

Casanova's Chinese Restaurant

Crossing the road by the bombed-out public house on the corner and pondering the mystery which dominates vistas framed by a ruined door, I felt for some reason glad the place had not yet been rebuilt. A direct hit had excised even the ground floor, so that the basement was revealed as a sunken garden or site of archaeological excavation long abandoned, where great sprays of willow herb and ragwort flowered through cracked paving stones; only a few broken milk bottles and a laceless boot recalling contemporary life. In the midst of this sombre grotto five or six fractured steps had withstood the explosion and formed a projecting island of masonry on the summit of which rose the door. Walls on both sides were shrunk away, but along its lintel, in niggling copybook handwriting, could still be distinguished the word Ladies. Beyond, on the far side of the twin pillars and crossbar, nothing whatever remained of that promised retreat, the threshold falling steeply to an abyss of rubble; a triumphal arch erected laboriously by dwarfs, or the gateway to some unknown, forbidden domain, the lair of sorcerers.

Then, all at once, as if such luxurious fantasy were not already enough, there came from this unexplored country the song, strong and marvellously sweet, of the blonde woman on crutches, that itinerant prima donna of the highways whose voice I had not heard since the day, years before, when Moreland and I listened in Gerrard Street, the afternoon he had talked of getting married; when we had bought the bottle labelled Tawny Wine (port flavour) which even Moreland had been later unwilling to drink.

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Anthony Powell.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the writer describing?
2. Why was the place in ruins?
3. Why had they bought the bottle of wine?
4. What was the woman like?
5. Vocabulary:
 - Rubble:
 - Dwarf:
 - Lair:
 - Unwilling:
 - Highway: