

JOPLIN

Lauren Van Schaik

Chapter 1

The summer I was twenty-one, I figured I'd marry Art Carson. I settled on it in the double parlour at Verna Hobbes' house, the day she married Alden Shirley, when the dance music treacled and I got stuck against the wallpaper with Art's sister, Billie.

It was late and the wedding party had sprawled past its welcome—from the lawn and into the house, straggled in toppled glasses and shoeless girls across Mrs. Hobbes' new rugs. The bride and groom had left hours before, bundled into Alden's automobile. We'd heard the cans on their bumper chattering all the way to the Connor Hotel on Fourth. The hired band started playing romantic tunes, to keep our minds turned that way, to the honeymoon suite: "Let Me Call You Sweetheart," with strings like a sick cat. "Keep the love-light glowing in your eyes so true."

Someone threw a shawl over the electric lamp and couples sucked together to dance. Joplin is small, and the circle of people Mrs. Hobbes would let in her house smaller, so I knew them all. June, Lenore, Inez: childhood friends, companions for plaits and passed notes and tomfoolery with rouge. They tottered with their husbands like they were running a three-legged race—legs scarfed together, arms twined. I stood against the wall, between the curtains and Billie Carson, and felt like I was going to smash a glass.

Beside me, Billie was swaying. She wanted to look inclined to dance if any man we didn't already know crawled out of the carpet. "Inez told me Martin has terrible croup," she said.

I rolled my eyes. "She told me too. She'll give herself croup if she doesn't shut up about it."

Billie bit her lip. "I thought you were friends."

"Doesn't mean she can't make me angry. More likely to, really."

Inez and I used to be friends, when we were fifteen, mostly, although she'd always seemed older. She'd never had the ungainliness of that age. When we'd sit at the soda fountain counter and admired the stretch of our stockinged legs from the stools and the flash of our lipstick in the mirror behind the bar, no one had ever seen me—only her. Even I was looking at her, in the mirror, in the chrome of the counter, and not at myself. That was years before I'd had to resort to Billie's company.

I'd run into Inez in the kitchen earlier. Married women are always in the kitchen at parties, hovering like flies over the food. She'd talked about her baby, the unexpected size of him, his teeth. She told me too that she saw me in the drugstore sometimes, through the plate glass window, and that I looked sad in my uniform, the smock the colour of Wrigley's and the matching headscarf.

"You should go to Little Rock or St. Louis if you want a man, Faye," she said.

"Do you have a catalogue of them?" I said.

Inez laughed, crooking her head like I was exasperating. "It's just that everyone here knows everyone," she said. I knew what she meant: *knows you and knows your aunt and her league of spinsters. Knows how your momma ran away and came back with you.* But Inez was too polite to say it in company. She scrunched her nose and smiled. "Look how well Verna did, and you know her face." She rubbed her finger under her eye, where Verna had a birthmark like a drip of candlewax.

Verna's Alden Shirley owned an oilfield, which made up for the hair that grew down to his fingernails and how his lungs rattled like tin cans when he coughed. His mother's maiden name was a word all the Hobbes pronounced like a foreign language—*Choate*, in italics and as if it was something you would know how translate, if you were smarter, and not from Joplin. He was the catfish, the out-of-towner Verna's mother had been holding out for. But Verna Hobbes could afford to wait. Her family had run the electricity out to Joplin. They were the wealthiest people I knew.

Against the wall Billie was squirming. "I wonder how Verna's getting on," she said.

Everyone was wondering about Verna: flopping beneath her mother's catch on a bed yards wide.

"Wonderfully, I'm sure."

I could picture how she was getting on; we all could. Mrs. Hobbes had been stage whispering the amenities of that honeymoon suite to everyone she could corner, set-dressing the scene. The king-sized bed, the icebox, the midnight supper delivered to door: salmon and devilled eggs. I closed my eyes and tried to conjure myself into that suite, with a husband. But I could only see a man like a paper doll groom: empty-faced and stuck in a penguin suit. There wasn't anything to him, underneath. Maybe I just lacked imagination. The only man I'd ever seen naked was Billie's brother Art—spied bathing in the pond behind the Carsons' house—and he'd just been feet of pink rubber under his clothes.

Billie had pinwheel eyes, as if she was seeing the suite too. She'd definitely pasted Alden into it. She said he was "romantic." She was still spooning peach ice cream from dinner, slicking her tongue along it.

"You just want to be married. And rich," I said. "Too bad Verna's already got the Shirley boy."

"Verna already was rich. God, I'm going to be sick." Billie licked the rim of the ice cream bowl.

"Do you know how people can tell you're poor, Billie? It's how you eat. Like it's going to run out." I snatched the glass from her and shoved it, still sticky, behind the curtain. Maids would likely find it in the morning, with the other scraps of this party, the champagne flutes and the lost shoes. Mrs. Hobbes had gone to bed earlier crying about her rugs.

"I can't remember the last time I had ice cream. And what do they call those red slug fish with their heads in the sauce? God, it'll be awful when Art comes to pick us up in his stupid truck and it's all gone."

"Sorry, Billie." I squeezed her hand. It was damp like a child's. "I'm a grouch. It is the nicest wedding I've ever seen."

It was: the catering; the white frocked tables on the lawn; the Cape Cod oysters, on ice in the dining room, their shells shimmery like Verna's hairpins and their insides grey and like ears. The Champagne brought up the Mississippi in crates marked as china and split open right at the tables, sawdust spilling out, to show how ingenious the Hobbes were, how far their wiring ran. Billie was awed, but I couldn't muster it. Lately, I wasn't moved by anything extravagant. I'd thumb through a Sears-Roebuck catalogue and not find anything to shear out and paper-cement to the wallpaper in my room at my aunt Mill's, where all my past greed had baked and curled in the sun. The clothes I imagined I could do brave things in and slink out of, the icebox a husband and I could have.

A few months ago Verna lent me a silk frock and recruited a cousin of Alden's, a Princeton man, to make a foursome at the Connor Hotel restaurant. And I'd hidden and cried in the marble washroom through dessert because the three were so well behaved, and as dull as lapdogs. Because, when faced with a plate of lobsters and sweetbreads, I only wanted grits. If Verna and her Shirley beau and her parents' fine house with the lights and pipes weren't exciting, if they made my eyes ache and their drinks started a racket in my head, I wasn't sure any longer what I wanted.

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Upstairs, in the blue-lit lavatory, I looked sick, and thirty, I estimated. The yellow frock Verna had dressed me in for the wedding was like a splash of lye; it scrubbed the features out of my face.

I'd been an attendant at the ceremony, with two hare-lipped Hobbes cousins from Des Moines. A girl had to be untouched, and yearning, to trail after a bride, bunch the veil in her hands.

I ran the tap. Water loosed from the spigot, thick and continuous as the magic scarves I'd seen Art Carson pull from his ear as a magic trick.

The yellow frock was four whole dollars from Christman's department store. When I saw it in its box—crumpled and livid, a lemon in the bottom of a shandy—I'd wanted to rush to Verna and tell her how I wasn't so pure. How a Calvert uncle had showed me a set of playing cards of naked women: in high stockings, with hair as curly in the joint of their legs as on their heads; playing gin rummy and kissing each other and setting kettles on the stove and crouching to piss. And how Roy LaForge from the drugstore had once thumbed my breast through my blouse and put his finger in my mouth, but couldn't kiss me because he was already engaged to a girl at Drury College. Verna's mother would have had an etiquette book that told her I couldn't handle the veil and comb her daughter's hair then, if a man had touched me like that.

I'd told Billie all these stories, of course. She'd nearly forgotten to breathe as she listened.

At least this dress was better than Billie's, I thought. Hers was a frontier thing from her dead mother's wardrobe; sheared off and hemmed crooked. She shouldn't have even been invited, but I'd begged Verna.

Downstairs, Billie wasn't against the wall. I heard her before I saw her: her giggle like a hot kettle, "stop, stop!" but like she didn't mean it. She was in middle of the parlour with Sol Valence, Inez's father, recently widowed and tonight, drunk to puce. They were dancing, a reel when everyone else was hardly swaying. He spun her out like a fair ride, then drew her back and buried his face in her chest; then out again, with a war whoop.

I'd taught Billie to dance: a cramped foxtrot then a stumbling waltz in Mill's parlour, until we'd knocked a shelf and shattered a milkglass Paul the Apostle. Before that we'd been very proper: me, the boy, with my skirt tucked up; Billie, in her fusty long dress, chewing at her lip until she got it right. Nothing like she was dancing now. She and Sol had rucked up the rug as they twisted. The guests retreated to watch, to whisper about them over Chinese

fans and crystal glasses: “The Carson girl, Billie or Blanche or something, dancing like a slut—”

Inez appeared beside me. She was damp-faced and sipping a vivid drink through a paper straw. “You know the Carsons?” she said, as if they’d just occurred to her, although like everyone in parlour, we were staring right at the middle one. They were unmistakable: always in ragged clothes and so towheaded you could see their scalp pinking through.

“Sure,” I said.

Inez sucked to the bottom of her drink, making it burble. “Well, I always wondered how they survived out there. That’s the worst tract of land in the county. Lloyd told his brother he thought Art was running a brothel. He didn’t tell me. But I heard. I see things too.” Her eyes were like half-dollars: shiny, giving nothing back.

“That’s hogwash,” I said.

Her mouth pincered. “Isn’t Art always picking up drifters, showing them around town like they’re the governor?” she said. “If it’s not a brothel, it’s something else.”

I chewed my lip and watched Billie and Mr. Valence: the blur of her tatty skirt as she twirled, the racket of his plaid waistcoat.

“And that’s your father,” I said carefully, “dancing with a girl who may work in her brother’s brothel.”

Inez exhaled through her nose. “Since my mother died, he drinks and he thinks he’s Romeo,” she said. “I can’t be held to account for that. We wouldn’t hold you to account for anything your daddy did, if we knew who he was.”

Her words hurt like a pinch on my thigh; we knew all the places each other was soft. She pushed her empty drink into my hand and turned, leaving me alone against the wall.

What Inez said wasn’t true—couldn’t be—but I looked at Billie: buckled in laughter, her breasts nearly tumbling from her dress. Sol was dragging her across the rug. She followed, limp and trailing, like a sheet.

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Art was so late I thought I’d have to walk Billie out to the house off Black Cat Road. We sat on the veranda, after the band packed up their instruments and the dancers stumbled home, still walking as if they were tied together at the knees. Billie slept with her head in my lap, snoring in whimpers.

“All right, Alden,” she said, when I jostled her.

“Hush about that,” I said.

Inez wasn't right: not about Art, although he did pick up drifters; and not about Billie, although she was graceless and as pliable as a pet. But thinking about that brothel, that whiff of rot, gave me a thrill. And more than all the fine things at the Hobbes' house did, the piping and the fish paste, and probably in the suite at the Connor, if I ever saw it.

I thought what I thought earlier, in the parlour, when I watched Billie dancing. Just marrying, being done with it. Marrying Art, because he was around and because in Joplin, he counted as strange, someone to talk about. I didn't want Alden, I'd realised. I didn't want to sleep on silk sheets and fret about people spoiling my rugs. And I didn't want to stay at my aunt's, tiptoeing around her glass apostles and bridge fours. I just wanted to see Inez's face twist and crumple like a cheap candle.

Art arrived in the rusted truck after three and I led Billie to it, her head rolling on her shoulders. She was as heavy as if I'd dragged her, clothed, from water. Art helped me settle her on the seat. "Jeez," he said, as she slumped between us.

"She's more tired than drunk," I said. "If you drive me out there, I'll put her to bed." I'd rarely been to their land. I usually wheedled Billie into town.

