help that he was half-Jewish.

Bayswater was the family name his father took instead of Brenowitz when he immigrated through New Orleans in 1898—the name had been printed on the side of a cracked and giant crate being dumped off on the harbor-side of an ocean liner, which was then left behind. His father claimed the name. It figured. His Alabama legacy was a cracked and abandoned crate.

At age seven he coined the nickname “Ponty” and would refuse to tell its origin until some little ape outed him for the Christ-hater he would inevitably be accused of being.

His teachers were of no help. Stuck deep in the belly of the Bible Belt, they most often looked at him askew and then shuttled away any mouthy children who were bellowing out the brainwashing of their small-minded parents.

“Jew-boy!” “Christ-killer!” “Pontius goes to hell!”

Never mind that Pontius Pilate was a Roman, Ponty thought; never mind that it was the Romans, not the Jews, who really pulled the trigger on that cross-hanging thing—a verdict as sinister as any he had ever heard. And what the hell did *he* have to do with it anyway, he wanted to know?

But in Alabama in 1929, accurate history was just a lot of side-chatter. Doctrine mattered, and where you fell on the line between Christ Jesus and the town’s loyalties to that martyr determined the treatment you’d receive from even the lowliest of the town residents.

Ponty learned to hate Alabamans for their “idiocy,” as he dubbed it, and became a precocious and prolific reader of history

books, a combatant of all manner of inaccurate attributing.

“Accuracy matters,” his mother would say to him after he had narrowly escaped another attack by the “trolls,” as he called them—bullies from his third grade class who regularly attempted to beat him up on the footbridge which led to his neighborhood.

“You are not a Christ-killer because your name is Pontius,” his mother intoned rather stiffly.

“I know that, Mama,” he would sigh, “but can’t we *please* change my name?”

“We do not give in to *ignorance*, Pontius,” she would retort.

By the time he was ten, he could refute any nastiness with a quick verbal jab that left his accusers stunned just long enough for him to run as fast as his asthmatic lungs would carry him.

“You’re parents are *Huguenots!!*” he would shout at his fifth-grade attackers, freezing them in their tracks with their ignorance of the word just long enough for him to backpedal and beat a path back off the footbridge, down into the riverbed under the heavy brush. He often came home wet.

For his entire twelfth year he refused to go outside after school, preferring instead the company of his loopy Aunt Violet, a former schoolteacher who lived with his family, never forgot a date, and could tell him the dirt on any historical character who ever lived.

“They’re all dead anyway,” she’d say squeezing out a steaming orange pekoe tea bag into her cup and swearing as she burned her fingers, “So who gives a good God-damn if I gossip about them?”

Ponty loved it that she swore, that she said “shit” and “piss” and even “fuck” from time to time.

She’d look down over her glasses and with a nicotine bark in her voice say, “Don’t tell your father, Ponty. He doesn’t like me anyway and profanity will not help my cause.” She was the only one in the family who called him by his chosen nickname.

Ponty loved her. He basked in her tales of King Henry’s affairs, Marie Antoinette’s sex life, and of some obscure nobleman whose wife had come to him and told him that she was in love with another

man, and they had all three lived together as lovers for the rest of their lives.

He hungered for her stories of outsiders, too; people who were ostracized in their home towns but who made good by leaving forever. He loved tales of people who invented things: engines, planes, the discovery that the earth was round and not flat. It was even better if the protagonist had suffered ridicule or had been put in prison for telling the truth. Galileo, the Wright brothers—Orville and Wilbur—and Leonardo di Vinci were some of his favorites.

His aunt told him that Leonardo was a homosexual. Ponty hadn't even known what that was, or that it existed.

"Men can have relations, Ponty," she insisted, looking unabashedly into his eyes.

Ponty was stunned. He asked how it worked.

"Think, boy!" she said. "What would feel good to you?"

She was the one who told him about sex—the actual mechanics of it. "We'll just get down to business, and talk the real truth of the thing, shall we? No *euphemisms*," she'd say. "I *hate* euphemisms."

She had explained to him the varieties of how women's bodies worked, how men and women worked together—not just the biology; but the how-to prowess of being a good lover, too—and then, also, the inner workings of homosexuality.

It was an education he appreciated—facts and tactics he was sure the sad little trolls in his school would never get, and it made him feel just superior enough to get through the blockhead-infested school day, then propelled him home, rushing to prod and query Aunt Violet some more.

