

FLECTION

A Wonderful Plan

Zeely

That night, I convinced myself I was dying of a completely internal disease. It was raging inside my chest and would surely soon puncture my heart and end my life for good. I would faint, suddenly pale and dead, sending shockwaves of grief through my family and friends, and worst of all they would be completely unable to understand what had happened to me. All I wanted was to take my mind off the jerk that had made me feel this way but, apparently, even that was too much to ask. I was slouched in the back of Janie's cramped, dirty car in the middle of a near-empty parking lot. My mind was very much still on Matt, and I was becoming enraged at the fact that nobody else seemed to notice my awful mood. In retrospect, it was probably because the three of us were drunk. Carley was yelling, not singing, along to the radio, and Janie was trying to roll a joint. Half of the weed was scattered across her lap, and tiny wads of saliva soaked papers lay at her feet. It was a bad scene.

Janie and Carley were the people I considered my best friends at the time, for better or for worse. They had picked me up so that we could drive around aimlessly in the hot mid-July night. Janie had just turned 18 two weeks ago, and we were using this to our full advantage. Our first legally-obtained carton of cigarettes sat beneath my feet, along with a bunch of X-rated magazines that had lost their novelty as soon as we bought them. Tonight, Carley had managed to swipe a bottle of Sailor Jerrys from her parents' rarely monitored and ever-dwindling liquor cabinet, and so we had parked in back of a bowling alley and gone to work on the rum, leaving the logistics of how we would get home to ponder at a later hour.

D e n m a t

I told Janie that I was taking another pack of cigarettes and slid a shining new box of Camels from out of the long rectangular carton. The cellophane crackled as I unwrapped it. I barely knew how to do anything, let alone do anything well, but one thing I was great at was smoking cigarettes. Mastering this worthless and ultimately fatal activity was the single most strategic and successful move I had made in my high school career. It gave me the protective veneer I needed to navigate the world free of palm-sweat and social anxiety. The cigarette in my hand, the act of exhaling a cloud of toxic smoke into the world, reminded me that I was cool, and a bad-ass, and I certainly did not deserve to be treated like this. The joint had been abandoned and the bottle was being passed around again, so I took it and tipped the amber liquid into my mouth. It clattered down my throat and landed in my belly like a biological weapon. With my rising inebriation, an intense and familiar feeling of loss spread through my central nervous system, branching out across thin, spidery veins so that everything from my fingernails to my eyeballs acknowledged my emotional pain. Like a surgical patient's nightmare, I could feel everything but had lost control of my body, curled and splayed pathetically along the crevices of the car. I had heard nothing from him in two long weeks.

As I wallowed and Carley and Janie murmured to each other in the front seat, the thought slowly came to me, accompanying the flow of alcohol into my bloodstream. I became aware that Matt was somewhere nearby, and that I was going to find him and make him explain himself. I would be very calm and tactical about it, making sure to maintain the upper-hand with chilly silences and skeptical looks. He would be so nervous and feel so guilty that I would have him begging for my forgiveness in a matter of minutes. Then he would whisk me away, back to his house where we would spend the rest of the night wrapped in each other's arms, and he would tell me how much he loved me and missed me and how very, very sorry he was. The rum glowed warmly in my guts. It was a wonderful plan.

"Let's take a walk," I said to the front seat. "I feel like a cop's going to pull in here any minute."

I am still not sure why I knew he was close by, but it didn't feel like a hunch, or wishful thinking. The feeling of knowing was the same as if I had just recalled the name of an actor I had been trying hard to think of, a sudden moment of

certainness after a great fog of frustration. The truth of it shone out like an orb from the top of my head. The three of us wandered down a wide, well-lit street of bars and shops, through occasional streams of people: gaggles of townie girls in heels, or else vaguely threatening walls of large, young men, all burdened with the heavy task of getting wasted. I counted the number of things that reminded me of him as I went. The storefront where we had crouched during a sudden rainstorm, the breakfast place where we had eaten together a handful of times. Even the fire escape that he had used to climb to the roof on a dare with his friends, an incident which had nothing to do with me but had been relayed to me, by him, and so was absorbed forever into my own memory. All the small, inconsequential moments that had accumulated into a relationship seemed so significant now, so overloaded with drama. They were haunted by his stupid, infuriatingly living ghost.

“Emily!” Carley called to the back of my head. Both of them had stopped walking several seconds before. “Do you want to check out the Shop? Maybe they’ll serve us.” The Shop was a coffeehouse by day, bar by night. Because of this, people of all ages flowed through its doors from morning to midnight, making the bestowment of alcohol to minors a hazy ordeal, left mostly up to the discretion of its bartenders. We were young, and we looked it, but we were just bored enough to give it a try. We crossed the street and paused outside the large glass windows of the narrow bar, smoking our cigarettes down to their stubs. I dropped the butt on the ground, grinding it over and over into the sidewalk with my boot until it separated into its component parts: black ash, yellow paper, smoke-choked cotton. We all nodded like conspirators and stepped into the noisy bar.

To my great chagrin, the Shop was in the midst of an open mic night. Our town was not known for its thriving artistic culture. This gave the local creative types that much more reason to be miserable, and to all huddle together in a sweaty, unwashed clump on a Saturday night in the one place that seemed to care about them and what they were attempting to do. The venue was new enough that it was not worn down by the enthusiastic patronage quite yet. Warm light fixtures adorned the wall-space in between art installations, glowing sleepily over wood paneling and mismatched couches and chairs. But what might have been a serene place to hang out with a latte and pretend to be writing/reading during the day was now transformed into a claustrophobic performance space. A long-haired young man with an acoustic guitar was warbling and groaning into a microphone at the back of the room, his knees at uncomfortable-looking angles as he perched on a bare, wooden stool. I pulled a blatant look of disgust across

my face, bending my neck towards my friends to make sure that we were all on the same page about how lame this situation was. I hated crowded spaces, and I hated sensitive, crooning types with guitars. Unfortunately, it was obvious that Janie was taken with the boy on stage already, swaying back and forth to the melody and holding on to her knapsack straps for support. My friends had their limits.

Carley had already returned from the bar with two perspiring beers in her hand. I looked at her in disbelief, mouthing how did you do that? We turned conspicuously away from the bartender, who was staring. She smiled and looked downward at her lingerie-catalog chest, which was cradled perfectly by her tight blue tank top. That's how, she mouthed back.

"You only got two beers?" Janie asked, thrusting her attention back to the two of us.

"I freaked out!" Carley hissed defensively. "I could only carry two and I didn't want to have to go back to the bar to get a third one. We can share these, okay?"

I noticed the man behind the bar was still looking at us, and my face flushed quickly with panic and embarrassment. I wasn't completely sure that I couldn't be arrested for drinking a beer that my friend got by perching her perfect breasts in front of some nothing-to-lose bartender. For all I knew, that bartender was an undercover cop.

"Why don't we go out back to drink these?" I said, trying not to sound frantic about it. I was starting to feel as transparent as rice paper in a sea of older, cooler people who must have known exactly what we were up to. We elbowed our way through the crowd, holding our beers tenderly like big frothy, sloshing prizes, and made it through the open door that led to the patio, a small fenced-in area frosted with fairy lights and scattered with uncomfortable outdoor furniture. I had to sit down very quickly because as soon as we exited the bar I felt, briefly, like I was about to have a stroke.

The two of them became quickly aware of the situation, because they heard Matt's voice too, which was unmistakable. They slid into the extra chairs at the table I was suddenly sitting at, asking me almost gleefully what I was going to do. As I became aware that he was truly there, my mind sped up, neurons shooting information back and forth in terrible understanding. It had been painfully obvious that Matt had been ignoring me. However, the cruel affirmation that in this period of silence he had been going about his normal business and had not, in fact, been barricaded in his room, quietly brooding about what a horrible mistake he had made, going through strategic bouts of





planning how he was going to apologize to me and then collapsing into muffled, masculine sobs, was too much for me to handle. Over in the corner of the patio, I saw the tall bulk of him looming, surrounded by a cluster of people, a position he found natural and comfortable. He was a casual collector of friends, and so wide-reaching was his net, so undiscerning, that a friend or group of them was usually waiting just around the corner, in parking lots and bars and grocery stores, to engage him in conversation. He had probably come here alone, on a whim, prowling with the easy independence bestowed upon his privileged gender. Maybe he had gone up to the microphone and told a few jokes off the cuff, made everyone in the room fall in love with him, just a little. I was beginning to see the strategy in it. He was attempting to turn away from me and the focused inferno of our feelings for each other, instead dispersing it into the greater world, letting it burn out and fall like ashes onto everyone he knew. He'd give them just a fraction of himself and let all of their fractional love support him, instead of mine. His voice continued to accent the conversation taking place in the corner, a low youthful rumble. He was laughing. At that moment, I wanted two irreconcilable things: first, to again be the recipient of all of his affection, every wonderful iota. Second, I wanted to close my fingers around his neck and squeeze until I felt the life slip away from him.

I drained the beer in front of me, forgetting about our agreement to share. I told Carley and Janie to wait for me at the table and I stood, swaying a bit, feeling my stomach swell from the carbonation. They looked at each other nervously but made no move to stop me. I marched over to the group of people surrounding Matt and they turned to look at me, parting in a curious, casual way until I was standing in the center of the crowd, facing my nemesis. He was holding a cigarette up to his face and grinning stupidly at me. The grinning made

my temper flare again, and I wondered if I was sober enough to effectively knee him in the groin. But the anger just settled into steely silence, and after a moment I became more aware of my body, the insubstantial awkwardness of it. I crossed my arms in front of me and continued to stare at Matt through slitted eyes. He shifted his stance, uncomfortable with the silence.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked.

An insane smirk spread across my face, as though his speaking first had given me a terrible power over him. I took two strides forward so that I could reach up and whisper in his ear.

“If you don’t stop this bullshit, I’m going to tell everyone that you’re fucking a seventeen year old.” I told him. “Maybe I’ll even tell the police.”

I stood back and smiled again as I saw the color leave his face, dropping out of sight along with the cigarette in his hand. Before he could respond, I turned around, gathered my friends, and exited the bar in the space of sixty seconds. I felt light, like I could run forever without losing my breath.

Much later that night, I was curled in my bed in my parents’ basement, half-asleep. I heard the unlocked sliding door open and shut, smelled the tobacco and alcohol cloud of him as he quietly weighed down the other half of the bed. He draped his arm around me and sighed heavily like a wounded beast. I said nothing, feigning sleep. In the morning, I told myself, we would put things back the way they were, and all would be forgiven.



Blood and Catfish

Christian

“I’m dying.” Josiah carries on, trailing behind me, holding his thumb. “I’m dying. I’ll bleed out. Stupid, stupid knife.”

“Stop talking about it. You’re making it worse.”

“Next thing you know I’ll step on a snake, get bitten, die.” His steps are heavy, swishing through the grass, cracking dry limbs.

“Quit it.” I turn around. A ring of dark red seeps from the top of his bandage. “Stop making it worse than it is. You should’ve been careful.”

“You let me use that knife.”

“Grandaddy’s gonna fix it up right. You’re not dying.” We walk on. Beside us, shadows of clouds drift across hazy pine and oak mountains.

“It’s throbbing bad,” Josiah says.

... Cut that thing’s head off with my knife You cut it, Jess I told you Why don’t you? You listen to me, Jo You cut it, scaredy ...

“Act your age,” I state. He’s thirteen.

We stride through the tall, thick, grassy field,

... Cut the head off, Jo, it’s just that my hand is cramping or I would ...

amongst flying winged grasshoppers, every one of them red.

... You just don’t like blood, Jess, so you’re making me ...

“Hope we don’t see a black bear. Danny saw one last year, remember?”

“Danny’s full of it,” I state.

“Says the Mexicans that dig up the rocks on his mountain saw one too. They’d know, the Mexicans. Wonder how much those Mexicans make off them rocks. They sell them down in

Texas to the rich people, he says.”

... I can’t look, won’t. Him sawing the flat square head.

L i n v i l l e

The catfish blood mixed with his ...

“Plenty,” I say. The mountains parallel to us roll hazy across the land in the late afternoon heat. Pine tops jut above oaks. White splotches of boulder buried deep in Granddaddy’s land peek through wooded cover. “That ain’t for me, digging boulders.”

... Be careful, Josiah ... Don’t ask me to do something, then tell me how, Jess ...

“Jesse,” Josiah says, “stop. Look at it.”

“No.”

“Jess,” he pleads, “I need you to.” He unravels the bloody undershirt. “Hold this.”

I step back. “I ain’t touching your blood.”

... I’m cut, I’m cut, look what you did to me, you made me ...

“Why? We’re related.”

“You get diseases that way.”

“Only if the other-en is infected.”

“No.” I look off to the mountains again, to the Ouachitas running into Arkansas.

“Tell me how it is? How bad is it?”

I go ahead and look. I have to. I’m supposed to, Daddy says. I’m the oldest.

... I’m sliced good, Jesse, I’m sliced something good ... Cover it, Jo, cover it up

His cut gapes open like parted lips. A speck of white bone is visible deep inside. I turn back. “Looks fine.”

“Help me wrap it.”

... Cover the cut so dirt don’t get in, Jo ...

“Let it alone. It’s good for cuts to have air.”

“By the way you keep avoiding this,” he holds his thumb up, “I’d say you’re queasy at my thumb,” Josiah hollers.

I turn to face him again, “That’s a lie. Shut up.”

... It needs air, Jess, right? ... Bandage it, I don’t want to see it not wrapped ...

“I think you are. You always have been, too. The time Brother caught that treble hook on his thumb, I had to pull it out, and you’re our big brother! Me and him laughed home, all right.”

“I had to finish cleaning those fish I’d caught us. I tried to let you clean this one and look what happened.” I say.

“Why, you made me.”

I walk on, leaving him behind. Josiah eventually catches up to match my steps again.

... Dang you, Jess, it's throbbing bad ...

Each stride I think of bone, milky white bone. More white boulders peek on the mountainside. A warm liquid rises into my throat from my belly. I wipe my sweaty forehead.

... I'm terrible at cleaning fish, you know it, Jess You wanted to clean that fish ...

I breathe deep. Jo mutters and whimpers behind me. I inhale deep.

... Wrap it up in your shirt I can't, I need help, Jess I need to gather our gear Help me, Jess ...

I look above, sky blue, the lasting moon, pine needles. We meet a dirt trail.

... Wrap it yourself, Jo, I need to gather, we need to hurry It hurts awful, don't be scared, help I ain't scared, don't say that again ...

“Is it real hot today?” I ask.

“What?”

“It's real hot.”

I count my steps, one, one, two, three, three, four, fighting warm liquid rising again to my throat. A red grasshopper jumps about my feet, red like Jo's blood. ... that knife impact, that spurt blood, slippery fish, dang him, slippery fish ...

“It's a hot one today, it is.”



“Watch your step, Jess, don’t trip. I can’t carry you home.”

“It’s hot.”

... dang that fish. Why couldn’t he have handled that knife like I showed him? All his blood, slippery fish ...

“Lookie. There’s Grandaddy.” Jo runs. Grandaddy waves from the porch in his overalls, no shirt, and hands on hips. “Grandaddy! I’m bleeding,” Jo hollers, “cut by Jesse’s knife when I was cleaning supper.”

“Woohwee, boy,” Grandaddy’s voice rings from the porch.

I trudge to the trough, by the horse. “Let’s fix that up, boy,” I hear. I plunge my heated head into the warm water.

... I know what you are, Jess, scared, you’ve always hated blood ...

Water in my ears. Water in my eyes.

... I know what you are, Jess, Daddy does too, says you won’t even help your own hurt family, you’re so scared ...



Gar Holes of This World

Lynn Veach

Bruiser Wallace sat on the Pulpit Stump throwing pebbles into the Gar Hole. He was dressed in a starched white shirt, bow tie, suspenders, knickers, argyles, and tan-colored shoes. His blazer was folded beside him, straw boater hat atop it. TeenyCat, in a white linen Palm Beach suit, tasteful tie, and two-tone spectators, slipped in behind him, watched a while, then picked up a fallen limb, snapped it. Bruiser jumped up, spinning, pulling a gun as he went. “Who the hell are you, Black-Boy-in-Suit-So-White? Sneak up on me, you’re likely to end up in bits fed to the gars in the Gar Hole there.”

“Oh, Massa-Bleeksburg-Bruiser Wallace, don’t shoot me with yo Mistah Gat!”

“Sorry. You’re the one I was sent to see. Mr. Cat?”

“TeenyCat am I.” Drops the accent. “Not quite the expected? Under-flashy?”

“What’s with you?”

“I so liked ‘Black-Boy-in-Suit-So-White.’ Maybe my A.K.A.? But I beg a slight correction in your oral commitment to mayhem and violence. You’d need a real chopper-tommy to dice me up. A gat, even a .44, is somewhat limiting among thugs and hoods, but ish kabibble.”

“Don’t feel obliged to ante-up hooey. You’re a hot sketch to my Reuben, but don’t razz me overmuch. I’m Bleeksburg Wallace.”

“Bruiser Wallace. A.K.A. not for size.”

“I don’t use ‘Bruiser’ here. I’m from these parts.”

“So I’ve heard. Sweet, shy, woman-saving local yokel re-born.”

“Woman-saving?”

“Miss Perils-of-Pauline, alias Little-Black-Orphan-

Sadler

Annie. Saved her from that mean locomotive and fevery Daddy Villain.”

“What’s with the bushwa?”

“You butt me. I’ll butt you. We can test the giggle water together in the rarefieds.”

They sat on the Pulpit Stump. Each lit a cigarette, took a puff, passed it on.

“My slogan is, ‘Those who smoke together stay together.’ I’m sending it to American Tobacco’s ad men.”

“It won’t beat ‘Try a Lucky instead of a sweet!’”

“A fag’s a fag. I’m not talking an Ethel or Pink-Powder-Puff Valentino. You’re no profiteer. I’m fixated on your little deal.”

“You checked me out?”

“An inside source gave me the fetish. The outside ones produced the fabrication. Lieutenant to Al Capone, Johnny Torrio, Bugs Moran. Not many say you’re from this old-blind-pig Southern Illinois town without a White Castle and as distant in time from Chicago as....”

“Mississippi is from your heaven.”

“Right.”

“Your family was among the Black hordes moving up from the Sweet and Moody Southland to escape the Ku Klux Klan. Only....”

“Only they’re something fierce here, too. Harlem’s Renaissance plain passed us by. Tycoons are the ‘in’s’ here. I’m just a poor singer-boy what never learned to sing ‘I Love the Land of Old Black Joe.’”

“Swing low, sweet TeenyCat, is the thing. Here, you can use up nine lives faster than spit sputters. You’re caught between as I see it. The KKK for one. Capone’s or Moran’s lads, for two. They don’t love your color exactly either.”

“That’s for damn sure. The only thing lower than my color is pink—liberal pinko-ski.”

Bruiser laughed. “Not to say ‘Red-ski.’ You’re a card-carrying Communist? Socialist? The Red Scare?”

“After serious consideration, I decided even TeenyCat couldn’t creep around them.”

“Your Red Sox aren’t exactly in tall cotton, are they? With trading the Babe.”

“Point taken. But our Chicago White Sox are in such low cotton, they might

as well be the Black Sox. They're having to go Shoeless. But I don't want anybody singing 'bye, bye blackbird.' TeenyCat protects another cat's tale. What's yours?"

"We've tales in common."

"I await enlightenment, black though my black self be."

"I'm the one enlightened. By a young woman folks hereabout don't deem the 'fair' sex. I love the dark beauty, Miss Radiance Shaw."

"Still carrying that torch? Not even Bruiser would chewing-gum me about that. Folk say you left to drown your sorrows. I thought you drowned them here in the Gar Hole. As our gambling friends are wont to say, 'You'll never get any of those chips again. They're in the Gar Hole.'"

"You playing me for a sap?"

"So's your old man!"

"Are you playing me for a sap?"

"If the sap fits. If I keep being a smarty, rub me out."

Bruiser laughed. "Bugs Moran would love your lip. Seriously, miscegenation's the game. Only it's not a game with me. I believe you traffic in the same muddy waters."

"Creable is my Sheba. I'm her Sheik."

"One far more colorful than Rudolph Valentino ever thought of being."

"Touché! 'Shriek, for the Sheik will see you too!' I knew Radiance had a secret. Just didn't know he was you. I figured he was ofay from the sealed lips. I tried to make her my everything. It just didn't take."

"She told me she wanted to love 'one of her own kind.' She didn't tell me it was you."

"No hard feelings?"

"None. Not even about my half-sister."

"And I was barely willing to accept you as my Creable's 'kissing cousin.'"

"We had the same mother. People pretend not to know. I knew she loved in the woodpile, but not who. Welcome to the Land of the Lost. Four star-crossed lovers with a vengeance. Romeo and Juliet never had it so bad."

"Never had it in 'spades.' Never had 'The Miscegenation Blues.' They don't come in no ragtime, no syncopation. Miscegenation blues in raggedy time, S-I-N-copation. I hears 'chattel.' I hears 'amalgamation.' I hears that 'one-drop rule.' I hears all mulattos jist like mules."

Bruiser laughed, clapped. "Creable said you're pretty and self-taught, wise, witty.... But we've other fish to fetch. You're still the man I'm sent to see."

"The resident still man in these parts."

“I expected a lieutenant. That’s why I couldn’t believe you were you.”

“I like to see how the land lays for myself. Mr. Moran knows my prevailing color.”

“He knows. He’s big on taking the lay of the land, too. You can bet Capone also knows about you, probably knows I’m here to see you. For Creable’s sake, watch yourself. If Moran doesn’t take you over, Capone will.”

“Thanks. I’m not altogether ignorant of what I’m up against. Has nobody wondered why your Canadian compatriots are getting so hassled you had to look south?”

“I feel a new supplier signing on. There remain only such routine matters as how much you can supply, how often, and where the exchange points are. I assume we’re not talking hooch by the bathtub-full.”

“Correct. All our bathtubs have long since been recommissioned as vessels of purity. You already know that, or you wouldn’t be here. We’re no wildcat operation.”

“You’re the TeenyCat Operation. I can’t help wondering how many have gone down in that Gar Hole to the ruination of their cement overshoes while you were rising from the mud.”

“Mothers warn their children not to swim where the Gar Hole can catch them. Johnny Weissmuller can’t swim it. Houdini can’t climb out of it.”

“The Gar Hole was the equivalent of Raw-Hide-and-Bloody-Bones.”

“People drowned in it all the same.”

“I’m serious about the quality thing. Moran prides himself on being a ‘legitimate salesman of good beer and pure whiskey.’”

“As opposed to Capone’s rot-gut alcohol and green beer muscled down the throat by musclemen. I’ve heard the pitch. Why would Capone be interested in my little stake? I’ve got my thousand. He’s got his ten thousands. He’s the Octopus Man?”

“Oh, but you’d add a widow’s mite to his great enemy, Bugs Moran. Capone can’t have that.”

“All I’ve got is one lousy juice joint....”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You know your onions. You’ve got good brew, plenty of contacts Moran and Capone don’t have.”

“The black bloods are good enough for customers, you mean. Besides speakeasies, real ‘saloons,’ and nightclubs, Capone’s got his own distilleries and breweries.”

“Not to mention gambling houses, horse tracks, race tracks, and bookie joints. A major interest in Chicago’s largest cleaning and dyeing chain. You won’t know

him when he comes here. He'll case you out from a legitimate-looking business front. He's played a doctor, an antique dealer. Watch your back whenever somebody new shows up. Even if they're your color. Even if you think the snaps, crackles, and pops are in your Rice Krispies. Or they'll be icing you down faster than Mr. Birdseye frosts green peas."

"Thanks for the warning, but lay off with the line. I do watch my back. Looks to the contrary, I'll never play the Emperor Jones. Tempests in a teapot have a way of boiling over into the Teapot Dome. If the Reverend Hall and the leader of his church choir can be murdered in New Jersey, what chance do I have even hunkered down outside Chicago? But I think there're other reasons you chose Moran over Capone. He's the people's man. Another Robin Hood. When they make his movie, Douglas Fairbanks will play him."

"They'll call it *The Thief of Old Chicago*."

"Good. I'm considering opening a film company. Nothing nickelodeon. I've been waiting for the maximum improvement in the photographic rifle and soaking up the experience necessary for shooting pictures. I'll keep *The Thief of Old Chicago* in mind until my target practice is optimal. Could we make him a fly boy? Fly boys are hot. I tried a scarf around my neck, but it didn't work."

"Would you be the star?"

"I can do *Othello* well enough, but my *Valentino* is beyond superb. Want to see?"

"Sure."

"Here goes. I'm now protruding my eyes. All their white's visible. I'll draw back the lips to bare my gleaming white teeth. Last...."

"The old flaring-of-the-nostrils trick."

"How was I?"

"So good I think you'd better hold your *Valentino* for Creable only. I can see you fighting off hordes of women."

"Remember Tom Mix in *Arabia*?"

"I'd prefer *The Sheik in Araby*, *That Lawrence Man in Arabia* ahead of *Tom Mixing in such exotica*. His movie was of, by, and for the horses, so help the Horse God?"

"You did see it! Hollywood got its name in Chicago. Did you know that?"

"My disbelief is writ large on my face."

"This real estate man, Wilcox, had a fruit ranch on the outskirts of LA. His wife met this dame from Chicago who had a country estate she called 'Hollywood.' Mrs. W. liked the name, used it for their ranch."

"Next you'll tell me I work for 'Hollywood' George 'Bugs' Moran.?"

“You slay me.”

“Goes double.”

“Let’s hope Moran doesn’t slay both of us. I figure he’s taken for an all-around good fella. Jokes, shenanigans, antics. Makes the Life of Crime fun. His ‘Nuts to you!’ to Capone made the rounds. Capone and his goons are organized—Goliath to Moran’s David.”

“That’s why you’re siding with him? You think you figure in the Great Booze War of the North Side Irish Gang versus the South Side Sicilians? Think Moran’ll protect your people’s interest? The Black Irish didn’t get such hot treatment from the non-black Irish, even if they do trace their ancestry to the Spanish Armada. Not to mention the rest of the world, which calls all Irishmen ‘micks’ and ‘harps.’”

“Give us a break. Everybody’s got to have somebody lower to feel higher than. That’s why we have not just spades, dinges, and jigaboos but bohunks, kikes, dagos, and wops right here in America. What do they call you Scots, and what made the Irish boy-o’s take you? I admire Bugs for his style. That cat knows how to wear three-piece pinstripes, cashmere coats with Chesterfield collars, fedoras. No matter what Capone wears, you can’t get past that ‘Scarface.’ Bugs is an extrovert. Capone’s an introvert.”

“You’re so sincere I’m getting a pain.”

“As sincere as you are, you left out the main reason you’re with Moran.”

“Meaning?”

“Brothels, cat houses. The Big Fellow, as Capone’s cronies call him, owns more dames than Jolly Time has corn. ‘Capone’s Cribs’ aren’t confined to the Red Light Districts. As good, upstanding Catholic boys, Bugs Moran and Dion O’Banion see prostitution as against Mother Mary’s Church.”

“Why does that concern me? I’m not Catholic.”

“You tried to save Radiance Shaw from that terrible ‘fate worse than death.’”

“Another time. Tell me about Creable. She wasn’t happy when I left for Chicago.”

“Was Radiance?”

“Listen Curiosity-Killed-Even-the-Teeny-Tiniest-Cat, you must know the value of letting sleeping cats lie. Radiance understood. Or accepted.”

“Our kind have had a lot to accept.”

“Yes.”

“Come back tonight. We’ll talk. You can see the show. It will surprise you.”

“Show?”

“We have our very own little hoocherie-kootcherie right down the bank there from the Gar Hole. The MSPCAB Speakeasy.”



“Stands for?”

“Making, Selling, Possessing, and Consuming Alcoholic Beverages.”

“What an egg you are! When I was a lad, the riverbank traffic was tightly controlled. Families came for weekend picnics. Occasionally in the summer, the Hard-Shell Baptists would baptize some unlucky soul. We boys sneaked off here to swim and smoke, maybe to try some white lightning if we could get it. A bit later, we’d bring a blanket to be with a girl, if one was crazy enough to come out here. I don’t remember any people of color hereabouts.”

“We were here nosing around the edges until you upstanding citizens beat your retreat. Mama Twatsie’s House of Sweet Receipt was off in the woods there right in front of the Gar Hole. I watched when you ‘saved’ Radiance Shaw.”

“Watched!”

“Radiance was beautiful in that white robe obviously with nothing underneath it. A lamb for the slaughter, meek, scared, innocent. I’ll never get that picture out of my brain. You won’t either. Mama Twatsie calling on two of her prostitutes to lead in ‘her special for this night.’ Sweet meat. Tender meat. Love for sale. Sweet virgin love for sale. The love she give don’t hurt nothin’ but your pocketbook. Be a pal to your friends comin’ ’long later. Break her in. Train up this child in the way she to go. Jist like the Good Book say. God done made sure He give us one outen all dem hundred-and-forty-and-four-thousand-virgins-sealed. And she a pretty thing, a sweet morsel. Who goin’ to unseal her? Radiance be her name. She like a star fall from heaven down to dis here place. Gen’lemens, let your beast rise up from out de sea of de ole Gar Hole and find de New Heaven and de New Earth. De New Jerusalem!’ Mama Twatsie pulled back Radiance’s robe then to expose a bit of breast and started the bidding. You couldn’t stand it. You ran for Mama Twatsie and Radiance. Lights went out. I heard the scuffle. I was watching, all right. Who knocked over the lamp so you and Radiance could get away in the dark? I was still watching when Mama Twatsie sold Radiance’s maidenhead to your daddy. But that was after he kicked you out and you hightailed it to Chicago. I was watching when Mr. Bleeksborg Wallace, Sr., decked out in a spanking new cement suit, slid into the Gar Hole. I was watching but am not saying who it was rode shotgun on Mr. Bleeksborg Wallace, Sr.’s body. I could say, but I am not saying and won’t be saying, but oh, I’m watching, all right. Everybody was surprised when Young Mr. Bleeksborg Wallace, Jr., didn’t even show up for the honorary funeral they held after his father had been declared dead, no never found. Everybody said they knew there had been some kind of ‘bad blood’ between father and son, but they thought bygoness should be bygoness at such a tragic time, only they decided that Young Mr. Bleeksborg Wallace, Jr., had been

corrupted by life up there in Chi City.”

“I slipped back. Only, by that time, Radiance was performing for you at the MSPCAB Speakeasy right at the water’s edge. Your patrons were playing mah jong. You were working on a crossword puzzle. Radiance was the resident flapper. That long silk scarf was floating, fluttering behind her. She was Isadora Duncan.”

“Or the other way round.”

“Her singing was all dreamy, sing-songy. From a half-trance.”

“Doped up. I had my guys do chording or soft blues music in the background. She made up the words. So help me.”

“I hear her in my head. See her tease with one end of her scarf, that roomful of men reaching for it and her. Pulling up her dress to show a garter, get customers to put money under it. Can’t get it out of my head! ‘Choc’late gin. Choc’late gin. Ain’t made in no bathtub but full of sin. Choc’late gin bone-deep like that ole Gar Hole. Mistah Gar go deep in that ole Gar Hole. Catch my scarf. I pulls you in. Ain’t no reg’lar whoopee. Ain’t no reg’lar pot o’ sex. You gets to drink my choc’late gin, try your sweet tooth on choc’late nookie. I gets to have yo’ berries, jack, kale, an’ scratch, all yo’ money green, green, green.”

