

Intro



Jana Nikolić

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THOUGH brilliantly sunny, Saturday morning was overcoat weather again, not just topcoat weather, as it has been all week and as everyone had hoped it would stay for the big weekend—the weekend of the Yale game.

> Of twenty-some young men who were waiting at the station for their dates to arrive on ten-fifty-two, no more than six or seven were out on the cold, open platform.

< The rest were standing around in hatless, smoky little groups of twos and threes and fours inside the heated waiting room, talking in voices that, almost with exception, sounded collegiately dogmatic, as though each young man, in his strident, conversational turn, was clearing up, once and for all, some highly controversial issue, one that the outside, nonmatriculating world had been bungling, provocatively or not, for centuries.

§ Lane Coutell
in a Burberry raincoat
that apparently had a wool liner buttoned into it,
was one of the six or seven boys
out on the open platform.

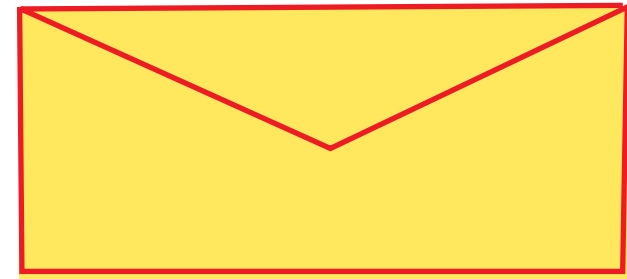
Or, rather, he was
and he wasn't
one of them.

For ten minutes or more, he had deliberately been standing just out of conversation range of other boys, his back against the free Christian Science literature rack, his ungloved hands in his coat pockets. He was wearing a maroon cashmere muffler which had hiked up on his neck, giving him next to no protection against the cold. Abruptly, and rather absently, he took his right hand out of his coat pocket and started to adjust the muffler, but before it was adjusted, he changed his mind and used the same hand to reach inside his coat and take out a letter from the inside pocket of his jacket. He began to read it immediately, with his mouth not quite closed.

The letter was

written—typewritten—on pale-blue notepaper. It had a handled, unfresh look, as if it had been taken out of its envelope and read several times before:

Tuesday I Think
Dearest Lane,



I have no idea if you will be able to decipher this as the noise in the dorm is absolutely incredible tonight and I can hardly hear myself think. So if I spell anything wrong kindly have kindness to overlook it. Incidentally I've taken your advice and resorted to the dictionary a lot lately, so if it cramps my style your to blame. Anyway I just got your beautiful letter and I love you to pieces, distraction, etc., and can hardly wait for the weekend. It's too bad about not being able to get me in Croft House, but I don't actually care where I stay as long as it's warm and no bugs and I see you occasionally, i.e. every single minute. I've been going i.e. crazy lately. I absolutely adore your letter, especially the part about Eliot. I think I'm beginning to look down on all poets except Sappho. I've been reading her like mad, and no vilgar ramarks, please. I may even do my term thing on her if I decide to go out for honors and if I can get the moron they assigned me as an advisor to let me. „Delicate Adonis is dying, Cytherea, what shall we do? Beat your breasts, maidens, and rend your tunics.' Isn't that marvelous? She keeps doing that, too. Do you love me? You didn't say once in your horrible letter. I hate you when your being hopelessly super-male ans retiscent (sp.?). Not really hate you but am constitutionally against strong, silent men. Not that you aren't strong but you know what I mean. It's getting so noisy in here I can hardly hear myself think. Anyway I love you and want to get this off special delivery so you can get it in plenty of time if I can find a stamp in this madhouse. I love you I love you I love you. Do you actually know I've only danced with you twice in eleven months? Not counting that time at the vanguard when you were so tight. I'll probably be hopelessly selfconscious. Incidentally I'll kill you if there's a receiving line at this thing. Till Saturday, my flower!!