Art blinked, as if he had to adjust his eyes to me, in that dress. "Sure. I guess."

As he drove, I watched him. He was tall and flat; sitting down, he was folded out like an ironing board, knees snapped into place. He chewed the side of his cheek and didn't speak. I thought about when I'd seen him undressed. Billie and I scrambled out of the pond and ducked in the scrub when he appeared, but we still saw, because we looked: Art, undoing the snaps on his long underwear, exposing more and more of his gelatine skin and finally, the empty pink pouches of his rear.

I thought: I can't have Billie outgrow me too, can't have her marry Sol Valence and have a baby with croup and look back and see how I was bluffing, about Roy, about men.

As we passed Turkey Creek, Billie, who'd drooped against Art, heaved and a slop of sick—pink with peach ice cream and prawns—slid from her mouth. It dripped down her chin and onto the lace of her dress, and she started to cry.

"Christ, Billie." Art shoved her forward, head between her knees, and she was sick again, a noise like thrown out bathwater against the truck's boards, with a smell so strong it was a tang in my own mouth.

"Oh God, Faye, you hate me," she said to her knees, between sobs. "You'll never take me to another wedding."

Art's eyes were heavy on me. I stroked her hair; it was matted in the back like that of a doll, used to lying flat. "Hush, don't be dramatic," I said. I thought I should look maternal to Art, although the one time I'd held Inez's Martin I'd thought, wildly, about dropping him.

"We'll go to scores of weddings," I said, and when Billie retched again, I held back her hair.

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When I was eight a boy at school peeled an apple with a pocketknife and slippery kid hands and badly sliced his palm. He fainted—suddenly stiff, his eyes rolling white—and Inez was sick over the desk we shared, but I couldn't look away. How his skin mouthed, how it nestled a bone, white and delicate as baby teeth. For weeks I was seeing it, in church and before I fell asleep and scrubbing dishes for Mill, my hand strange and not my own under the water. I'd see it and trace a line with my nail on my own palm.

Other things too: the cyst on my second cousin's neck Mill drained in our kitchen, a tomato that rolled under the oven and was forgotten and bubbled and grew fur. The albino boy from Carthage, who we weren't supposed to point at—his ghostliness like a bad photograph, his rat-red eyes. The women on my uncle's cards and the glister of his fingerprints on them, and Roy LaForge: the push of his finger against my lips and how easily my mouth opened for it—with just the flat of a thumb, like a clasp on a necklace—and the calm meanness that came over him then, sudden as a sweat. All the things you're not supposed to see but can't shake out of your head, even though they make you giddy and sick. I can never stop looking, recalling—inviting the evil, Mill would say.

After the wedding, I slept in Billie's bed, crowded in with her hot limbs. I lay still and sleepless, imagining the Carsons' house done up to sell women, like Inez thought.

Part theatre curtains onto a room, plush and red as an organ, furnished with nothing I'd ever seen in Sears-Roebuck. Billie dancing in the middle, stark pink and made of felt. I see Inez there too, with June and Lenore, dancing awkwardly now that they're unfastened from their husbands.

Art takes the cash, stashes it in a lock box, and just touches it, smoothing his hand over it like a paper cat. He never spends it; they're always near to starving out there on Black Cat Road. There's just wonder in earning it. Taking it really, because what else is women's time worth—a stack of peeled potatoes and a made bed? There's wonder just in knowing the money's there and everything it means: so much packed in a small box, better than a rabbit in a hat.

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Art ran lumber between here and Springfield twice a week and sometimes, after Verna's wedding, I rode along. I'd read to him from a book of card tricks—and not hear a single word of my own voice—and he'd let me finish the silt in the bottom of his Coca-Cola. He didn't have much to say, not unless you knew about magic tricks—enough to be interested, but not to guess how he always ended up with the ace behind his ear. Once he plucked an orange from his mouth like he had it stashed in his throat and handed it to me. I peeled it in little thumb tears, imagining it wet with his saliva. I was disgusted and excited, like this was a proxy kiss, although I'd seen him buy the fruit in Springfield, seen it roll between us on the bench seat and the lump it had made in his sleeve.

And like Inez said, he picked up drifters: sharecroppers washed up from Louisiana and homesteaders blown off the high plains with their topsoil. Anyone who turned up on the verge of the Old Wire Road. Nothing else Inez said was true, although I hung around the Carsons' house a lot to watch. Art said he just liked company, talk to keep his eyes from crossing on the road. Male talk, to distract him in a house with three sisters and Billie the brightest of them.

He had no shortage of this company in those days. Our roads then ran with wanderers and day labourers. They were everywhere: near the depot, panhandling for the ticket price to Texas and the oil fields; scraping at our backdoors for chores and loaf ends. Mill said the war had heaved up the rural parts of this country like a quilt snapped over a bed and set them down wrong after, with men shaken loose of the land, drifting downwards like dust. It was a great pity, she said, because a man needed something to keep him stuck. My father, for an example. Sometimes I looked for my nose and my mouth in sun-crumpled faces and under caps, because if the wind gusted him away, there was a chance it might blow him back.

Mostly our drifters were swept into Joplin with the Katy from Kansas City, in the gasp of dirt it pushed before itself like a street cleaner. But the ones from the East came in with Art, hunkered on the pyramids of timber in his truck bed. And they were stranger creatures: men with flat-tongued accents, store-bought dungarees, the duskiness of Italians. Mill said they were carpetbaggers, vultures, or plain dumb to look for work where there was none.

Art didn't care about their origin. He'd advertise his tin-roofed shack as a hotel to anyone he found on the road, talking until the proposition shone for them like a mirage, a rill of silver water right over the road. Fresh sheets, hot suppers, hay-haired sisters to fix them both, and a fishing hole out back.

“Smile real nice,” he’d say if I were in the truck cab—the only time he acknowledged my enticement.

I’d see the suspicion in the men’s faces, when they pushed in beside me on the seat in the truck, slick with sweat and reeking of the road, their eyes soft on me but tight on Art as he gushed. In lean times men weren’t usually so generous. They must have known of Labette County, a stone’s throw across the border, and the Benders, the trapdoors in people’s generosity on the plains.

They were right to be wary, really. Art’s pitch was all talk. The Carson girls were horse-faced and skittish, and two of them still children. Their land was a strip no one else wanted, a handle without the pan. It was flinty near the road, soggy on the other side, and sloped in ravines throughout, a creek bed long ago run dry. It only ever mustered potatoes and a mutiny of weeds, and they were always hungry. But Art was more of a fantasist than a liar. He didn’t want to harm those men, just hear them talk.

The drifters he liked best—the ones he cracked open his gin for and gave the blankets from his own bed—realised quick what he wanted: stories of the road, the more fantastic the better. Guests to the Carsons’ house told him they’d been in knife fights and at Shenandoah, when they hardly looked older than forty. They said they’d gotten rich on Wall Street and lost it all, had been with the Pinkertons at Haymarket, and invented wireless telephones. And Art believed them, like he believed in séances and moon men. Like his daddy before him had believed, when a drunk told him there was silver at the bottom of the flooded mines near Saginaw.

I’d heard this story two dozen times: from Mill, when I first started bringing Billie round; from Inez, when she came to the drugstore for Martin’s soothing syrup and tins of prophylactics and leaned across the counter, elbows smearing on the glass; from Art himself, a twinge of rue in his voice.

I knew how the fellow had met Otis Carson near the train depot, had told him that he’d worked the zinc mines years ago, in the Nineties, and that they’d been carting out silver, not zinc, until they hit an underground lake. How this man’s word and his handshake were all the proof Otis had wanted. He’d dug a pool in the spongy corner of his land and started training there daily for the dive that was going to make him rich. He learned to doggy paddle and how to hold three minutes of breath in his lungs and, three years prior, had drowned there, orphaning the four Carsons, leaving them penniless.

That was the fishing hole Art talked up: little more than a muddy sump now, with his Old Man buried feet away, in a bog that threatened to spit him back up again. Art, at least, was content to let the silver sit.

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I was going to marry Art Carson because I'd decided it: chosen him, brought him to Mill's, sat beside him at the supper table when he told her how people on the other end of the wireless could hear us and about ectoplasm, and her mouth twisted.

He'd been telling me a lot about ectoplasm, spiritual energy that curdles like bad milk and oozes from the mouths and noses of mediums. He showed me photographs, taken by T.G. Hamilton, a doctor in Winnipeg: people with their eyes screwed and this substance seeping from their noses, like snot but with faces—fleshy or skeletal, full-featured or just eyes or sometimes stray legs, all mixed up in the spume. Art believed in that gunk furiously. He told me we could try to summon my mother, to see what she could tell us about the man who'd fathered me.

“Is this how you occupy your time, Mr. Carson?” Mill asked, when he finally took a breath. “Summoning spirits?”

“Oh, I just read about it.” He shovelled potato, then, muffled through it: “Mostly I like more ordinary magic. Card tricks.”

I couldn't look at him. He ate with the knife I'd found him scraping the rings of dirt from his fingernails with on the porch. I stared at my plate instead and putted a potato through a slick of grease.

Mill was mincing her pork into smaller and smaller bits, knife snipping on china. She'd brought out her mother's plates for the occasion, and the lace tablecloth, and Art hadn't turned out worthy.

“Well, that's not magic,” she said. “That's just quickness in your hands. Don't you suppose a doctor from Winnipeg has quicker hands than you?”

He swallowed thickly. “I guess, Mrs. Calvert.”

“Miss Calvert,” Mill said. “Just like Faye.”

She wouldn't look at me across the table and she'd been looking at me for twenty-one years, eyes tracking me as I hung the laundry and read her Bible and learned to sew and dance; switching behind the curtains as I left, for school, and with Inez and then Billie. I felt that lack like a rash.

After dessert we left Art on the settee with a pack of cigarettes and scraped plates together in the kitchen.

“That is a remarkably foolish man, Faye Calvert,” Mill said.

“He’ll hear you.” I knocked the potato from my plate into the garbage pail.

“He has nothing in his head, and a man like that is liable to find something to fill it up,” she said. “Fiddle-faddde. Magic. Bad company.”

I scrubbed the gravy from Art’s plate, and Mill watched, smiling.

“I’m just trying to be practical,” I said. Practical was Mill’s religion more even than Roman Catholicism was. And as long as she hated Art, I’d defend him, marry him even. That was our relationship.

Her hand darted into the garbage, picked up the potato I’d dropped there from my plate. “And yet, waste.” She brushed dirt off and handed it to me. “Go on.”

“Aunt Mill,” I said, but I rubbed the potato on my skirt and pushed it, whole, into my mouth. It was as cold as an apple. Its skin slipped; it felt like newspaper against my tongue.

She waited until I swallowed then patted my cheek. “Don’t go making trouble when there’s no need, Faye,” she said and then left me with the dishes, the sink full of hot water, the soap strong enough to take the nails off your fingers.

I often imagined then that I’d wake up and Art and me would have done the thing—married—and he’d be asleep beside me, crammed in my narrow bed at Mill’s, hogging the sheets.

Chapter 2

Until I was twenty-one the most trouble I’d ever made was being born. Mill never tired of reminding me of it. How I’d been feet first, which I must have got from my run-off father, and Mill herself had to reach in and turn me—like catching hold of a wet cat, she said. How Marie, who was my mother, fainted dead away and was no help at all—which just like her, a little sister weaselling from chores and falling asleep in mass.

How asleep she’d bled right through the tick mattress and onto the rug and can you see the blotch there, in the room you sleep in—faint and the colour of liver, stubborn against vinegar, lye, steel wool, every solution in the magazines?

How high the late March snow was: up to the porch rails on the house on 2nd Street, so the doctor couldn’t come and none of the aunts. How the blotch between the carpet roses grew and grew and my mother shrank and shrank, and left Mill to deal with the scandal of me, and all that mess. She’d had to burn the ticking in the yard.

For Mill the outrage was less that Marie had run off than that she'd come back, and come back with me. Me stretching her dress out of its stitching, me swelling her ankles out of her bootlaces. Me making her hungrier than any prodigal sister had the right to be. Better that she simply would have vanished, and as completely as my father managed. In ten years no one would have remembered the Calvert girl who had run off but they'd remember now, when Mill dragged a child from church by the collar—a child with a stranger's face, a child with blood leaking from a stranger's nose.

If Mill had forgotten to remind to me, I still would have known, from the pinch in the church ladies' mouths when I trailed her into a pew, from the clawing of their kid-gloved hands when they bought talcum powder and cough drops from me. I used to think they looked at me that way because I'd killed my mother and be ashamed. Later I decided there was certain glamour to my situation, reflected onto me off this stranger who was my mother. I liked to think of her then: a girl who was younger than I was and who'd been more wicked—and worldly and brave and suited to romance—than I thought myself most of my life.

Mill too used to look for signs of Marie in me, my mother like a hereditary disease I might grow into. Greed around sweet things, a tendency to afternoon naps and blouses buttoned badly, a proclivity to lust. When I returned from dances at the Methodist church where we didn't belong, chapped lips and the tang of cologne. Her suspicions would make me giddy. On the walk home I'd tear at my lips with my teeth and nails to give her something to steam about, and then lie in bed alone and wish I could be worse, contrive it somehow that a man had bruised my lips, torn my skirt, lain over me in dry leaves so for days I was plucking them from my hair.

But the only rotten thing I'd ever done was steal from the cash register at Pearl Drug. Dimes and quarters thumbed off the top of coin rolls, to turn inside my skirt pocket, to rub between my finger and thumb when Roy LaForge wouldn't look at me, when Inez was smug and dangled her baby over the counter. A secret deviance I wished I could brag to them about, to prove I was more than I seemed. I'd sit at the dinner table with Mill after work, after turning my \$11 weekly wage over to her, and my pocket would feel heavier than two dimes could make it. I'd wish I could tell her, just for the way she'd look at me: as if I were a stranger or her sister magicked alive.

I never did. I just kept those coins in coffee tins beneath my mattress and when I squirmed in bed, I could hear them clink, like the rasp of mattress springs I heard sometimes from the neighbours', when the windows were open in summer. I'd feel a thrill at my own

awfulness then, but also an ache like an empty glass might have. It was like the feeling of thumbing your own breast.

Mill always said that except for that stranger's nose I looked just like her, much more than I did Marie, and because we had only one photograph of my mother—on the porch on the 2nd Street house, fifteen and squinting in the sun—I had to believe her.

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I invited Billie to a picnic at St. Peter's and dropped enough hints, about the potluck and the spinsters who'd struggle with the trestle tables, that she brought Art, hungry and ready to lend his spindly arms.

It was hot that day: a late September heat, rotten like it had left out since June. Bees sucked up to the sweat under our collars and sleeves, and pie tins bristled with wasps, needling under overturned plates. In the summer wasps want meat. At a picnic in July they'll fizzle on a deer loin as soon as it's taken off the grill and you can't be squeamish or you'll lose the pinkest parts to them. In the autumn they want sweetness. I've seen a dozen drown in a jar of marmalade, thrashing themselves in deeper, like a man in movie quicksand, and I've seen Art Carson smear that marmalade onto a biscuit and pack it into his mouth.

From the sassafras shade on the graveyard's edge, Billie and I were watching Art, as he loped along the potluck spread, a plate, his third, heaped with vinegar slaw and soda biscuits, the glister of barbecue pork. Spinsters steered him between dishes, nudged him with spoons. They liked him: the nervous twitch of his manners, his face guileless and like a foot. Only Mill wasn't charmed by him. She'd brought a skillet of succotash and pan of cornbread as heavy as gold ingots, and he had none of those on his plate. None of my contribution either, as I'd ensured: a sad gooseberry pie with its crust in a sugar swamp, covered in wax paper and hidden behind a pleasant-looking hummingbird cake. I'd watched the crowd locust over the dessert table and squirmed every time someone peeled back that cover.

Beside me, Billie rubbed her finger across her plate, the cherry residue of pie there, and, as furtive as if she was sticking that finger into her nose, slipped it into her mouth. She was sprawled on the clover-stippled grass, four plates in the spread of her skirt, and her bare knees jutting below—pale and shocking there as molars. I envied those bare knees, even the itch of grass under them. Mill had insisted I wear stockings and my legs had jellied inside of them in the heat.

“Art never gets full,” Billie said and shook her head. “What's it like to never get full?”

I shrugged. "The spinsters just keep feeding him."

"I think I've been stung," Billie replied. She pinched the fat above her elbow and studied it. "Does it look red to you?"

I crouched beside her and tried to keep smoking, even though every mouthful of it was broiling my insides. "You would know if you'd be stung," I said.

"How?"

"It hurts."

"I know it hurts. I just can't remember how much." Billie flicked at the fold of skin and scowled.

"It's like pricking yourself with a hat pin, but worse," I said. "Like in school when we got the diphtheria shot." I pinched the flesh of her arm, got it between my nails, and she yelped.

I was thinking of the time Inez and I passed a needle through a candle flame and then nosed it into the pads of our thumbs, until blood beaded at the punctures, and we could mingle it, our fingers pressed into each other's as into ink pads. It was so we could share blood and be sisters, Inez said, even though she already had two sisters and couldn't stand them.

Maybe Billie and I were closer than Inez and I had ever been, because when I looked at Billie, her wilted hair and the pale fuzz on her legs, the same colour as her skin, like the fur on felt, I couldn't stand her.

I looked instead across the picnic: the blankets, musty horse rugs and sheets stripped from beds tessellated across the sun-cooked grass, from the church steps to the graveyard. Parasols twisting over them like dandelion clocks and children sprawled, blue-lipped and drowsy with pie, across mothers' knees. Men in shirtsleeves soaked to the flesh clutched around the grill, bearded in its purple smoke, and girls younger than me stork-swollen, their necks proud and rubbery, rocking round spring babies and fanning themselves with church programmes.

Here there were variations of the same nose on two-dozen faces: freckled under straw cloches and old Edwardian hats and smudged with dirt and jam and caught in the broom straw of a moustache. Pairs of sisters married to pairs of brothers, the harelips and the witlessness of that inbreeding, and the black Irish hair of the Learys seeped now into every family line. A tendency to girls and the spinsters it created.

I mostly watched those spinsters: the dark bevy of them around the food like ribbons of flies on spilled lemonade. When they weren't tending to the spread they sat away from the

picnic in the shade, smug as nuns, and ran commentary on it. Who was courting, who was expecting, whose husband had strayed, who hadn't taken the host at mass, and who had when he shouldn't. I'd sat among them enough times, in the grass beside Mill's chair, to know how it went. My aunt was among them now. I spotted her: in elbow gloves, with yards of netting tacked to her hat—protection from the bees and the stings she claimed made her swell like a zeppelin. Even in this heat she was blustery and prim.

“Wouldn't it be awful to end up like that?” I said to Billie.

“Like what?” She was twisting the spiked heads of clover flowers off their stems and scattering them in the valleys of her skirt.

“A spinster, sitting and watching, nattering about things that happen to everyone else because nothing ever happened to you.”

Billie cocked her head and smiled like a woman in a cold cream ad. “I'm sure something is going to happen to me.”

I eyed her suspiciously. “How can you be sure?”

She played with the hem of her skirt, sweeping it up in a mock curtsy and out, shreds of clover tumbling. “When I was twelve my ma told my fortune and she said I'd have a great love and many babies.” She sighed. “I just have to wait for it to happen.”

“Did she tell you she'd die and your daddy too?” I said.

Billie blanched. “Faye,” she said, almost exasperated. “Future-seeing doesn't work like that.”

“I don't pretend to know how it works,” I said. “It's all tripe, right? ‘You will meet a dark and handsome stranger.’ They don't say what he'll do. He's as likely to murder you as to marry you.”

I lit another cigarette. I could feel anger stewing my ears. I was envious of this ripeness for romance Billie claimed to have, and of the lustre of a dead, fortune-telling mother, and one she'd known and could remember. But when I imagined myself into Billie's place, with a guarantee of love and infants, I felt a panic of tight spaces, of the handbreadth gap beneath Mill's wardrobe where she once had me wriggle, searching for a button, dropped and skittered.

There weren't many things that could happen to you in Joplin: a man asking you to dance in the basement of the Methodist church and then a wedding and the rest of your life; a childhood sweetheart or a second cousin coming to sit in your mother's parlour in the rain. A girl from Badger had died in an automobile crash but she had been with a beau and another

had toppled from a streetcar and broken her neck and it was tragic because she'd been engaged. Without a romance, you couldn't even die dramatically in Joplin.

And if nothing ever happened to you, you ended up like Mill: sleeping in the bedroom you were born in.

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I had a theory about spinsters I elaborated once for Billie, smug with the idea I was charting her future. She'd listened intently, her gelatine chin propped in her hand, her eyes wide. That was before Sol came around.

I said I reckoned there were two types of unwed women in Jasper County, and abroad too: those who had never wished to marry and those who did and had been disappointed, and that I hadn't worked out yet which it worse to be.

In the first classification were the aunts and great-aunts who had turned down a dozen heart-pounding proposals—fifteen years of men chasing them on their knees across their mothers' parlours, to hear them tell it—because they thought men superfluous. They were often lady journalists and doctors, although we had none of those around here. My aunt Mill was my best local illustration: a woman who could drive an automobile and kill mice and had impatience and suspicion for all men, even relations. My aunt often made a great proud show of this spinsterhood, when one of the Leary babies next door wailed or we saw the second Mrs., sister to the first, wrung out and already pregnant again, chasing a gaggle of crow-haired sons and nephews through the yard. Mill would drop her mending or the sauce spoon and sit with her legs propped, a *Reader's Digest* on her lap. She claimed because she was unmarried and not exactly a mother she could do whatever she pleased, although she rarely had time for it.

The other type had been disappointed, jilted, sometimes, and had usually been ruined by it. Miss Una Hunt was one of those. She wasn't really a Miss but she'd fastened chasteness so tightly to herself even people who'd attended her wedding—and six months later, her husband's wake, in the parlour of the house on Zora Road with the bullet hole in the plaster not yet patched—didn't dare call her anything else. The Gibson sisters were another local illustration. They'd reportedly gone to bed with the same man within weeks of each other forty years ago, competing for a wedding, and had been ruined together when he married a girl from St. Louis.

Mill then, having never married and never, in living memory, entertained the attentions of a man, had the best claim to virtue among that set. And she used it like a cudgel

among them. When I woke with a badge of blood on my sheets some mornings after my fourteenth birthday, she'd sent me to the Gibsons, as if insist she'd never been plumbed to raise me that way. They took my visit—early on a Saturday, with an old sock bunched in the gusset of my stocking—as a charge of adultery and helped me with clamped mouths and tiers of denial: “We blossomed very late. We were orphans too—not like you are, of course, but our mother died—but we always had each other. We never knew what we were doing, but we were very sorry we did it.”

That's how I became a woman: sitting on old towels on two spinsters' couch because there was no one else to throw me into it.

Today I hoped the spinsters would talk about Art and that Mill would hear. Art who wasn't Catholic, who wore trousers too short, who maybe ran a brothel out of his house (although, knowing few men, they likely hadn't heard that story, and if they had, they wouldn't beam up at him like they did), and who was maybe courting me. I'd always liked the sensation of being on peoples' tongues, and spinsters had a particular reverence and suspicion for any woman who could attract and keep a man.

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“Faye, Faye, *Faye*.”

Mill, gusting across the lawn. Her netting was flapping; even in this still heat, when the state flag on its pole in the churchyard had gone slack, it was moving, dragged out on Mill's own wind. I scrambled up to greet her and tucked the cigarette behind my back. She held a scrap of wax paper and when she got near loosened her fingers and let it fall at my feet. “No one has eaten the pie, Faye,” she said. “You left it covered, which I'm sure was an oversight.” From her voice, she didn't think it an oversight at all.

“Does it really matter? There's so much food,” I said but my voice sounded tinny. I could feel Billie's eyes on me, as keenly as the heat of the cigarette at my back.

Mill heaved her shoulders and crossed her arms across her sunken chest. “I'll not be seen leaving this potluck with a full dish, and I will be taking that tin home, Faye Calvert,” she said. “I'm not about to leave it. I'll never get it back.”

We'd paper-cemented labels with our last name and address to undersides of all our dishes, but they were still liable to go astray, end up in the rectory, in a box jangling with mismatched china and lidless pots and never be recovered.

“I'll eat some,” Billie said from the grass.

Mill looked at her as if she'd just realised she was there. I could see her eyes clocking Billie's bare feet, her grass-stained blouse. "That's a kindness, Billie," she said, "but it won't be necessary. Faye here will go about and make sure that pie is eaten."

"Aunt Mill," I said but she fixed me with a stare that curdled my stomach. I was pliant as she grabbed my shoulder, pushed me ahead of her back toward the crowd.

We stopped out of earshot of Billie and Mill wet her thumb in her mouth and scrubbed at my cheek—some smudge there I hadn't seen—and brushed my hair from my forehead. "I really wish you hadn't invited the Carsons," she said. "They're not Catholic and where are that girl's shoes?"

"No one in Missouri is Catholic."

"Everyone here and that's quite a lot."

Cousins and drunkards and unmarried women—such an array.

I was still holding the cigarette behind my back, in the folds of my skirt. Mill grabbed my elbow, followed my arm and found it—wet from my mouth, grown a long nose of ash. She screwed my hand until I cried out and my fingers went slack, dropped the cigarette into the grass. "It's unbecoming of a woman to smoke," she said.

I knew Mill to smoke, but only with the curtains in the parlour draw, or on the back porch, when the neighbours' windows were shut, so no one could see or smell her indulging an appetite.

"Look, you've burned your skirt," she said and seemed almost pleased. She plucked at a pleat, twisted it around so I could see: a grey pock in the gingham, a full-moon hole. "Really, Faye," she said and turned on her heel and walked ahead. The cigarette smoked thinly in the dry grass. I scuffed it out with my shoe and followed her.

At the tables she watched as I picked up my dish. Uncovered, it seemed worse than I remembered, the crust charred and sunken, the skinned gooseberries below rolling like so many eyes. Mill sighed when she saw it but smiled for the black bunching of spinsters in the shade to see and prodded me toward them. "Sweetness and light," she said. Mill who was never sweet, who wielded manners like scalpels.

I approached the Gibson sisters first, because they were familiar. They were settled on dining chairs in the grass and eating off the same plate. Myrtle and Opal—I could barely tell them apart. "It's the Calvert girl," one said to the other when I got near and she craned to give her sister the pince-nez strung on the chain around her neck so she could regard me too. Four pairs of fogged eyes blinked slowly at me, like a magic lantern changing slides.

"Mill sent me," I said. I squirmed to hear the meekness in my voice.

“Mildred sent her,” one said to the other.

“Ah yes, Mildred. She hasn’t been to see us in a while.” Their mouths pinched.

“I’m supposed to offer you pie.”

They hoisted their eyebrows and I showed them the dish, mess of it as green as I imagined the insides of a frog would be.

They shook their heads sadly. “We couldn’t eat a bite of pie. You couldn’t eat a bite of pie, could you, M?”

“Not a bite, O.”

“But you’re a dear to offer.”

“A dear,” the other said. “We remember when you were born”

“I’m sorry.” I felt a trickle of sweat behind my knee.

They smiled at me at me in unison, the knots of wrinkles tightening around their mouths, and I was ashamed, of the burnt pie and my obedience.

I wished I could speak to the Gibsons as Mill did, I thought as I walked away: with a twist of disdain. But I didn’t disdain them so much as envy them. I’d always envied them, I realised: when my aunt whispered to me that they were fallen women and then brought me to sit on the divan in their tiny apartment as a lesson after I walked home from school with a boy. They’d given me sad smiles and boiled sweets.

I envied the strange lustre of their reputations, the way people whispered after them—about this deed they had done, which was a ripe and awful deed, and not something they had merely been born with and were as blameless for as they were for shape of their mouths.

I envied how a man had once chosen them and how they’d been brave enough to let him.

But more than anything, I envied their closeness. Latched hands, joined sentences, and someone else for company in your head, someone who had the same shames and secrets and lusts. If one of the Gibsons had stolen from the cash register at Pearl Drug she’d have someone to tell, someone whose face could reflect her brave terribleness back so she could see it and revel in it.

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I approached Una Hunt next. She’d taught me Sunday school in the cold church basement here, with eight of the Learys and a wheezy parlour organ. She watched now as I dished a slice of pie onto her crowded plate, lips closed snugly around her teeth. She smelled vaguely of must, of dresses unboxed from attics and underthings dusted with talc.

“You look unrepentant, Faye Calvert. And too thin.” She switched her handkerchief over her plate, a horsetail flicking flies. She troweled beans into her mouth and talked around them: “I’ll accept this, dear, in public but I can’t eat it. You know why.”

“Thank you, Miss Hunt,” I said. She gave me a slivered smile.

Una Hunt believed I was possessed. She’d known it since my nose started leaking my innards during mass when I was eight and Mill had to drag me, bloody mouthed, from church. I was prone to nosebleeds in those days. Mill thought I contrived them to spite her, as I contrived then to grow out of all my clothes, until all my dresses showed knees and had to be replaced. Nosebleeds were the second worst thing I’d ever done, until I was twenty-one, and to hear Mill tell it, somehow connected to the first.

Una was telling me something about Rose Leary, who was engaged and just fifteen, but I wasn’t listening. I crossed my eyes over my nose and slipped my tongue past my teeth and made sure she saw.

Her knuckles whited at the rim of her plate and a shudder went through her—indignation and a shiver, from mashed silk flowers on her hat to the buckle on her tiny pumps. “I’ll tell your aunt, Faye Calvert,” she hissed. “Don’t think I won’t.”

I rolled my eyes. I would have liked her to tell Mill but knew nothing Una Hunt said could perturb my aunt. Years ago Una had written Mill several times to inform her of my condition and offer her services, and was mortified Mill never acknowledged her letters, although she’d read them aloud to me, before she burned them: “The Devil knows who fathered that child. Maybe the Devil himself did.” Mill had appropriate fear of the devil but none for the women of Joplin.

I’d fished one of those letters from the grate before it caught, when Mill wasn’t watching, and kept it under my mattress with the tin of Pearl Drug coins and used to read it over and over again, like a love letter.

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Finally I’d gotten rid of a slice of pie, although Una Hunt would only scrape it into the garbage. But when I turned to look at Mill she was thunder-faced and motioned me toward her. “Why did you bring that girl?” she hissed when I got near and pushed her face so close to mine it folded and blurred.

“What are you talking about?” I said.

She took the pie tin from my hands and grabbed me by the wrist and jerked me so I'd look—to the sassafras shade, to the edge of the churchyard, where Billie Carson sat on Sol Valence's lap.

Sol, with his sun-reddened face, his plaid suit straining at the belly. He had Billie draped over his thighs, cradled like a kid, his waxed whiskers tickling the buttons of her blouse. She fiddled with the leather thongs of his tie and his hands stitched through her hair and when she saw us—my aunt ahead, dragging me—she started and tried to scramble up. Her face was pink as undercooked meat and her jaw hung, but Sol had her by the waist and wouldn't let go.

"Billie Carson, this is an indecent display," Mill said. "In front of all these children and the Lord..." Her mouth curled in disdain that may have been smile. "Faye, I don't believe you should see this," she said, although she'd yanked me across the churchyard just to look at it.

Billie's hands were quavering and she'd crossed her legs on Sol's lap but she jutted her chin at Mill all the same. "Isn't the Lord always watching?" she said. She must have meant it genuinely, naively, because Billie wasn't clever enough to sass, but Mill didn't know this. My aunt's hand twitched and flattened at her side, as if she wished to slap her.

Billie didn't see. She kept babbling, talking herself out of embarrassment: "I'm sorry Miss Calvert, I am. Just I told Sol—Mr. Valence—that I would be here. His car is busted and he can't make the drive out to Black Cat Road at the moment and I said I'd be in town and—"

Sol swept his cowboy hat off his sweat-shiny forehead and held out a hand to Mill, Billie jostling on his knee. Mill ignored it but he kept it out, hung between them over Billie's head like an accusation. I could see how square-topped and fat his fingers were, his nails scraps above their quicks.

"Extract yourself from this man, Billie Carson," Mill said. I heard in her voice, the hitch of breath between the Christian and the family names, the urge to call Billie by a fuller name, the middle name Mill didn't know, as she called me when I went astray of expectation, when I forgot to buy string or didn't clean my plate of its vegetables. I imagine if she ever found out about the Pearl money, or about Roy, what little there was to find out, she'd be wedging the names of saints into mine, to stretch the reprimand out longer, as it rattled around the kitchen and ascended the stairs: "Faye Helene and Joan of Arc and Mary Mother of God and Margaret of Hungary and Bernadette Calvert."

“Billie Carson,” Mill said again but the name wasn’t enough, wasn’t made for scolding: it was too sweet, its vowels too clipped.

“There’s no need for commotion,” Sol said and grinned. “We’re all here to have a good time.”

“A church picnic is not a good time.” Mill reached for my hand as if for support against such a notion. In mine, her hand was powdery and despite the heat, sweatless.

“We’re having a good time, aren’t we, Bills?” Sol jangled his legs so she bounced on them and, like a jiggled baby, began to smile. “I’m sure Faye here came to this picnic for a good time.” He flashed his teeth at me; they were yellow as toenails.

My name sounded odd through those teeth; I couldn’t imagine from what corner of memory he had dredged it. He had never known it when Inez and I were thick, when I’d come to fetch her for the cinema or a dance and she’d plant me on the rug in the parlour with him to wait while her mother finished tonging her hair. I would stand near the door, unsure of my elbows and knees, and Mr. Valence would play Al Jolson on the Victrola, squint at me and ask if I knew the man, who was a Jew but painted himself black, and call me “Frances” or “May.”

“What’s this now?” Una Hunt had drifted down the slope from the picnic. She nudged me away with her hips, cushioned as the arms of settee, so she could stand level with Mill. “What’s the fuss?” She didn’t try to hush the excitement from her voice.

Mill wouldn’t give her the pleasure of an outburst. “The gentleman and Miss Carson were just leaving,” she said and sniffed.

Billie picked at a loose thread on her skirt and wouldn’t look at us.

“Do you have the time?” Sol asked Una.

She flushed and her hand fluttered from her hips like birds shaken from a tree. “Me?” she said but she was already fishing in her skirt pocket for her watch—a tiny thing with a face no bigger than a dime—then dangling it in front of her face. The skin on her forehead puckered with the effort of reading it: “Just gone four.”

“My girl and I should be off then if we want to make the matinee.” Sol levered Billie off his lap and she stood, legs rubbery as a colt’s, bare feet scrunching and toeing for her pumps in the grass. Mill looked away concertedly.

Sol stretched and stood, scratched at his belly. “Pleasure to see you ladies,” he said and settled his hat at a steeper slant over his nose.

Mill crossed her arms tightly over her chest and wouldn’t look at him. The white flab of his stomach, the swirl of hair around his navel. I had to look away too.

I didn't see Billie until she flung her arms around me, saying "sorry, sorry" and so sudden she knocked the breath from me. Her armpits were damp on my shoulders and her smell—the yeast of her sweat and the cooking odours in her hair—sharp in my nose. We had never before embraced and I felt a prickling of obligation, and also how easy she would be to hurt. I'd felt the same way when I held Inez's Martin, and thought, wildly, how easy it would be to drop him, or hurt him. You could do it with a flick of thumb.

"Sorry," Billie said again into my hair. "We'll talk soon." She backed away and Sol flopped an arm around her, carelessly as hanging a coat over a chair back.

"Darling," he said to her; "Misses," to us. "Pleasure of an afternoon."

And they left, wound together, Mill watching them over a tipped-up nose and me still feeling the stickiness of Billie down my front. Standing behind my aunt and Miss Hunt, I felt my own goodness as grit in my throat.

"Such a shame, that girl," Una said when they were out of earshot. "Such spirit, directed at the wrong things. Much like Marie and I'm sure it pains you to see it, Mildred."

I thought Mill flinched to hear my mother's name but she smoothed it quickly from her face—as she'd run a hand over sheet wrinkled on a bed. "Una Hunt," she said, "I don't think I saw a soul with angel food cake on his plate."

Miss Hunt pinked and her hands balled on her horse-wide hips. Angel food cake was her potluck standard but however she topped it—today with ruffles of cream and candied lemon coins—half of Joplin knew to avoid it: stinky on the sugar, heavy on the flour, like cud in your mouth, like quilt batting to swallow.

"I'm sure I saw the Leary children with some," Miss Hunt said but her hands fidgeted at her bonnet and already she was wheeling away, back to the picnic. "You'll excuse me," she said. Her feet scuttled beneath her skirts.

"Absurd woman," Mill said after her. "She should have the decency to let the dead rest. You know her husband was a suicide, right? And they buried him right in this graveyard, as if he hadn't brought it on himself."

I wondered whether Mill thought my mother should be buried here, because she too, it could be said, brought it on herself.

My mother was feet from us now, I realised, below under a flat stone engraved with "Marie Helene Calvert," then her birthdate and my own. Una Hunt had called her by name and I felt her now like static, needling and zinging where my aunt and I touched: Mill's netting grazing my arm, her hands pressing the pie tin into mine.

I rarely heard that name spoken now, although sometimes it seemed to chase loops in my head, a word like *damn* or *cunt* I shouldn't say or even know. What would Marie think of this frock, what Marie say of Mill's cooking and how she made me scrub the floor? Was my hair—colourless as wheat and not straight or curly but somehow always awry and rucked—my mother's hair?

Una said Billie was like my mother and Una would have known my mother or certainly met her, in the drugstore or at mass. Billie, with her eyes like the hole in an angel food cake and her mouth ajar to catch fireflies. In my chest my stomach dropped. She was like my mother and I was like Mill. Mill with her crabbing hands, her cheeks hollowed as if she kept a lemon rind on her tongue; her shelves of milk glass and her suspicion of men; her weeks whiled in chores, laundry Tuesday and floorboard Thursdays until she'd die—and in the house she was born.

"You're lucky you had me, Faye," Mill said and flicked a strand of hair from my cheek, as she'd swat a fly. "Some children have no one respectable to raise them—even their own parents. Especially their own parents because they'll let anyone become parents and many do not understand the gravity of the task."

"Thank you," I said. It was automatic as an *amen* at the end of a prayer, and Mill smiled at me for it.

"Now don't bring those Carsons around again—not to the house either. That girl has a made of fool of herself." She turned back to the picnic flock.

I watched her walk away, her bee netting bannered out. Mill would have children ripped from breasts and raised by covens of virgins and spinsters, I thought. Mill thought anyone who had done the act that could create a child was, in surrendering to that act, proving themselves unfit to rear that child. Mill would have us sterile as the Shakers, stamping out futures, like sparks on a rug, before they caught.

But there was nothing in else Joplin but that rhythm, of birthing and dying—mothers and daughters, cows and calves, June brides swollen by September and dead by March, and mothers if not. There was only this pulse, regular as a dirge and humdrum as a Monday, but to be deaf to it, to be exiled as Mill was, as Miss Hunt was, as I was now, to be sliding even now to death, with no turns or thrills in the spill—that was unbearable. I might as well pitch myself into a grave I thought, be buried next to my mother. If nothing else, we shared two-thirds of a name.

I was still holding the uneaten gooseberry pie. Wasps had found it; they nettled at the green muck, their beaded bodies bunched. It turned my stomach. I crouched to scrape the tin

out quickly over a grave and didn't mind if I were stung. But the wasps didn't care for me when there was sweetness on the ground.

Then I straightened and saw Art Carson, slouched under a tree in the far corner of the graveyard, a plate propped against his chest.

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There was no coolness in the cemetery's shade. The heat didn't come from the sun—which was low now, slouched on the horizon—but rather from the ground. It stewed there, around ankles, like stagnant water. If I stopped to think about it, as I picked my way over fat tree roots and listing headstones, it was terrible: the earth there baking, with all it contained.

Art was oblivious to ghosts or to heat. He sat eating baked beans with his fingers, sticking them in his mouth as if he was about to whistle. I looked at him and waited for the pitch of my heart, the way I felt when Roy's eyes stuck on mine, or when, in a hurry, I missed a step on the stairs—a heartbeat skittered, a moment of weightlessness. It never came. I just felt drought on my tongue, impossible to swallow.

Art didn't look up until I leaned against the tree beside him. "Hello," I said, in a voice I thought coy.

He wiped sticky hands on his trousers and gawped at me. I could see the pink mush of beans on his tongue before he swallowed.

"Thanks for coming. The picnic." I sat, tucking my legs beneath myself, spreading my skirt prettily so a corner of it toed over his knee.

"Billie said there would be food." He shrugged and slid a fingernail between his front teeth. I had to look down so nerves and disgust wouldn't show on my face. And it was easier that way: studying the stretch of his legs in the grass, the tree-bend of his groin. I wondered what I'd have to do to make him pull me into his lap, knot my hair in his hands. I wondered why the thought made me feel clammy and strange.

As I watched his hand scrunched in his dungarees pocket and he pulled out a pack of cards, sweat-damp and bound with a rubber band he wiggled onto his wrist. As he shuffled them the cards shucked wetly against each other, like tongues. They bowed when he fanned them for me. "Pick a card," he said. "Any card."

I knew how this went: me with a jack of hearts pressed against my blouse, Art squinting and screwing his face as if he were doing long division in his head and then spitting

out “jack of hearts” as if it had come to him in an electrical shock, and not from the gap in the suits when he shuffled. He’d expect me to be impressed.

“Can I tell you something instead?” I said.

He chewed his lip—already raw from so much chewing. “If you want.”

“Put the cards away then. They’re unsettling me.”

He folded them away but kept the pack in his fist, balled on his knee.

“You know how I work at Pearl Drug?” I said.

“I’ve seen you there.”

“Well, I’ve been working there for three years, since I graduated, on the cash register, and it’s good, honest work, as Mill says, but Mr. Pearl doesn’t pay well because I’m just a girl and—”

As I spoke I sat up straighter. Finally, I was excited. Finally, my heart had begun to thrum and my lips go numb, as they often did when I drank, until I couldn’t feel the glass, only the sting of the gin, only the words as they curdled in my head and not as they passed through my lips:

“I’ve been taking money from the cash register. Nearly every day. It’s quite a lot now.”

I waited for the shock to crumple Art’s face, for my awfulness to flicker there in reflection. But his cheeks stayed slack and his mouth, straight as a seam. I felt I’d slapped someone who wouldn’t flinch.

“It fills two coffee tins now,” I said. “Quarters and dimes. Sometimes half dollars.” Silver and so comically large next to the others they seemed like saucers. Those were for special occasions, days when Roy’s Drury College girl came to see him, flitted outside in an angora sweater and beret; days when Mr. Pearl bought me a soda at lunch and let me drink it right at the counter.

Art wiped his nose on his sleeve. “How much is it, then?”

“I don’t know. Haven’t counted it. That isn’t the point.”

“The point of money is to spend it and you can’t spend it if you don’t count it.” He nodded to himself as if that was wisdom.

The point was the thrill, the point was the jangle, the point was talking to Mr. Pearl with his money in my pocket, looking at Roy and marvelling that he didn’t know the half of me—and that if he did, maybe he’d love me. Art couldn’t understand.

“Maybe I’m saving it for something special,” I said. I tried to think of something special, in my mind wandered through Christman’s department store, looking for something

I'd die if I didn't have. But there were only dresses and iceboxes and shoes and even I had never died for their lack. I chewed my thumb; a hangnail there was like a razor on my tongue.

Art was shuffling his cards again, one-handed, his fingers splayed. They seemed to have too many joints, to be too long.

I wondered how my mother had done it, with the stranger who gave me my nose. She wouldn't have been so squeamish about it.

"I've told you a sin so you should tell me one," I said.

Art whistled. "Don't really got any."

"Everyone's a sinner," I said. "Isn't that a hymn?"

His face pruned.

"You're at a Catholic picnic," I said. "We're playing confession."

He yanked a tuft of grass from the ground. What if Inez was right about the brothel, I thought. What if that's why Billie was so easy around Sol, so glassy-eyed and calm as he stroked her. What if Art told me that now—a crime and a brashness so much greater than a handful of pilfered change that he wouldn't even flinch when I told him my sins. I had to remember to breathe as I waited.

"All right, I got it," he said finally. He cleared his throat: "Once, a couple year ago, I didn't pay for a cinema ticket. Just plain forgot. Walked right past the ticket counter and the collector and they didn't say a word. I only remembered halfway through the film. I went out and told them and they just laughed. I gave them the money and walked out."

"Why'd you leave? You'd paid for the film then."

Art's shrug twitched his whole body. "I'd stolen the first half so it didn't seem fair to see the rest."

"That's all?" I could feel my lips again. I realised, dumbly, from the wetness on my chin and collar, that I was crying.

"Grit in my eyes," I said but Art hadn't even noticed. He was ruffling the grass intently.

I grabbed his hand to still it, gripped it awkwardly in my own. "I've kissed boys," I said. A lie; it was out of my mouth before I could even note its falseness. "Quite a few boys."

Art whistled again. His face was stupid and empty. "That's really something," he said, as if I'd told him I'd been to Chicago or seen a tiger at a zoo.

I tried to imagine these boys I had supposedly kissed, in case he asked. Ranks of them like a marching band, but I couldn't see their faces beneath their caps. I didn't think I'd ever met more than two or three boys I'd wanted. Roy and my second cousin Hartley Calvert, who

greased his hair at fourteen and told me the feel of a cunt as if I didn't have one myself (although mine was never like "velvet got wet") and a geometry teacher from school, Mr. Otto Crane, who would peer with such insistence at me through his soda bottle glasses. He wasn't handsome but I still thought, wildly, about sitting in his lap.

Art didn't ask.

"Have you kissed girls then?" I said.

"Not really."

"What sort of answer is that?"

You either had kissed someone or you hadn't, I thought. Except I hadn't but it was like I had, because Roy said he would have kissed me. Art wouldn't understand such nuance.

"I don't want to say." Art wrenched up more grass.

I wanted to slap him then for real, until his face mottled purple and his eyes streamed—to see if he'd flinch, if he'd cower. If he'd strike me back. Instead I leaned to him and kissed him flat on the mouth, until I could feel the ridge of his teeth and his lips slick and papery as apple peels. His mouth was narrow and I wondered how it would ever stretch, around a sweet or better kiss.

As we kissed he folded his arms around me, neat as if he were folding a shirt with himself, and me, inside, and breathed the smell of baked beans into my mouth. I am my mother's daughter, I thought. What would Una Hunt say of that?

It was Art's eyes that spooked me. Eyes that were supposed to rock closed as you kissed, like a sleepy-eyed doll's when she was laid down. But his didn't and mine didn't and as we kissed we stared at each other. The jerk of his pupils, leftward, toward the picnic; the innards redness in the creases of his eyes. I felt, in a surge, I'd be sick.

I pulled back and Art was still looking unblinkingly at me.

"Did you know Una Hunt says I'm possessed?" I whispered. I wasn't sure where it came from or why I said it.

His face crinkled. "What?" I felt his lips form the word.

"My nose started to bleed in mass once and no one knows who my father is—you know that, right?" I said.

Art inched back from me and climbed unsteadily to his feet. His limbs were in disarray. He couldn't figure how to stand, where to place his hands.

"Art." I was startled by the casualness in my voice. The sickness had trickled away and I knew from the burn of my cheeks I was grinning. "You look like you've seen a ghost,"

He was breathing heavily; I could see the jackrabbit leap of his chest under his shirt. His hands scratched for a hat not on his head. “No ghost,” he said.

I stood and shook the dust from my shirt. “Good, because it’s just a stupid story from a stupid woman.” I looked at him, his cornmeal hair and his caved-in chin and the sweat-limp cards still bunched in his hand, and felt, in an instant, five years older. There was no rubber in my knees, no coltish quiver; just the heat of pride, fingering from my throat.

“But don’t tell anyone,” I said. Art nodded grimly.

Really, I hoped he’d tell everyone he saw, in the bruise colour of his mouth, the flush that pinked through his pale hair, the bird quiver of his hands. I hoped he’d tell Billie and the next time she saw me she’d look at my lips and at the space between her brother and me, imagine it folded down like a paper fan and us pressed against each other—kissing and not in the bloodless, dry way we had. If I were Art I’d tell everyone I knew.

He propped his hands on his head. “You know I never kissed a girl until just now,” he said.

“I could tell.” I reached out to pet his cheek. We could touch and it was nothing.

As I returned to the churchyard I wiped the baked bean taste of him from my mouth with my sleeve and imagined myself changed. I sat among the spinsters, in the grass beside Mill—she patted my head—and fancied they could see this change, in the flutter of my skirt against my knees and the sway of my hair, newly pretty. Una Hunt sat feet from me. The humps of her were pinched by a belt, as sausage is tied, and the uneaten angel food cake stashed beneath her chair. The Miss Gibsons slept upright in afternoon sun, heads nodded to lace collars, chests rising and fallen in unison under Victorian shawls. Una, oblivious, still chattered to them. I smiled at them with pity. How much better I’d use this chance to marry than they had.

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Mill and I walked home in slanted evening light, empty pans in our arms and her mouth full of hearsay. I tried not to listen but her voice was insistent and shrill. Rosemary Schulz née Parker swollen with a child again—hadn’t she been a year behind me in school? The Fords with the twins, five now and just the same as one boy photographed. And Billie Carson: she was trouble but Mill had stamped out that scandal before it caught. Only she would grumble on it. She was delighted as a child given a bag of boiled candy and told she didn’t have to share.

As she jabbered I fingered my lips, dug my nails into them. I'd hoped they'd be fat with Art's kiss, so Mill could see I was trouble too.

She saw my hand at my mouth at least. Hers flew up and snatched it away. "You'll give yourself sores that way," she said.

We'd stopped on a corner, at the turn to 2nd Street. Mill was peering about for anyone who could see us bicker.

I pushed that lip out and wrenched my hand back from her and put it again to my mouth. My lower lip had finally plumped, but maybe just from the pull of my fingers.

"Stubborn," Mill said and shook her head.

"Is that all you have to say to me?" I folded my arms across my chest. I tried to look as Marie had in the photo tucked in the family Bible: the impudence of her cocked hip, the boredom on her face even as she squinted.

I wanted Mill to rage at me like she'd nearly raged at Billie, would have if Billie had been her niece. I wanted her to call me by my full name, to boil and tremble and talk of a woman's closely guarded secrets and the rot that was in my mother and me and how Una Hunt was right and I was possessed, and maybe by Marie. But she turned on her heels and walked away, down 2nd Street, and I was left with the back of her, the bluster of her bee netting oddly bridal in this light.

"I'm going to marry Art Carson," I called after her.

Mill turned back. She seemed worn out, a rug beaten limp and colourless. She rubbed at her forehead and sighed. "You think you're doing this to spite me," she said. "But you're just cutting off your own nose. It'll be ugly, Faye Calvert. You won't like how you look."

"Something is going to happen to me, I know it," I said. "I'm going to do something. I won't die in that house."

Mill's mouth scrunched but she was as impassive as Art had been when I told him my sins and then kissed him. She wouldn't flinch. She stepped close to me, and I could taste her lavender perfume in my mouth.

"Let me remind you that your mother died in that house," she said. I could feel the breath of each word on my cheek. "She went to Springfield and she came back and she died in that house."

She wanted to see me cry. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction. "Go away," I said and held my hand over my eyes.

I'd never known where my mother had gone. I'd dreamt it was Chicago or New Orleans. I would have been satisfied with St. Louis or Little Rock. But even I'd been to

Springfield, had rattled there over the bad roads in Art Carson's truck and eaten a greasy sandwich at a downtown diner. It wasn't much better than Joplin.

There was a slick of snot beneath my nose and I was breathing in gulps. I stomped my foot so the tears would stop and when that didn't work, threw the empty pie tin onto the sidewalk. It clanged there emptily between Mill and me and spun like a dropped coin, until my aunt stilled it beneath her shoe. I could see the label on the underside: "Miss and Miss Calvert, 442 West 2nd Street."

Mill bent down, unexpectedly stiff on her knees, and picked it up, to stack with her skillet and pan. "Did that make you feel better?" she said. "I bet it didn't."

I scrubbed at my eyes and wouldn't look at her. I wished again she would scream at me. I could scream back then—wordlessly, with all my inscrutable grief and the unformed fury I felt, toward Art and Billie and Mill and my mother even, and didn't understand.

But Mill was already walking on, down 2nd Street toward home, and I could do nothing but try to still my heaves and wish I had the gumption to do else. To walk out to the house on Black Cat Road and slink into Art's bed and welcome that fate and the weight of his body. To go to Union Depot throw myself in front of a through train. To go to a soda foundation and watch my legs ripple and shine in reflection on the counter's chrome and find a man who'd like to touch them as much as he liked to look.

Instead I went home, following Mill a block back. And there I lay clothed in my bed and listened to the din of the cicadas—so loud I couldn't hear the stolen money beneath my mattress in its tins. I wondered if I'd just dreamt it up.

I had to rip up the mattress to check. The coffee tins were still there, nestled in the springs. I poured them out on the rose rug: greened dimes and quarters grown fur, spattered among the flowers and the bloodstain. I stacked the coins in dollars and bunched the stacks in tens. After twenty minutes: \$280, with scattered change. Half as much money as I made in a year and dutifully turned over to Mill. Enough for 200 catalogue dresses and seventy pairs of shoes; enough for three iceboxes and a mohair living room set; nearly enough for a raccoon coat, the type girls in magazines and on the East Coast wore; half of what you'd need for a car.

I knew what it could buy but I didn't know how far \$280 could take me, if I ever worked up the nerve to spend it.

Chapter 3

Sinclair Hale came to Joplin in the last hot spell of 1929, picked by on the Old Wire Road by Art, like so many that summer, and given a camp bed on his porch for the night. I heard about Clair after he'd been sleeping on that camp bed for four nights, long enough to make an apostle out of Art. A T.G. Hamilton, sitting at Art's supper table, washing at his pump. When Art swung by Mill's he couldn't stop talking about Clair Hale, speaking right through gulps of lemonade. He had a stuck drifter, he said, a fantastic fellow, with stories straight out of the pictures and some ingenious ideas for getting rich.

"If he knows how to get rich why is he hanging around here?" I said. We were on Mill's porch: me on the stoop, with my head cocked to my shoulder—romantic, like I'd practiced—and Art pacing, so excited his legs wouldn't still. The day was so hot you could see it: how it bent the air over the road tar and rippled off the hood of Art's truck. I hadn't invited him here. Since the picnic he'd just been turning up.

"He says I should give up the lumber gig and really monetise my land," Art said. "Raise ostriches and peacocks on it, sell them for lady's hats."

Peacocks in Missouri, on land potatoes barely took to. Mill would love that, I thought. "How would you ever meet a person like Mr. Hale again if you didn't have to go to Springfield for Mr. Van Wey all the time?" I squirmed with the effort saying something nice.

Art huffed. "Springfield? I could take those feathers to department stores in St. Louis and Chicago, Clair says. Even New York."

"But you don't want to," I said. "You don't even sound like yourself when you say it."

Art rarely sounded like himself, just whomever had convinced him last—same words, same accent, and a school speech stiffness, like he'd been rehearsing. Mr. Hale's words were *monetise*, *free yourself*, and *New York*, with the vowels pumped up like tyres. They sounded funny in Art's mouth.

He stood over me, hands tucked into the back of his trousers. "How do you know what I want?"

"I've known you half my life."

"I've known me longer." He slumped against grille of his truck. "Why aren't you excited?"

"The birds? You'll never do anything like that," I said.

That's what was driving me mad about Art. Beneath his bluster and gullibility, there was nothing, no gumption. I would have kissed him again—in front of Mill's house and the

world—if he'd told me he'd start hosting séances himself, and I could believe it. Even better if I could make the props, the ectoplasm—cheesecloth scrunched up, with faces sheared from newspaper. I'd like a scheme like that.

I studied Art, the chest of rib-knitted wool that had crept into the vee of his shirt—long underwear even in this heat—his lankness against the truck grille. I felt fury at him like a burn, as from a pan or a stovetop: the shock of it tearing through the skin of the day, and the shame, stinging in your palm and throat, because you did it to yourself, carelessly let a finger drag, a hand droop. I wished I'd never kissed him at that picnic, had been regretting it all week. I pressed my lemonade glass to my forehead and closed my eyes so I didn't have to see him.

I felt the sag of the step as he sat beside me, his knee as it rolled out and knocked mine. “Hey, Clair says there's a lot of opportunity in what I do,” he said.

“Running lumber, really?”

I felt him writhe. “Picking up hitchhikers. Drifters. Running scams, stealing. Not killing anyone. Not the Benders. But we've been talking about it. We stayed up all night talking about it. Some of these guys, they've got to be carrying money. The stories they tell... Clair says he'd stay and help and.... you know.”

I looked at Art's foot, still moving, skittering on the stair; his boot sole flapping, a toe tonguing out. He thought I would know because I'd bragged to him about stealing the money from Pearl Drug. Really, I didn't know a thing about that sort of crime.