Ponty had his first love affair at the age of eighteen, just when the U.S. entered the Second World War and he was about to be shipped off to the Philippines. Five weeks before he was scheduled to board the *USS Alabama*, a WASP of a girl named Juliette Whitaker had planted her body between him and the men's room at Jasper's Supper Club, and then landed a big, sloppy, wet kiss on his lips.

"I'm gonna marry you, Ponty Bayswater," she drawled.

"No, you're not, Juliette—you're just drunk," he said, throwing an arm under her collapsing frame. He had liked Juliette; had admired her, too. But he hadn't thought much beyond that. Her parents were the high and mighty type—everybody knew that—and he was certain they thought well-enough of themselves and their bloodline that they wouldn't want their only daughter gallivanting around with a half-Jewish young man.

Juliette stumbled towards him.

"Nope. Ponty. You're—*uh-oh*," she said, tripping over the heel of her shoe, "—you're *myyyyyy*—man. *Always* wanted you." Her head took an intoxicated roll towards his shoulder and then plopped there, with a rather hard thump. "Just had to get drunk enough to say it."

It landed on him like a bag of coal to the head. She meant it.

Ponty did not think of himself as handsome. He was thick-built, on the short side, and masculine enough, certainly, with a warm-colored brown head of hair, and bulky forearms. Juliette was an inch taller than he was, even in the flats she wore, and the fact that she had never cut her chestnut hair into the overly swept-up, curling-ironed styles of the era charmed him. She wore her hair parted on the side and flowing to her shoulders, and she was shapely besides—small breasts, flat belly in cinched-waist cotton dresses, and lovely gams peeking out under her skirts.

Ponty walked her home, and waited on the sidewalk while she wobbled up the front stoop.

"Bye-bye, Ponty!" she drawled, not turning, but waving her fingers at him from the side of her curvaceous hip.

The next day he came to call, stood on her front porch while she faced him through the screen door—she was standing much too close; almost within kissing distance—and asked her to go for a walk with him on the green.

"I would love *nothing more*, Ponty," she whispered through the tight metal grate of the screen. He could feel her breath on his cheek

as she spoke.

Her mother sat still and tight-lipped in the front room as Juliette walked out, and Ponty got a good glimpse of the woman's expression as he held the door and balanced the screened-in. Her mother didn't get up to say hello and Ponty didn't go in.

"You sure you want to do this?" he nodded his head toward her mother and then looked Juliette in the eye.

"Wanted to *forever*," she said, and then leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. Ponty let the screen door slam good and loud and turned to escort Juliette down the steps.

Two days later they were making love in the grass next to Siber's Creek, and Ponty was taking his time exploring her every crevice.

"Well, Ponty Bayswater!" she said, laughing into his armpit, "who would've thought that you'd be such a Casanova!"

He spent two hours delivering as much pleasure to Juliette as he could muster, never entering her. Her breath came hard again, and she panted into his ear, "Where did you learn to...?"

"My aunt..." he said as his tongue found her earlobe.

Juliette pushed him back and sat straight up, almost jumping. "You mean *she*—and *you*—"

Ponty laughed out loud—a big, hearty guffaw. "No, no, *no*! Juliette, she *told* me how to touch a woman..."

"Isn't that a little...inappropriate?" Juliette sniffed, trying to regain her composure.

Ponty smiled a sweet smile. "Do you like it, Juliette? You tell me the truth now..."

She smiled back, looked down at her naked body, and then blushed bright red.

Ponty began kissing her belly. "Then we'll just have to pay a visit to my Aunt Violet and tell her thank you, now won't we?"

Ponty boarded the *USS Alabama* five weeks later without "jumping on the pre-combat matrimonial bandwagon," as he called

it—much to the chagrin of Juliette.

“But what if you die?” she sniffed, her big eyes filling up watery and red-rimmed.

“All the more reason you shouldn’t sit around waiting for me,” Ponty said stoically.

“I know you love me Ponty Bayswater,” she pleaded. “I can see it in your eyes.”

He took her by the shoulders and pulled her whole, slim frame close to him, her face just inches from his. “Juliette Whitaker. I love you and if I come home whole and safe I will you marry you that same day. I promise.” He kissed her hard on the mouth, pulled her into his chest, and then swung his duffle over his left shoulder and didn’t look back.

A week later Juliette packed her bags and moved into Ponty’s parents’ house. She knocked at the front screen, and red-faced and sweating from the humid heat, said to Ponty’s mother, “I’m going to marry your son when he comes back, and I need a place to live.”

“Let her in Maxine!” Aunt Violet yelled to Ponty’s mother from the parlor.

Ponty’s mother cracked the screen door open, but Aunt Violet was suddenly right behind her and reached in and pulled it wide.

“Your mama threw you out? Over Ponty?” Aunt Violet said pointedly.

“Mmm-hmm,” Juliette sniffled. Her eyes were wet.

“People do the most *asinine* things, Maxine!” Violet said to Ponty’s mother. She placed both of her hands on Juliette’s shoulders and looked her straight in the eyes. “You’re *family* now. You stay here as long as you like, you hear me?”

Juliette got a job at the peanut-processing factory, working part-time on the line, and volunteered for the Red Cross making bandages for the war effort. She thought about Ponty every day, wrote to him weekly, and though she got on fine with Ponty’s parents, her preference was the kind and bawdy company of Aunt Violet.

Aunt Violet told her stories of Ponty's childhood: how he used to carry a fish or two in his pockets after spending the afternoon at the river with his fishing rod; how his hair changed color from sandy to auburn to dark brown as he grew; how he ate fried egg sandwiches on white bread every day of his eleventh year.

She told Juliette how she had kept a post office box for Ponty when he was sixteen, so he could mail-order bawdy and Alabama-banned novels.

"Old Florence down at the post would get all huffy every time she'd see me pull one of those books outa Ponty's box. I'd rip open the brown paper, standing right there, lookin' dead-on at that scrunched up face of hers and ask her how her *Sunday School* teaching was shaping up. Laughed all the way home every time!"

Juliette adored Aunt Violet, and yearned to tell her all of the secrets of Ponty's sexual charms. One day she blurted out, "Thank you for teaching him the way to—" Juliette ducked her head and blushed, unable to choke out the rest.

"Look me in the eye, dearie," Violet said, pulling Juliette's chin up level. "No woman should ever have to apologize for taking pleasure from the man she loves."

"I *do* love him, Aunt Violet," Juliette said.

"Then that's just that," Violet said, grinning at her.

From then on, the two women sat upstairs each evening in the sticky heat of the screened-in porch or the chill of the winter rains, talking about all manner of intimacies.

"Practice on yourself, young lady," Violet would say in her pointed and gravelly voice, puffing on a cigarette, and Juliette would giggle, half-trying to hush her on the porch as neighbors strolled by on the street below.

But each day after work, Juliette would go upstairs into her small room and practice, as instructed by Aunt Violet, as best she could. She was delighted to discover that she was not at all rigid or reserved. No. She was hungry and curious for every variety of private pleasure that

her own mother would never, ever have given vent to, let alone have participated in or shared.

One night, sitting on the porch after dinner, Juliette felt herself drifting off, staring at Aunt Violet with a sadness welling up in her chest.

“At least three times a week then, honey,” Violet was saying. “Keeps the desire fresh and the libido in check.”

“Aunt Violet—” Juliette ventured tentatively. “Don’t you ever want to—*you* know—have a *man* again?”

Violet took a sharp breath in and quickly looked away.

“I mean,” Juliette stammered, “you of all people—of all *women*—should have a—”

“I’m too ol—”

“No, you’re not!” Juliette sat up straight in her chair and leaned in. “You tell me all the time to stay *interested* in my own desire—”

Violet turned and looked Juliette in the eye. Her face had gone soft, almost vulnerable. “Edward was my third and I loved him best. I had him for a good long time, and when he went, I knew I couldn’t stand to have a fourth one die on me. So now I tell tales and I don’t do the act.”

“You miss it though?” Juliette asked, angling her face in Aunt Violet’s direction.

Violet winked at her. “I know how to take care of myself, dearie. And don’t think I don’t.”

By the time Ponty returned three-and-a-half years later, Juliette had had a thorough and unabashed sexual education.

On the day his ship arrived home, Juliette waited on the pier with his mother, his father and Aunt Violet, standing just near the ropes of the gangplank. Ponty came down the ramp, shook his father’s hand, kissed and hugged his mother, lifted Aunt Violet in the air, and then placed both hands on Juliette’s shoulders, just as he had on the same day he had left. He kissed her tenderly on the

lips, and without a word, took her hand and walked her through the crowds until he found a justice of the peace. He married her that day, just as he had promised.