“I recognized you when you jumped up. More than I can say for Radiance. Your chair slamming backward to the stage floor didn’t penetrate her daze, even when you leaped up to face her, yelling ‘Goddamn you, Radiance, I saved you from this!’ I got you both out of there, came back to patter it all over.... ‘Well, now, it do appear as how our newest patron done caught Miss Radiance’s scarf and been pulled right in that Gar Hole sure enough. They had a mind to ankle, and ankle on out of here they purely did. Futz ’em all! If you’ll excuse my French. Anyhow, it saves me having to give ’em the bum’s rush. Now as to the rest of you sweet people, don’t be castin’ a kitten. Don’t be after takin’ any wooden nickels. Just you stay right where you are, Daddy-O’s. TeenyCat’s opening the private brew for you tonight. We ain’t no cheap gin mill. Put away your mazuma and your simoleans and your voot. You ain’t goin’ to have to go see no man about no dog this night. You will not upchuck from rotgut here. A free sample to toast our next little number, one of everybody’s favorites, Miss Flapper Rea in person. You all know Miss Flapper Rea ain’t no chunk of lead. Nor no dumb Dora neither. Miss Flapper Rea, of the bee-stung lips, is the real eel’s hips. Make that eel’s knees. Knees is cheese these days, and Miss Flapper Rea can bend and straighten them right up there with Miss Ginger Rogers herself. Miss Flapper Rea is the essence and quintessence of syncopation.

Miss Flapper Rea makes 4/4 time with me. Miss Flapper Rea's got "it" coming out her ears. Miss Flapper Rea is just plain darb! Peace, Good Brothers, Better Sisters. Everything's coming up Jake in these parts! That's for pos-i-lute-ly! Now come on out, please, Miss Flapper Rea. Ladies and Gents, The MSPCAB Speakeasy, alias the Making, Selling, Possessing, and Consuming Alcoholic Beverages Speakeasy, is proud to present Miss Flapper Rea! What you didn't stick around to find out was that Flapper Rea was Creable."

"You turned Creable into another speakeasy creature?"

"Not the way you mean. That was the first time she was Little Miss Nifty putting on the ritz. When you came after Radiance. Creable surprised herself and me. People said the likes of 'TeenyCat ain't talkin' no banana oil even if that jazz baby do wear his hickie!' Said Creable was 'copacetic,' wanted her to 'shake her it sure enuff.' Wasn't long before we were being called for to do all the Partner Charleston Patterns, like Hand to Hand, Crossed Arm, Back, Flying...."

"Why didn't she let me know?"

"First, let me clear up any misimpression. Radiance is not in the life, Bruiser. Nobody in the MSPCAB Speakeasy works as a prostitute. But she needed to feel she was earning her way. You know she always wanted to be a performer. We let her. The regulars understand. They don't take her the wrong way. But the important thing to her is, she's on the payroll. What Radiance does may not be the prettiest thing going, but it's hers."

"Thank you. I did need that. But why wasn't I told about her?"

"We thought she was with you."

"How could she be with me? I was on the lam. I didn't dare even try to contact her."

"The fact remains, after she was—after what happened to her happened and your father—died—or disappeared—or whatever, Radiance just left. We couldn't get a glimmer, and we tried. We thought if we tried too hard, we might draw attention to you—to what had happened, maybe raise more suspicions than were already being voiced. I put the fear of God in Mama Twatsie, and she closed down and went. And good riddance. Just about the time we were feeling pretty confident you two were holed up somewhere safe together, I got word from a dick friend of mine in Chicago that Radiance was in one of Capone's cribs. My informant said she was so messed up it was only a matter of time before Capone gave the order to have her put out of her misery. We drove up and took an apartment across the street from this particular Capone House of Ill Repute where they had her. That's the way Capone himself goes about his dirty business. Staking out his targets like that, I mean, from across the street."

“What happened here with Radiance?”

“After you took her out of here that night, you apparently got the wind up of your mother. She got Sheriff Coggins to question Mama Twatsie.”

“The Sheriff was my mother’s cousin.”

“Somebody—I don’t think Sheriff Coggins would have told your mother that even if he was her blood kin—somebody let it out to her at any rate about your father going after Radiance Shaw and having all the others before her.”

“She never said a word to me. My mother, I mean.”

“She was quiet and determined. Creable says that’s where you get your ways. Anyway, you and Radiance had gone to ground somewhere.”

“That’s right. I couldn’t take Radiance home. Even if my father hadn’t been crazy after her, I couldn’t have taken her to my home. My mother would have been nice about it....”

“But disappointed. Right. She had high hopes for you. Everybody did. You were the George Washington of these parts. You and Creable. Make that Molly Pitcher for her. But both of you sharp as razors. The old style, I mean. Not Schick’s Bad Boy. But where did you go? I know you didn’t leave the area. Not right away.”

“Near here. The other side of the river. Opposite the Gar Hole. To a secret lean-to I built with my best friend, Wingnut Rosser, when we were boys....”

“Amen-d that to when you were even younger than then. You were still a boy. Still green enough to believe you could right ancient wrongs.”

