

Yvette in America

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Colorado State University (February 2000)

\$22.00 (189pp)

978-0-87081-578-2

Arriving in Boston from Brittany during World War II, Yvette Greville takes a room at a boarding house where she meets her second husband, the consumptive Albert Pleven. A composer, Pleven courts Yvette by arranging a melody that captures the sound of her footsteps going up and down the stairs, from her room to the parlor. In 1941 they marry, and produce a son, George.

In a series of six interconnecting stories, Yvette travels from Massachusetts to California, creating havoc wherever she goes. In "Dear Father Flanagan," eight years have passed and the Plevens' are living in a boarding house in Kentucky. Maxwell, the landlady's eleven-year-old son, "with the hooded eyes of the born bully" and a "dirty puddle of a face," has just returned home from reform school. Confronted with evidence of Maxwell's mistreatment of her son George, Yvette manipulates Maxwell with sweets and a pamphlet from Father Flanagan's Boys Town. She cajoles: "Maxwell, we've had our disagreements, there's no denying that. But life doesn't have to be this unfair. When I hear your father beating you, I think to myself, there must be a place where this boy can be happy...a place where you'll be cared for and loved." Bent to her will, a few nights later Maxwell takes his father's Colt revolver, five dollars from his mother's purse, a plastic raincoat and runs away.

In "The Snake in the Snow" Yvette is now in her seventies when she decides to go on an adventure visiting her ex-husband and his new wife. After traveling by bus from Wisconsin to Iowa, Yvette learns that Albert died only three months earlier. She decides to visit his widow, and passes herself off as Mrs. La Fleur, an old friend of Albert's. "Even though he'd been dead for three months, she expected to see traces: where was his chipped ashtray with four or five chewed-up stinking pipes. The phlegmy handkerchiefs? Where was his torn red and gray robe, his stained underwear?...was it possible she'd made a mistake? That another Albert Pleven had lived and died here?" Unbeknownst to Yvette, the new Mrs. Pleven recognizes her immediately, and hopes to spark a posthumous reconciliation between ex-husband and wife, by taking Yvette to Albert's grave.

Yvette in America is the story of one impossibly difficult (yet irrepressible) woman and her pilgrimage through America.

REBECCA MAKSEL (March / April 2000)

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