Ponty and Juliette lived with his parents and Aunt Violet for twelve months, and the whole house hummed and buzzed with the electricity of their loving. It was impossible not to feel it. Aunt Violet gloated, as proud as punch—and since it had been her instruction, after all, that created their sexual happiness, Ponty and Juliette felt she was entitled to it. When Juliette became pregnant, the young couple moved out into a little yellow bungalow apartment with a trimmed green lawn, just a few miles away.

Ponty was a good husband, and after a several years, an ample provider, and a doting but firm father. Juliette was an easygoing mother with a delighted and realistic approach to raising her children, an organized homemaker, and active in all manner of secular volunteerism. They were happy.

They had three children, two boys and one girl, and named them, at Ponty's insistence, "normal American names." Terence, Daniel and Ellen would never have to fight off the "trolls" in their third grade class because of their names.

Ponty became an insurance man, and though not a salesman by nature—it never ceased to amaze him how the introduction of his full name could bring a quick and sometimes fierce revulsion in people—his easy wit drew him many appreciative clients.

After the war, his Alabama neighbors were chagrined enough by the travesty of the holocaust—as was the nation, at least in the places where those horrors were admitted to—that the combination of Ponty's half-Jewishness and his Christ-killing first name were rather overlooked. Fewer neighbors balked at his and Juliette's "interracial" marriage, and they were even offered dinner invitations from regular church-goers.

When the subject of Christ, God or religion came up at one of these dinners—particularly when it became clear that Juliette and

Ponty had no intention of subjecting themselves or their children to doctrines of any stripe—he would say something pithy in a merry tone like, “Y’all go on ahead and brainwash those kids however you like. We’re stayin’ out of the pool,” or, “The only church or temple we need is the one in our bedroom.”

They were tolerated as the “funny” couple, the off-beats in a sea of the homogenized up-and-coming Alabama middle class, the “we-have-friends-who-are-Jewish-so-we-can’t-be-anti-semitic” token dinner guests.

Though Juliette’s parents, Mavis and Joseph, never got over the shock of her marriage and subsequent willingness to have children by Ponty—especially with regard to their lack of a Christian christening—they grudgingly came to enjoy Ponty’s witty company on holidays and family birthdays. Joe, Juliette’s father, could not form the sounds of Ponty’s name without wrinkling up his face in a distasteful and disgusted way, and took to calling him “Son,” much to Juliette’s delight.

Aunt Violet began to falter the year Ponty turned forty-five—just five months after his father had died and his mother Maxine was recovering from long-term pneumonia. Ponty and Juliette moved Aunt Violet in with them without so much as a hiccup of hesitation.

“Ponty, leave me be!” she hollered as he lifted her into his paneled station wagon the day he came to get her. “I’m a banged-up old wash-basin of a woman, and I’m gonna kick the bucket as soon as—”

“Hush now!” Ponty interrupted. “If it weren’t for you I wouldn’t have Juliette, or my kids either.”

“I’m not going to be of any use!” she protested, flailing her hands at him.

He dropped her in place on the red leather front seat. “You’ve already been all the use you need to be! Now you’re comin’ with me, you mouthy old broad, and that’s the end of it!”

He kissed her on the cheek and she smiled broadly, wrinkles crackling across her thin face.

When Terence, their oldest, asked, “How come Aunt Violet lives with us and not your mama?” Ponty answered, “Because Mama doesn’t want to, and Aunt Violet cared enough about me to teach me how to love.”

When Aunt Violet died two years later, Ponty and Juliette wept bitterly. At the gravesite, Ellie, age eleven, turned to Juliette and asked, “Did she teach you how to love too, Mama?”

Juliette’s eyes went wide, and hot tears fell down her cheeks. “She did, my love. She absolutely did.”

Several days after Aunt Violet’s death, Juliette came upon Ponty hunched over on the stairs of their front porch with his face in his hands. His hair was thinning, and his sides had become a bit fleshy. She touched him lightly on the neck, her fingers barely brushing the suntanned skin at his collar-line.

“You miss her, don’t you Pont?” She said, gently lowering herself onto the stair next to him.

He pulled her into his chest and kissed the top of her head. “Terribly, my love,” he whispered. “I miss her terribly.”

Ponty and Juliette lived another thirty years together “without a hitch,” Ponty liked to say. Their desire for each other never diminished, and their friends and children took to calling them “The Romantics.”

Even after their children had grown up and moved out, they still kissed in public. They held hands whenever they walked anywhere together, and always when they walked on the green. Juliette sat on his lap at picnics, and Ponty still asked her to dress up and took her out for cocktails each weekend, like a first date. In bed, they continued to explore and laugh and please each other.

As happy as he was, Ponty thought being called “The Romantics” was hogwash. Aunt Violet would have set them all straight, though, barking out some raspy-voiced remark, like, “‘Romantic’—ha! *Euphemism!* It’s *sex* between the two of them! They *please* each

other and they both like it—*that's* what you're seeing!"

Because of Aunt Violet, all of their long life their intimacy had come easily. Ponty could twinkle his eyes at Juliette from across a room, even in the middle of a party, and she would know that he wanted her. Juliette could slide her hands over her hips and lift her breasts ever so slightly at dinner, and he would feel her arousal. Age, wrinkles, spots on the skin—nothing diminished their wanting. They held tightly to each other for more than fifty years.

When Juliette died, Ponty was seventy-six. He grieved slowly and patiently, refusing the company of all except his children and grandchildren. He had had a full life with Juliette, and his gratefulness filled him. Each morning he got down on his knees and talked to her—speaking out loud the things he planned to do that day; the things he felt; how he missed her.

"Your daffodils are coming up again," he'd say, swaying just a bit as he spoke, "and you're going to have a lovely patch of strawberries this season."

He dreamed of her; he could feel her near him daily. He felt, now, in her death, that she was next to him always, in an invisible way, something he could not express or explain in words.

After she had been gone for a year, he cleaned out her clothes and personal objects, saving from the Goodwill pile several articles of her cocktail-wear and lingerie that had always aroused him, even after years of being together. He did it alone, and cried through the days until the task was done.

He found things she had hidden in small boxes—a note from 1945, just when he had returned from the war which read, "P.—My one and only. Love, J." in her handwriting, and his own answer, scrawled on the bottom, reading, "Dearest J.—I 'll never, ever be away from you again. Your P."

He found a sock filled with trinkets he had bought for her—junk jewelry in chipping bright red plastic that, in a flush to his chest, brought back a hot, sticky night they had made love in the dark behind a lean-to at the county fair.

In her underwear drawer, he found something that caught his breath in his heart—a tiny journal of Juliette’s in small, almost illegible scrawl, with notes from Aunt Violet on how to pleasure herself, and then how to show him how to do the same for her. He sat with the journal for three days, and when he had finished reading, he went to the cemetery and covered his wife’s and his aunt’s grave-stones with pink lilies and yellow daffodils.

One morning as he was cleaning out the back of their closet, he found a wooden keepsake box full of old photos—his own from years ago, almost forgotten—then lifted them out and set them on the bed.

There was a black-and-white photograph of Juliette as a young woman in a smart, grey, 1940’s-style suit with dark piping, and another of her in a see-through black gown, well into her years. There was a snapshot of himself on his parent’s front porch in 1941 with broad white borders on the Kodak paper, one that he had given her when he left for the war, which she had covered with lipstick prints.

His eyes lighted on a small upside-down snapshot at the bottom of the box with writing on the back that he recognized. George Chesapeake, from his Navy war days, smiled broadly out from the black-and-white, his arms wrapped around Ponty’s shoulders from behind, leaning in. Ponty was laughing in the shot, holding a glass of beer and looking up at the camera with joy in his eyes. George’s writing on the back read: “Anything you ever need—I’ll be there. Love, George.”

George had come from the Tennessee Valley and was a year younger than Ponty. On their first day aboard ship, George came right up behind him and dumped a bucket of ice water over his head and said, “Welcome to the *USS Alabama*.” Ponty howled with laughter, and they quickly became inseparable friends.

Full of wit and both pranksters, their troublemaking was bombastically punished and hugely appreciated as an antidote to perilous

combat missions. Finding his chair glued to the floor, or his file cabinets filled with sand, or his desk flipped upside down, their Lt. Commander would scream, “Chesapeake-Bay! You two get in here!”

It took two months to find George, looking through Tennessee phone books at the library and calling long-distance. When Ponty finally got him on the phone, he said, “George? George Chesapeake?” The hopefulness in his voice surprised him.

“It’s me, Ponty.” George said warmly. “Long time. You’re feeling well?”

“Juliette died, George—year ago now.” Ponty was quiet for a long moment.

“So sorry, Ponty,” George said softly. And then, steadily, “Should I come?”

“You’re on your own now?” Ponty queried.

George sighed. “Yeah, I am.”

Ponty’s eyes went wet and watery. “Why don’t you come then?”

That night Ponty went into his and Juliette’s walk-in closet and stood still for a long time. It had been the right thing to do to clean out her things—surely it had been—but now it made him feel empty.

He had spent many lingering moments in their closet over the years, when he knew his wife was elsewhere, ensconced in the scent of her and surrounded by the femininity of her clothing. He loved fingering the fabrics of her cocktail dresses and the see-through things he had bought for her. He loved to pick up her high heels and even smell the sweet-and-sour scent of her sweat in them after a night out dancing.

He had had an intimate relationship with her things as well as her person: a dress, a blouse, a stocking, or a *negligée* recounted for a him a precious moment of intimacy, his kisses moving down her belly, her hand sliding up his inner thigh, places and positions and nights they had gone at it so hard they made the four-poster move across the floor.

“God, how I miss you,” he breathed into one of his now keepsake objects—a sheer red nightgown.

Later, he lay awake in his bed for a long time, closing his eyes and pretending that Juliette was lying next to him. For the entire year since she had died, he had filled her side of the bed with pillows, so that if he woke in the night he would not feel the emptiness of her missing body. On this night, though, he left the pillows on the arm chair, and reached out into the dark to feel the still-indented place where she used to lie. It filled him with longing to try to feel her, to remember his hands reaching around her hips in the darkness, to feel her open her body to him easily and automatically, ready for pleasure, even when she was half-asleep.

The morning George was to arrive, Ponty sat upright in his bedroom armchair staring at the bed. He tried to remember his time with George—not generally, but in detail. It had taken fifteen months of Navy shenanigans and side-by-side combat for Ponty and George to consummate what had begun as simple camaraderie, but what had grown into a genuine and pressing attraction.

“No.” Ponty said out loud. “*Euphemism*. It was more than ‘attraction.’ I loved the man.”

What had made them do it? Was it the daily shelling—the very real possibility of death banging on his heart at every single hour? Was it knowing that he could lose his life at any moment of the day or night and might never love Juliette or anyone else again? Was it Aunt Violet’s ability to make him feel that exploration was just fine, even between men?

He did not believe that his wife had suffered at his hands. He had given all of his love to her—warmly and with genuine affection. He had had a ferocious passion for her, had made her happy and been made happy in return. He had not held back and had not held a torch for anyone else—not even George.

He heard Aunt Violet in his head saying, “Ponty Bayswater, you are not a betrayer. *Screw* that namesake! You are honest and good

and true. And you love who you love.”

Could he now, at the age of seventy-seven, begin again—*all* over again—and live a completely different life?

When George’s cab arrived, he got out of it carrying two small suitcases. He took a long time walking up the path and set them down on one end of the wide porch. George had been stocky and well-built, with trimmed blond hair atop a wide-jawed face, punctuated by shimmering green eyes and a sly smile. Now his hair was white and thinned with a bare dome on top, and his once-thick thighs were spindly. But his eyes still shone.

Ponty stood in the doorway watching his old friend, and then propped the screen door and reached out for George’s hand. A palm-zapper toy which George had hidden in his hand gave Ponty a small shock, and they both bellowed with laughter.

“Chesapeake, you old son-of-a-gun! You’re still the same.” Ponty moved in to hug him. “Kept that smirk, I see.”

George’s eyes welled up. He breathed in hard. “Ain’t going to be easy now, Ponty,” he said seriously, moving back to get a look at his old friend’s face. “Both been married. Both have kids—and grand-kids.”

“Know that, George.” Ponty wiped his brow with the back of his hand. “Waddaya say we just do our level best from here on out?”

Ponty moved George into Terence’s old room so he had a place to set up his personal things, but they both slept in the master bedroom, in the bed that he had slept in with Juliette until she died. They set up house rather simply—retirement meant plenty of time for reading and making meals and taking in a movie.

The neighbors queried, but all Ponty would say was that an old war buddy had come to stay—joking that his house was a “bachelor pad” now and they would “live like slobs and be damn happy about it.” No one pressed him any further.

George was quick to laugh and had a relaxed demeanor, and Ponty found his company joyful and comforting. In bed, they joked

around at first to get comfortable—lots of wisecracks about not knowing where to put things, and body parts that seemed to have meandered off their usual path—but very quickly they settled into an easy intimacy, much like the first time they had been lovers on the ship, fifty years before.

Even more than sex, Ponty found it relaxing to his heart to wake up and find George in bed next to him.

After several months of living with George, Ponty decided to sit each one of his adult children down and tell them about him. He wanted to do it in person, not on the telephone, to help avoid misunderstandings. He drove across Alabama, and then all the way to Atlanta, visiting each of his kids in turn. Terence took it best; Daniel, not so well; and Ellie not well at all.

Daniel asked him if he had ever really loved his mother at all, and Ellie assumed he'd been a homosexual all his life and had just hidden it from his children and his wife.

"You're betraying her!" Ellie yelled over her kitchen table. "It's almost as if your name—"

"Easy, babe," Ellie's husband Bruce had put a firm hand on her arm to stop her. "It's his life."

He knew what had been coming next: Pontius-the-killer, Pontius-the-betrayer—the references he had long lived with, the prejudice and the recrimination—the association with a man of no principles that had sentenced the betrayed. And it had almost been uttered by his own daughter, whom he loved with all his heart. It hurt terribly.

"They'll come around," George said on the phone when Ponty called from the road. "Let 'em get over the shock and then we'll see."

"How'd it go with yours?" Ponty asked, exhausted.

"Same, same," George choked out a laugh. "My daughter wants to know if we'll be wearing leather at Thanksgiving."

"Ah, George," Ponty chuckled. "Always made me laugh. Even in combat."

"This is combat," George said. "A fight for our freedom, Ponty."

At home, Ponty took George up to the cemetery to visit Juliette's and Aunt Violet's gravesites. He walked across a bright green lawn with flat plaques in metal or stone placed equidistant, embedded into the uncut grass. Ponty moved from one marker to another orienting himself and searching for his loved ones. Grey clouds began to move in along the horizon line and the sun began to set in brightly pink hues behind them.

"Aha! There you are!" he stepped over several metal markers to Juliette's. The plaque read, "Juliette Bayswater, 1921 – 1997. Devoted Wife and Mother. May the Happiness You Gave Be With You Forever."

George stood back as Ponty bent down low to talk to her, hushed and quiet. After several minutes he got up slowly and began to walk again, searching the markers once more.

"How come you don't visit your folks' sites?" George asked, trailing behind.

"Do. Once a year—watch your feet," Ponty said, marching through the too-tall tufts of grass toward Aunt Violet's headstone. "Visit the two who loved me the most once a month, though."

When he found Aunt Violet's headstone, Ponty gingerly eased himself down on his knees onto the grass and began to whisper again.

"What you sayin', Ponty?" George asked him. "I'd very much like to know."

Ponty turned on his left hip and looked up at George. The wind was lightly blowing, and the sky had turned a beautiful grey-and-watery-blue with gold tinges just above the clouds at the sunset line. George's face was backlit from behind, his thin hair sparkling.

"George, I was just telling her that I love a man now, after I've fully loved a woman."

George tugged on his right ear lobe. He looked down at Ponty on the grass. "And what'd she say to that?"

Ponty smiled. "She said, 'No man should ever have to apologize

for taking pleasure from the man he loves—even if he’s already loved a woman.’ ”

George wrinkled his nose and turned up the corners of his mouth in a sly smile. “That sounds right to me,” he said.

George had been right: his and Ponty’s children did come

around, and by their second Thanksgiving the whole family gathered at their house for the holiday—George’s two children and five grand-kids, and Ponty’s three and six grandchildren.

The morning after Thanksgiving Day, Ponty sat across the kitchen table from Ellie, his daughter, drinking herbal tea.

“Ow! Damn it!” Ellie squeezed the just-boiled bag, burning her fingers on it. Ponty laughed out loud.

“You’re laughing at my pain, Dad?” Ellie said.

He chuckled. “Just remembering how Aunt Violet used to burn her fingers on her orange pekoe and swear like a sailor. That was just before she told me how to sleep with a man.”

“So it’s her fault,” Ellie smiled and put her fingers on the back of her father’s hand.

“You could say that, Ellie. You truthfully could.” He stared down at his daughter’s fingertips touching his own veiny and purplish flesh.

“How did I get so old? Wasn’t it just yesterday I got off a ship and married your mother? And just a week ago you were a tiny little thing...”

Ellie looked into her father’s eyes. “I’m glad you have someone, Dad. I really am.”

Ponty flushed with warmth, and tears sprang up under his wrinkled eyelids. “I loved your mother with every ounce of breath I had, Ellie. I miss her every day. You know that, don’t you?” He turned his hand over and grabbed his daughter’s fingers tightly.

“I do, Dad.” She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. “I honestly do.”

Ponty turned ninety-one the month that he and George celebrated their fourteenth anniversary. His grandson Jake stayed with them all summer long, and he and George sat up every night with him on Violet's favorite couch after dinner, available, in her old tradition, for questions about love and sex.

"Truth, Jake," Ponty would say, rocking his legs against a wooden chair propped in front of the couch, "That's what we're here to tell you about. No *euphemisms*—just say it like it is."

"Grandpa..." Jake would begin. "What if the girl wants to sleep with me and another guy too?"

"Hmmm. Well, let's see," Ponty would rock his feet back and forth against the chair, and say, "First off—do you love her? 'Cause if you do, then that's a whole can of worms by itself. I loved your grandmother and once she was gone I loved George. Never wanted to share her—or him."

"One at a time, son, I say," George said. "Key to happiness."

Their children and grandchildren threw them a small dinner for Ponty's birthday. After it was over and he and George had settled into bed for the night, George turned to him and said, "A full life, Mr. Bayswater. You're a lucky dog."

"There's still one thing..." Ponty said, pressing his lips together and rolling over gingerly on his forearm to squint at George.

"What's that, Pont? Skydiving? Twenty-mile marathon? Harem?" Ponty jabbed at George's side, upsetting his own balance on his arm, then falling onto his pillow.

"Easy there..." George chuckled.

"Nope, not a one of those things," Ponty said, staring at him with a steady gaze, righting himself. Then, in a determined tone, he said, "George, I want to change my name. I'm all through being that man's whipping post. I'm ninety-one and I want the name I chose on my gravestone."

The next day Ponty and George called a cab and went down to the county clerk's office, stood in line, and asked for the forms. When

he had filled out his name, address, and social security number, and when all of the other attendant lines and boxes were filled in, Ponty paused, looked at George, and said, “Here we go. Should’ve done this a long time ago.”

“Never too late—we’re still a-kickin’,” George said, adopting a John Wayne swagger and faking a gunslinger’s shots.

Ponty laughed, and then filled out the last two lines. Under “previous name” he scribbled in “Pontius;” and under “new name” he wrote, in delicate print, “Ponty.” George took out his old, leather-encased camera and took a picture of the page, even though the clerk said that they could have their own copy.

Ponty sent out announcement cards to all of his family members and several friends who were still living. They read: “Pontius no more. It’s legal. Love, Ponty.”

Three nights later Ponty awoke shortly after 3:00 am and opened his eyes. He could feel George’s heavy breath on his back, and he was sweating, overheated by the too-thick comforter. There, at the end of the bed, was Juliette. She stood, clear as day, in her smart 1940’s suit with the dark piping, and she was angry with him.

“Ponty,” she said. “I’m waiting, and I don’t *want* to wait.” She crossed her arms and her eyes went wide with irritation.

“Juliette—” he cried out, reaching a hand towards her apologetically. “I’m sorry—I—I...George is—”

“No, no—none of that Ponty Bayswater. George is a good man. But Aunt Violet and I are here—we’re *waiting* for you...”

“Juliette—I—I—” Tears ran quickly down his cheeks.

George sat up and put his open palm on Ponty’s back and calmed him, waiting.

“You saw her then?” George said steadily. He reached for Ponty’s left hand and held it tightly.

“Yes. She was right there.” Ponty pointed, looking confused.

“Then I guess it’s time, Pont,” George said solemnly. “If Juliette’s a-callin’.”

Ponty lived another two weeks, began to lose his sight, and had time to say his goodbyes. George helped him make phone calls and write short notes to his children and grandchildren, telling them how much he loved them. He died in George's arms on a spring morning on the same date that he had returned from the war, the same date he had married Juliette.

He had awakened just after six in the morning that day, turned to George and with a heavy rasp in his voice said, "No one should ever have to apologize for loving who they love, George, and I love you, just like I loved Juliette."

"Shall we say a little thank you to Aunt Violet?" George said, reaching an arm under Ponty's frail frame.

"You betcha, George—let's," he whispered, and then he closed his eyes.