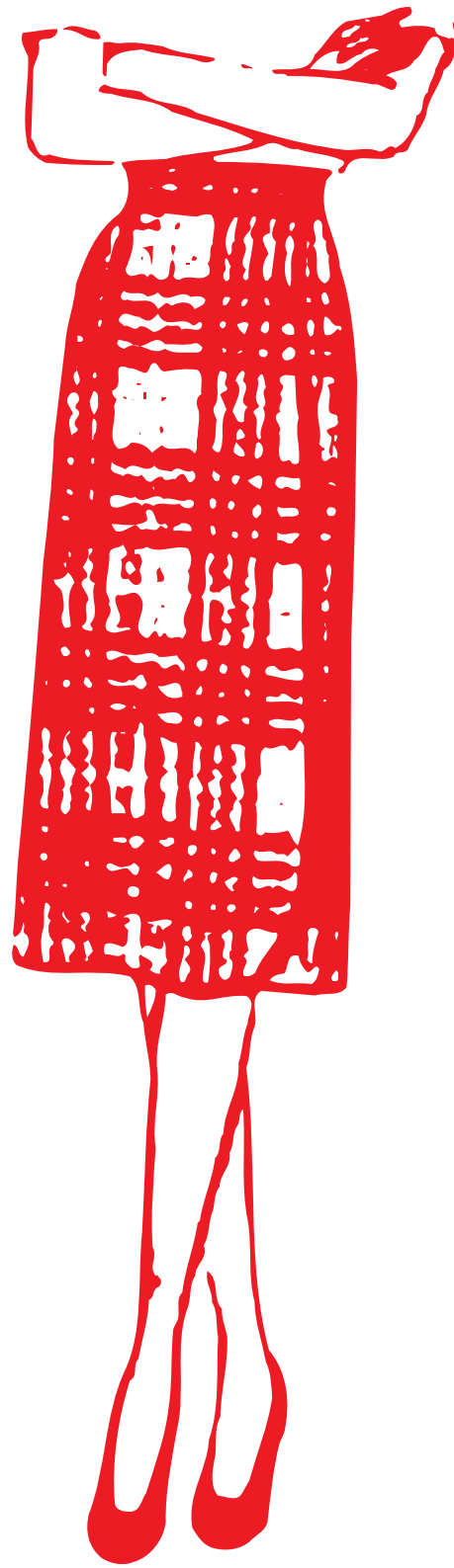
All my love,
Franny

P.S. Daddy got his X-rays back from the hospital and we're all so relieved. Its a growth but it isn't malignant. I spoke to Mother on the phone last night. Incidentally she sent her regards to you, so you can relax about that Friday night. I don't even think they heard us come in.

XXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXX

P.P.S. I sound so unintelligent and dimwitted when I write to you. Why? I give you my permission to analyze it. Let's just try to have a marvelous time this weekend. I mean not to try to analyze everything to death for once, if possible, especially me. I love you.

Frances (her mark)



Lane was about halfway through this particular reading of the letter when he was interrupted—

—intruded upon, trespassed upon—

by a burly-set young man named Ray Sorenson, who wanted to know if Lane knew what this bastard Rilke was all about. Lane



Sorenson were both in Modern European Literature 251 (open to seniors and graduate students only) and had been assigned the Fourth of Rilke's "Duino Elegies" for Monday. Lane, who knew Sorenson only slightly but had a vague, categorical aversion to his face and manner, put away his letter and said that he thought he'd understood most of it. "You're lucky," Sorenson said. "You're a fortunate man." His voice carried with a minimum of vitality, as though he had come over to speak to Lane out of boredom or restiveness, not for any sort of human discourse. "



Besides, the train was arriving.

BOTH BOYS TURNED A SORT OF HALF LEFT TO FACE THE INCOMING ENGINE. ALMOST AT THE SAME TIME, THE DOOR TO THE WAITING ROOM BANGED OPEN, AND THE BOYS WHO HAD BEEN KEEPING THEMSELVES WARM BEGAN TO COME OUT TO MEET THE TRAIN, MOST OF THEM GIVING THE IMPRESSION OF HAVING AT LEAST THREE LIGHTED CIGARETTES IN EACH HAND.