I could imagine it well though. Art's hitchhikers would set down tin mugs and rise from the supper table, faces scrunched in sheepishness and resignation—it burns more when you know you've done it yourself, been careless around strangers—and turn savings out of trouser pockets, out of hollow heels and the toes of socks. Art would grin uncertainly as coins spattered on the table and it wouldn't be wrong really, with all the hospitality he'd given free of charge. And the man with the gun, and the idea, making them all do this—that was Clair Hale and I'd never seen him, couldn't imagine then past the mouth of his pistol, but I was certain he was handsome.

I closed my eyes and imagined all this and felt like the first time I was ever drunk, when Inez and I stole a bottle of sherry Mill had stashed for Christmas and drank it all, until we thought the Oriental rug in her sitting room would swallow us. I felt like I was staring into a cut, the bone raw inside.

Art saw my face. I must have been pale, because he reached to hold my hand. “It's just what Clair says,” he said.

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Art invited me to dinner. He wanted me to meet Clair Hale. He wouldn't stop talking about Clair Hale. And as long as he talked about him and in his voice, the evening had a glister. It sprawled ahead of us like a swimming hole, surface smooth as a freshly made bed and depths unknown.

I left Art on the porch while I changed in my room. I tried three dresses, two blouses and skirts. Their slithers down my back were anxious; the zippers, sticky; the buttons, suddenly too fiddly for my fingers. The familiar floral of the wallpaper buzzed like a headache and my slip had a strange static grip.

I was conscious of the clock on my bedside table; and of Mill, due back, and the dinner I swore I'd make her; but mostly of Art sitting below, with an empty lemonade glass and the sun heating his neck. My room had a startling intimacy while he waited on the porch: my clothes and undergarments tumbling, slippery, out of the highboy; my bed disarranged, its sheets pale like the bottoms of feet. It seemed foolish that I'd ever conjured Art here: always in aftermath, always in a way that made me cringe.

I settled on a blouse Mill disapproved of, for the darts at its the bust, and a skirt that sufficed, and took the steps downstairs two at a time. I scrawled Mill a note and then paused in the kitchen, by the icebox, and after a thought, opened its tin door and grabbed the pork loins Mill had bought for tonight's supper, the ones I was supposed to prepare. Their wax paper packet was slick-cold; I had to hold onto the string. Supper at the Carsons was always stewed tomatoes and fried potatoes—and then the next day reversed—and I couldn't have the evening founder on something like hunger.

I banged through the door and stood awkward on the porch in front of Art, feeling the jitter of the door's screen behind me.

"Jeez, there's no rush," he said and yawned.

"Thought I'd bring pork," I said and pushed the packet into his hands. In front of him my hurry seemed ungainly. I put my hands behind my back so he couldn't see them shake. "It's just Mill," I said. "She'll be back."

If Mill came back, she'd stand like a gate on the drive: her eyebrows hitched up, inspecting Art and then me in the blouse she said "invited things." And Art, bashful, would tell a sterilised story, about the fellow on the porch bed and how he'd be moving on soon—nothing of schemes and guns—and then even if I could weasel out of chores and Mill's stare, all the promise of the evening would have gone, whistled away like air from a punctured tire.

But Art was dawdling. He was standing near Mill's rose bushes, looking up at the house, at the upstairs window with the Swiss dot curtains, waving there like a woman's gloves.

"Is that your bedroom there?" he said and pointed.

My stomach dipped and I wondered if he'd been thinking of it, as I struggled in and out of dresses.

But he turned and his face was blank and kind. "It's supposed to rain," he said. "Maybe you should close the window."

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There was little trace of Clair Hale at the Carsons' property: just sheets rumped on the bed on the porch, shoved up to show the ticking. Art trudged from the truck straight into the kitchen with the pork—"Billie, Billie, I brought you someone, and meat"—but I dawdled outside and edged toward that bed. I let a hand drop to it, finger a corner of the sheets, where they'd been frayed, stitched and re-stitched. They were heated by the sun as if by skin, as if they'd just been left.

Inside the house a pan clattered and water sloshed. I snatched my hand back, and Billie burst through the screen door. Her hair was frizzled, her face, kitchen-red. It fell when she saw me: "Oh, it's you."

My palms went slick. "Who else would it be?"

Billie was barefoot, of course, but in a sweater I remembered she'd worn often in high school, although she'd since passed it down to her sister Dot. It was pilled, greyed from washing, but it clung to her breasts, the dough of her stomach. She saw me looking at it and crossed her arms over her chest. "Just Sol. He promised to visit."

Sourness tanged on the back of my tongue. "I think you need to cut it off," I said. "He's old enough to be your father. He's *Inez's* father."

"Inez and I aren't really friends so I don't see that it matters." Billie twined her arms around her shoulders. "He took me to the pictures again on Thursday and then to dinner. He bought me a milkshake—a strawberry milkshake—and told me he likes my eyes. He says he can talk to me and I listen. None of his kids do."

Billie with her dumb, pooled eyes, her mouth that never closed. You felt you could tell her anything and she'd believe it. I thought of Sol, his waxed moustache, his hands tucked in his armpits for keeping, filling Billie's head with sweet nonsense and craning over

a table in a diner to see her breasts move in that sweater. I felt sick, like at the silt bottom of a milkshake.

“You shouldn’t encourage him,” I said.

Billie ran a toe along a cleft in the porch boards and smiled at it. She looked pretty—the breeze stirring her corn silk hair, her face soft as pastry. I remembered how I’d looked in the bureau mirror in my room: wan, my hair flat, my nose strange. My heart clenched with my throat at that.

“So, how’s Roy?” Billie said, idly, as if he’d just slid into her head. Her voice was sweet and wheedling.

“I don’t know.” I did know: still working the stockroom at the drugstore, still pretending I didn’t exist, that he’d never touched me. Sometimes, when he sloped up the back stairs, arms stacked with amber bottles and jars of throat lozenges, I thought I’d scream just to make his eyes settle on me. Billie didn’t ask about Art and I was almost relieved.

“Who’s this fellow Art has around now?” I said, to change the subject.

Billie rolled her eyes. “Oh, Mr. Hale. He’s horrid. Night before last he asked if I would make him chicken Key-ef. Now, what is chicken Key-ef?”

“Kiev. It’s a city in the Ukraine.”

“What’s that have to do with chicken?” She sighed, as if she were familiar now to weariness with the appetites of men.

We were both looking at the bed, the dishevelled sheets, Billie exasperated, her hands bunched at her hips. “Well, doesn’t matter anyway. He should be leaving now,” she said.

I kept my voice steady, incurious. “That so?”

“I really wish Art wouldn’t,” she said. “There’s never enough food to go around.”

In the kitchen she was stretching lard into gravy, frying potatoes in medallions. She gave me a knife dulled toothless, a skirtful of eyed potatoes. I was clumsy with them: I still didn’t know what to do with the hand that had touched those sheets. I’d tucked it into my pocket but it still stung.

--

Mr. Hale was at supper, eating the pork loins I’d stolen from Mill’s icebox and the potatoes Billie and I had fried, and talking low to Art. I sat catty-corner from him, across the pan of bulldog gravy, and I could hardly make out his words over the dishes. Just *peacocks*, *cash*.

Mr. Hale had looked at me only once, when Art introduced us—hitching up his shoulders in my direction, “Clair, this is Billie’s friend, Faye. Faye, I told you about Mr.

Hale.” Mr. Hale’s eyes had fallen on me then, but as if incidentally, when scanning a crowd for faces he knew, and finding mine strange, drifting on. I’d looked down quickly, to my plate, the pink meat there, embarrassed of the import I’d given him. He wasn’t so handsome. His hair, when it caught the light, was slightly ruddy—his eyes too—and they quarreled with the bottle green of his suit. I’d never seen a man in a suit that colour, and I decided I didn’t like it.

The pork had only been for two and we were six: Art and Mr. Hale, given half, and Billie, me and the littler Carsons, Dotty and Estelle, to make do with the rest. Beside me Billie grumbled about that, although she’d been snatching potatoes slices from the pan as they fried, had likely eaten a full spud of them like that and burned her fingers so badly she was still sucking on them at the table. I’d been trying to tease her about Sol, to see her laugh him off—“not exactly a strawberry milkshake,” I said, and “will Sol like you fat?”—but she hadn’t laughed, just creased her forehead at me and told me to cut faster.

I wanted this Mr. Hale to look at me, listen to what I said. He wasn’t handsome but I feel that way about men sometimes: ache for their attention, when I grope for it and find its lack. I wished I could think of something thrilling to say, to make his eyes fix on me. But everything that had ever been in my head had fallen out.

And anyway, he was speaking only to Art, as men sometimes do, like we don’t have ears. He canted across the table, elbows propped close to his plate, and pegged his fork at him between each bite: “I met this fellow in St. Louis *something something* chicken feathers,” I caught when I strained, “made them look all nice and fine *something something* suspect a thing.”

Art bent his head toward him and nodded, tried to look pensive with his cheeks fat with potato.

“What are they talking about?” Billie’s breath fell on my cheek, greasy from the gravy. We were jammed on the same side of the table and because Billie is left-handed, and careless, our elbows kept knocking.

“How am I supposed know?” I said under my breath. Billie frowned.

To Mr. Hale I’m the same as her, I thought: fastened to her as Art had introduced us; no different than Dotty and Estelle to the other side, really, twelve and thirteen and opening their mouths only to eat.

And then Billie spoke.

“If you know how to get rich then, Mr. Hale, why aren’t you rich yourself?” she said.

Mr. Hale turned from Art and looked at her. She rocked her shoulders back to greet him, the fabric of that sweater moving like fur on a cat. I wondered how she'd learned to talk like that to a man, coy and testing, if a dance and two date with Sol Valence could work that kind of magic.

"That's the question." Mr. Hale grinned but it only moved one side of his mouth. "I was rich once but it didn't last."

"How'd you do it then?" Billie's voice was taut with suspicion.

Mr. Hale slouched back in his chair and made a show of rummaging in his trouser pocket for a cigarette case. It was silver-plated, I saw when he got it out, and opened with the press of a thumb. His languor, his ease in the Carsons' house unsettled me.

"I won't tell you all my schemes," he said. "You might go off and try them yourself." He smirked at Art and after a beat, Art smirked back.

"Well, I don't care about getting rich," Billie said. "It's not that important."

"It is that important," Mr. Hale said. He pulled a cigarette from the pale rank of them in the case. "So I'll tell you one a girl can't do: oil."

He had an audience now: Dotty and Estelle craning forward, elbows on the table; Art, swallowing the last of his pork so he didn't have to strain to listen over his open-mouthed chewing; Billie with her arms folded over her chest, wary and curious; all our forks stilled on our plates. Mr. Hale stretched in the heat of that attention, a cat in a square of sun, and put an unlit cigarette in his mouth.

"See, three, four years ago I went down to West Texas because I'd heard that's where a man could get rich," he said. "Place called Hendrick where they struck oil in '26, so remote you could only reach it by cattle trails. They were pulling 390 barrels a day out of the ground there."

He paused to let that sink in but he might as well as have been measuring the weight of a horse in beans—it was meaningless to us. He grinned in the silence.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "When you see first see oilfield, it's something else. A forest of matchstick trees and somehow one spurting a black swill, so much and so thick it's like smoke before it falls. I thought a rig was on fire, the first time I seen it gush. Everyone in that oilfield, even the old-timers, whose blood ran black, who'd been at Spindletop, was petrified of fire. And that fear got into me, under my skin. I'd go back to the shack I was living in, out there in a little town called Wink, and my hands would be slick with oil and my nose full of the stench of it, like the smell of hell but somehow sweet, and I wouldn't light a lamp or a cigarette until I'd scrubbed myself nearly raw and my clothes too. Even when I was

clean the flame in my kerosene lamp would make me jump. You still have to light it though: you can't live in the dark."

He struck a match on its book and we started at the flame, the sudden orange lash. He lit the cigarette on his lip with that match and then knocked it out with a snap of his wrist and tossed the book onto the tablecloth. It landed near my plate. "The Gayest Place in Chicago," in read, whorled white script on teal blue. When no one was looking I curled my hand over that matchbook and pulled it to the edge of the table so it fell onto my lap, the valley of skirt between my knees.

"Sometimes I still think I smell of that stuff." He extended an arm to Dotty held his sleeve under her nose. "What do I smell like?" he said.

Her face scrunched in confusion but she sniffed him obediently. "How men who wear nice suits smell," she said.

Mr. Hale laughed, and Art with him, late but enthusiastically, slapping his knee. A smile slunk onto Dotty's face.

Billie glared at her sister and sat up straighter in her chair. "If you got rich on oil what are you doing here?" she said.

Mr. Hale blew smoke through his nose and crossed his arms over his chest to match her. "It doesn't last," he said. "Money is like water running through your hands, unless you own the rig."

I studied Mr. Hale again, over the rim of my tin cup when I drank. I wanted a sign that he could pull off a scheme like Art said, hint of a capacity for callousness, for crime. I thought it was in his mouth: it was tensile, curled. He would have a pistol, I thought, and not just a shotgun for chasing off coyotes and foxes like folks have around here. He may pause but he wasn't in the end afraid to light that match.

He was talking again, about when he was in California, on a movie lot and then driving a car along the new highway that was stitched along the coast there, all the way to Canada, sometimes right on cliff edges. He seemed to have been everywhere: Florida, New York, Alaska. My brain could only keep track of the places, like fixing pins on a map, and not follow the stories he was telling of them: knife fights and redwoods and barges down the Mississippi—

"That's enough," Billie said, interrupting him. "You'll keep the girls up at night dreaming foolish things."

Mr. Hale held up his hands in mock surrender. “If you’d like,” he said. He picked up his fork again. He had a fancy grasp on it, the tongs turned down. I saw Estelle flip hers around to match his.

“I have to thank you for the supper, Miss Carson,” he said to Billie.

“We’re kind to our guests,” she replied and stiffened.

“The potatoes are good tonight—rich. Better than at breakfast. And at supper yesterday. And the night before.” He took an enthusiastic, cold forkful of them, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek not to laugh.

“Well, Faye here brought the pork,” she said defensively.

“Is that so?”

I felt his eyes on me like a weight, a book on my head to balance. I should be dismissive, I thought.

“Christ, Billie,” I said, “you’re not supposed to embarrass a person giving charity.”

“You know we’re grateful, Faye” she said quietly.

“Stop mewling,” I said, and I was pleased with the gristle in my voice. It made me sound like I smoked more than I did.

“And why are you feeding these folks, then?” Mr. Hale cocked his head at me, a pantomime of curiosity.

“They’d starve otherwise, wouldn’t they?” I was dizzy to have his attention but it wasn’t evident in my voice.

“That’s noble of you.” His smile stretched over held back laughter, but it twisted both sides of his mouth now—I could see his sharp canines. I couldn’t tell whether it was at the Carsons or me but that laughter felt warm: like a swig of alcohol, like when Roy broke open a case of stomach bitters, which he said were mostly liquor, and he took a nip and I took a mouthful, to prove that I could. When men look at you, laugh with you, it’s like that, that taste: a sear on your tongue then heat, fingering from your stomach and throat.

I couldn’t hold his attention though. Already it was straying, back to Art and money-making schemes: “If they ever found zinc on this land you’d be rich...”

I flipped open the matchbook in my lap and I looked at it. The matches, the four of them left, were sketched to look like naked women: the slide of their legs; the fullness and clefts of their rears; the safety tips as their hair—brilliantly red. I fingered one, traced the fiddle swoop of her hips and an idea caught in my head, a way to keep Mr. Hale looking at me, listening.

“I know a way you can monetise your land, Art,” I said. My voice wasn’t my own. It was the one I had for the telephone at the drugstore: stretched, my accent all in my nose.

Art shot a conspiratorial grin at Mr. Hale. “How?” he said. There was a new condescension in his voice that enraged me but I beamed at him nonetheless.

“Just the way everyone reckons you already do,” I said.

Inez, whispering about Art selling his sisters like horseflesh in this house—how desperately I’d wanted it to be true, for something in Joplin to be sordid and strange, for Art to have more under his surface. I bent my head to my plate, watched my fork dandle in the potatoes. If I didn’t see them hearing me, it was as if I wasn’t saying it to them at all.

“You know folks say you run a brothel out here,” my voice said. Or maybe it was Inez’s; it was sing-songy and snide like hers was. “Picking up hitchhikers, showing them around town like the governor. And if everyone already thinks it maybe that’s just what you should do.”

Once a cousin of my aunt’s shot at a pigeon on one of the electrical wires that were newly strung along our street then. Tugged a pistol from his jacket pocket and shot it from the dining table we’d dragged onto the porch for supper. The shot cracked near my ear and I couldn’t hear a thing for ten minutes except the whistle of it, like a sheet tearing. It had made me so dizzy I’d had to lie down.

I feel like that when I say something reckless or untrue, when I talk myself into corners, like I’ve lost half my senses and I’m just bluffing, with no feeling for truth or the ground, like I can’t hear a thing.

I met Estelle’s gaze first. She was chewing on her lip, her eyes wounded and wet. I could see each scissor snip of her kitchen haircut—square, separate, notched across her forehead—and for some reason that sight sheared at my heart. I couldn’t turn back though: Mr. Hale was watching and anyway, something had gotten into me when I was fourteen and I’d lost all my sympathy. Maybe I am possessed.

“I’ve heard it from a half-dozen people,” I said.

I cautioned a look at Art. He seemed stunned, eyes stitched to his empty plate. I couldn’t figure what had so astounded him: the sex or the contempt the town must have for him, to think this thing true, but surely, he had to know both—at least the outlines.

I felt Billing pulling on my arm. She pushed her face inches from mine; it was naked and pale as a skinned potato. “What are you talking about, Faye? Who says this?”

But Mr. Hale was laughing. “Is that what they say in town, about Art and this place?” he said. “What do you think of that, Art?”

Art jerked as if woken from sleep. “Oh um, I don’t know—it’s not good.”

Mr. Hale leaned back in his chair and propped his hands behind his head. He scanned the table—Estelle, Dot, Billie—but his eyes stuck on mine. “Sorry, Art but I’m not sure what I think of your offerings here,” he said and his mouth slanted again in that half-smile.

“Can we stop talking about this, please?” Billie said. “Faye.” In her mouth my name had all the softness and whine I hated in it—when it was dragged out on Mill’s voice, hollered up the stairs—and her hand still crawled on my arm.

I shook her off. “Frankly,” I said, “it hasn’t helped that you’ve been seen around town with a man as old as Sol Valence.”

Billie flinched. “Who said this?” she said. “Was it Inez? Oh Jesus, if it was Inez—” Her soft chin jutted but trembled. She had always wanted Inez to like her, had always wanted to hold Martin and coo over him, to touch Inez’s wedding mink, her salon-waved hair. I always had to look away from Billie then, from the grossness of all that wanting.

“Did you not know about this?” I said to Art. “Didn’t you know Inez Valence in school? She was one of my friends.”

Art shook his head but he had to know her. Everyone in town knew Inez, her heavy, bandolined hair and her mouth.

Billie was whimpering, crying thick tears into her lap. Her hair had straggled into the grease on her plate.

Mr. Hale slithered down in his chair. “I’ll tell you who says these things,” he said. “Women say these things. They stitch their legs together and then go around seeing the carnal sin everywhere. They’re possessed by it. So, I don’t think you know anything about this at all, Miss Faye. Brothels, cat houses. I think you’re naïve, and squeamish.” Beneath the table he rocked his knees out. One knocked mine and I drew it away, my throat stiff.

“Art, are you going to let him talk to me like this? Art,” I said.

“I don’t know, Faye.” Art was rooting a red shred of potato skin from his teeth with a knife, his mouth stretched open so I couldn’t figure his expression. He might have been gawking as witlessly as his kid sisters.

“Art,” I said, and I couldn’t keep the hurt out of my voice. He was insipid and boneless and it was an affront because I’d had to choose him, I’d had to—

A crash. Mr. Hale had slapped his hand on the table, set all the dishes ringing.

“I think I’ve got it now,” he said. “See earlier, I couldn’t figure out why Miss Faye was here, why she brought the pig, when she seems to so despise you people—spreading gossip like that.”

Billie looked at him, lip caught in her teeth. “What are you about? Faye doesn’t despise us,” she said. “She’s known us since we were all little.” She’d bunched up the ends of the gingham tablecloth to mop at her nose but she let it fall now and looked at me, eyes frosted like a fancy glass.

I reached out and held her hand. This time when I squeezed she didn’t squeeze back.

“I’ve known them a lot longer than you’ve known them,” I said to Mr. Hale. “So you just can’t come here and think you know—”

“Let me finish.” He stood up from the table and came to stand behind Art and clapped him on the back. “I reckon Miss Faye here has got Art in the crossfires,” he said. “She’s not sweet on him or anything, not in any way I recognise, but I know what loins means.”

I felt a raw rise of panic in my throat.

“What’s he saying?” Billie said. Her voice was wobbly as gelatin, as her chin.

“I’m saying Faye’s got an angle and it’s why she’s here and it’s why she brought the damn dinner. She wants something from you people. They always do.” His smirk, lopsided again.

“Faye, is this true?” Billie said. She tugged at my arm.

“You’ve got some nerve,” I said to Mr. Hale but it was too late. He’d already settled back, satisfied, in his chair. The Carsons, even the little ones, were looking at me with mistrust, their mealy faces closed and all the same.

“For Christ’s sake, he’s got you,” I said. I shoved my napkin into a gravy puddle on my plate and stood, knocking back my chair. “Some people will believe anything.”

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I had a mind to walk home but by the porch I’d burned through my rage. I sat on the stoop and in my pocket my hands found the matchbook, flicked it open. The girls again, the row of them like white piano keys. I wondered if I looked like that from behind—wasp-waisted and bow-legged—and how I’d ever tell. I wanted a cigarette, for lack of anything to do with my hands and mouth, but those matches were too pretty to light.

The Carsons were inside, through the living room, but they seemed remote. Art especially: like a portrait face seen a thousand times over the mantle, so familiar it doesn’t even look human. I couldn’t find it in myself to be embarrassed around them, as Mr. Hale wanted me to be. I wasn’t sure what I should be embarrassed of: scheming to marry Art or letting my despising of him jut up into that scheme and disarrange it.

And I really did despise him. Mostly how he couldn't walk in a way that wasn't a gallop, lurching his head with his steps, and how he was just feet of pink felt inside his clothes. How he had no capacity for excitement or sin, for all Inez and the wives whispered about him and he talked of séances and borrowed schemes. There was only a surface strangeness and it wasn't much to scratch at. For me there had only ever been that, and the novelty of his maleness. His legs jarring Mill's coffee table. The spectre of him in my bedroom, upsetting the sheets and the drawers. A man's freedom to drive where he wanted, take a girl the 90 miles to Springfield and back. But Art would never think to touch her, even when it grew dark outside of Carthage and the jostling of the road jammed them together repeatedly on the seat, sucked her stockings to his dungarees. He'd never think to run a brothel, to do anything else to his drifters than offer them supper and a dry bed.

Mr. Hale was different though. He'd mocked me and seen through my scheme but I couldn't make myself dislike him. Not in a way that stuck and didn't just excite me.