Lane himself lit a cigarette as the train pulled in. Then, like so many people, who, perhaps, ought to be issued only a very probational pass to meet the trains,

he tried to empty his face of all expressions that might quite simply, perhaps even beautifully, reveal how he felt about the arriving person. Franny was among the first of the girls to get off the train, from the car at the far,

northern end of the platform. Lane spotted her immediately, and despite whatever it was he was trying to do with his face, his arm that shot up into the air was the whole truth. Franny saw it, and him, and waved extravagantly back. She was wearing a sheared-raccoon coat, and Lane, walking toward her quickly but with a slow face, reasoned to himself, with suppressed excitement, that

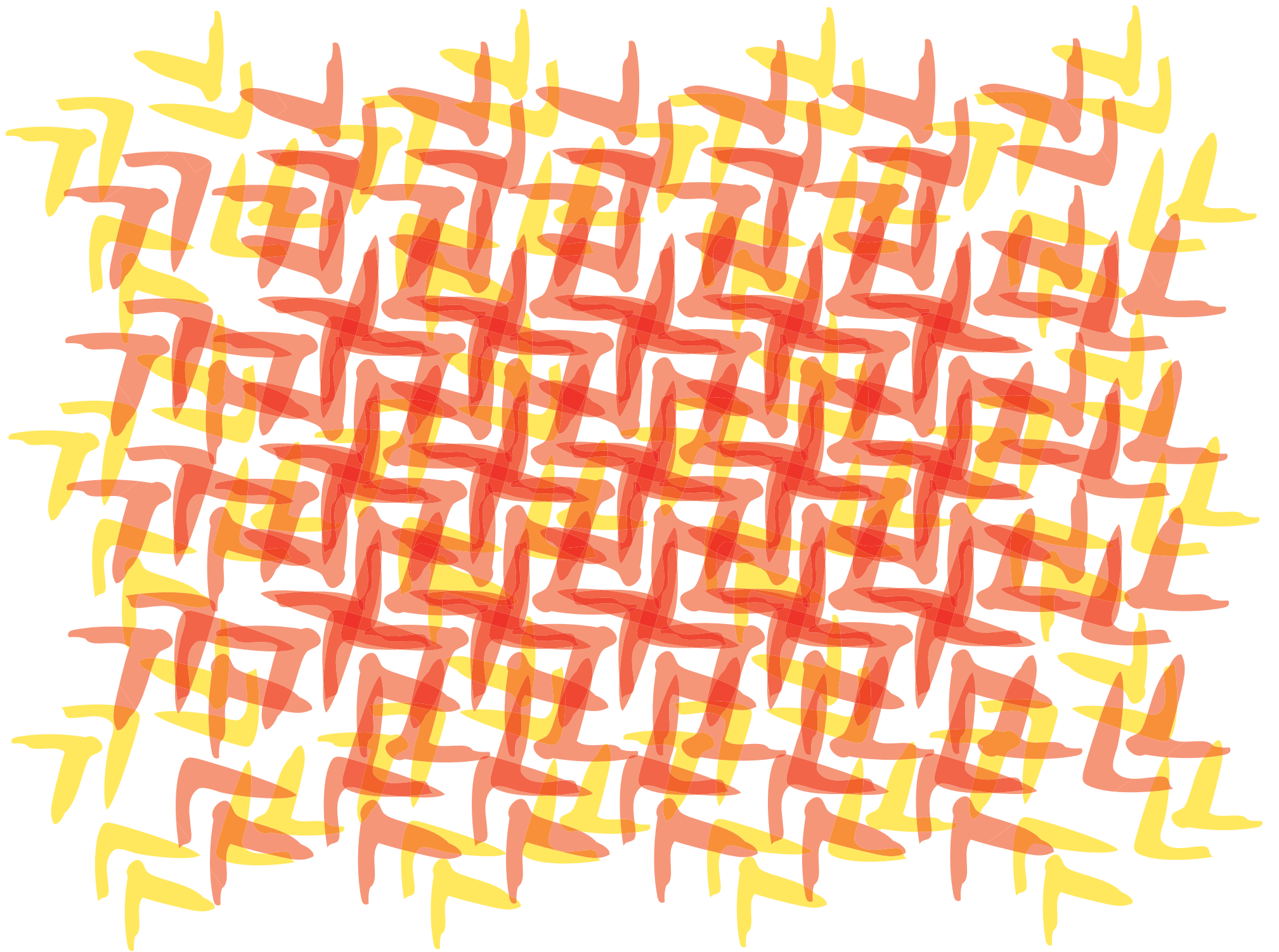
he was the only one on the platform who really knew Franny's coat. He remembered that once, in a borrowed car, after kissing Franny for half an hour or so, he had kissed her coat lapel, as though it were a perfectly desirable, organic extension of the person herself.

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"Lane!" Franny greeted him plesurably—and she was not one for emptying her face of expression. She threw her arms around him and kissed him. It was a station-platform kiss—spontaneous enough to begin with, but rather inhibited in the follow-through, and with somewhat of a forehead-bumping A S P E C T .

"Christ, it's cold," he said, and took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. Lane noticed a faded but distracting enough lipstick streak on the lapel of Sorenson's camel's-hair coat. It looked as though it had been there for weeks, maybe months, but he didn't know Sorenson well enough to mention it, nor, for that matter, did he give a damn.

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"Did you get my letter?" she asked, and added, almost in the same breath, "You look almost frozen, you poor man. Why didn't you wait inside? Did you get my letter?"

"Which letter?" Lane said, picking up her suitcase. It was navy blue with white leather binding, like half a dozen other suitcases that had just been carried off the train.



"You didn't get it? I mailed it Wednesday. Oh, God! I even took it down to the post—"

"Oh, that one. Yes. This all the bags you brought? What's the book?"

Franny looked down at her left hand. She had a small pea-green clothbound book in it. "This? Oh, just something," she said. She opened her handbag and stuffed the book into it, and followed Lane down the long platform toward the taxi stand. She put her arm through his, and did most of the talking, if not all of it. There was something, first, about a dress in her bag that had to be ironed. She said she'd bought a really darling little iron that looked like it went with a doll house, but had forgotten to bring it. She said she didn't think she'd know more than three girls on the train—Martha Farrar, Tippi Tibbett, and Eleanor somebody, whom she'd met years ago, in her boarding-school days, at Exeter or someplace. Everybody else on the train, Franny said, looked very Smith, except for two absolutely Bennington or Sarah Lawrence type. The Bennington-Sarah Lawrence type looked like she'd spent the whole train ride in the john, sculpturing or painting or something, or as though she had a leotard on under her dress. Lane, walking rather too fast, said he was sorry he hadn't been able to get her into Croft House—that was hopeless, of course—but that he'd got her into this very nice, cozy place. Small, but clean and all that. She'd like it, he said, and Franny immediately had a vision of a white clapboard rooming house. Three girls who didn't know each other in one room. Whoever got there first would get the lumpy day bed to herself, and the other two would share a double bed with an absolutely fantastic mattress. "Lovely" she said with enthusiasm. Sometimes it was hell to conceal her impatience over the male of the species' general ineptness, and Lane's in particular. It reminded her of a rainy night in New York, just after theatre, when Lane, with a suspicious excess of curbside charity, had let that really horrible man in the dinner jacket take taxi away from him. She hadn't especially minded that—that is, God, it would be awful to have to be a man and have to get taxis in the rain—but she remembered Lane's really horrible, hostile look at her as he reported back to the curb.

Now, feeling oddly guilty as she thought about that and other things, she gave Lane's arm a special little pressure of simulated affection. The two of them got into a cab. The navy-blue bag with the white leather binding went up front with the driver.

"We'll drop your bag and stuff where you're staying—just chuck them in the door—and then we'll go get some lunch, Lane said. "I'm starved." He leaned forward and gave an address to the driver.

"Oh, it's lovely to see you!" Franny said as the cab moved off. "I've missed you." The words were no sooner out than she realized that she didn't mean them at all. Again with guilt, she took Lane's hand and tightly, warmly laced fingers with him.