“I suppose. Anyhow, I went off down the river one day to get us some food and a paper, try to find out what was known and who knew it. When I got back....”

“Let me guess. Radiance was gone. She left you a note saying it wasn’t going to work but that she’d always love you and not to worry, she’d be all right. She was going to New York to try for work in the Cotton Club or some damned place.”

“Are you shrewd guessing, or do you know?”

“Creable got it from her later. After we brought her back here.”

“But nobody else knew about that spot but Wingnut Rosser and me. Nobody.”

“If you didn’t tell, then I don’t have to be a John Dewey or an Albert Einstein to throw the spotlight on Mr. Wingnut Rosser, former best friend of Young-and-Naïve Bleeksburg Wallace. The Wingnut Rosser with the stand-out, all-hearing ears. I hear Mr. Disney got the idea for that mouse with the big ears from your pal, Mr. Wingnut Rosser. For crying out loud, his ears are the bigger to hear you with! He’s our resident double-crosser. He passes as a drugstore cowboy and a dewdropper, but he’s on Capone’s payroll. He’d play the Fuller Brush man if he thought he could get away with it.”

“He’s still around here?”

“He’s everybody’s favorite candyman. Later for that. As to Radiance, they got her to write the note to you in exchange for leaving you alone and letting you go your way. They told her miscegenation was the only hanging offense left and that they’d see you had a swell hanging. They also hopped her up. From then on, whatever you wanted Radiance Shaw to do was paid for with hop. Well, your Dear Daddy, Mr. Bleeksborg Wallace, Sr., also had to lay out the moolah for Mama Twatsie, but he got what he wanted. Some say he got a lot more than he bargained for. After he disappeared, your mother just withered on the vine, though not for him, I imagine, but for her lost son, and pretty soon she was gone. Creable took to the Pulpit Stump, played Sister the Savior, went after the ‘sons of Behemoth,’ ‘sons of The Beast.’ You do know ‘Behemoth’ and ‘The Beast’ are two of the names Bugs Moran uses for Capone?”

“Now that you mention it, but I wouldn’t have caught the connection on my own. Did Capone’s torpedoes?”

“We didn’t stop to inquire. We went in right after lunch when most of the house regulars were sacked out. Their business is mainly in the wee small. Even the bouncer was sleepy-eyed. I got a crowd gathered on the street outside listening to my patter. ‘Hey, Mr. Bouncer, I’s in the employ of Live Messenger Service. Been sent with a gift for Madam Luciferella from the High Boss hisself. It’s in this box here. Comes with a message. Can you fetch Madam Luciferella, please? I’s got my strict orders not to enter this ’stablishment but to deliver my message at the door and put the box into her arms when my message is through.’ A frowzier Madam Luciferella you cannot imagine. When she finally came to the door yawning and scratching in unmentionable places, she was in a fine mood. But I wouldn’t back down, told her I was to stand on the street, with her on the ‘stoop,’ and that was that. Otherwise Mr. Capone would mince me up and sell me as cat sausage, only it wouldn’t be cat sausage on the label. While we were arguing, Creable slipped inside to find Radiance. I kept all entertained with my famous ‘One of a Cat’s Nine Tales’ purportedly from Mr. Capone to Madam Luciferella. By then, it was a street party. Everybody out to see what was happening. The Good Humor Man selling Eskimo Pies. A hot dog vendor.”

“All you lacked was Sidney Bechet doing ‘Wild Cat Blues.’”

“I was wishing we were in the Milky Way, while on the inside, they musta thought Aimee Semple Macpherson had risen from her kidnapping. Faster than Howdy turned into 7-Up, up popped Creable as Sister-The-Savior. She wasn’t Flapper Rea this time. She was dusting their crops with Heaven’s own insecticide. We did our call and response thing....

“She say, ‘Know you not that whoremongers dwell with unbelievers and



abominators and murderers and sorcerers and idolaters and liars? Know you not that you will have a place apart with them in the Gar Hole where burneth fire and brimstone in the Second Death?’

“I respond,: ‘What must I do, Sister-The-Savior, to avoid the Gar Hole?’

“‘You are too late, and not even this is all laid in store for you, for you have polluted other souls. You have turned women into whores. The Great Gars will chew constantly upon your flesh with their mighty teeth, and your flesh will be renewed in order to be chewed again.’”

“I screamed. ‘Already the Great Gars chew my flesh.’ Once I’d started screaming, people got disgusted, left.”

“Where’d you take Radiance?’”

“The only way to outsmart Capone’s spies was to pretend I had nothing to hide. We holed up in that apartment across from Madam Luciferella’s a week waiting for the heat to die down and trying to get Radiance dried out before we headed back here. We tried everything on her. Including autosuggestion. ‘Day by day, in every way, I, Radiance Shaw, am getting better.’ Only the two of us sounded a lot more convinced than Radiance. She was a zombie. She tried, but the life had left her.”

Bruiser had to see her. Creable and TeenyCat took him to her room at the speakeasy. He had to keep low but was content assisting Creable with Radiance. They’d been waiting for that loud “Ah-oo-ga!” signaling the bulls were coming. They doused the lights. TeenyCat had Bruiser fetch Radiance, gave Creable his secret ledger to take through the cellar tunnel to the Hidey Hole. If TeenyCat flashed the red signal light and buzzed, they were to head for Creable’s office at the school where she taught English. He’d meet them or send a message when the coast was clear.

The Hidey Hole had all the comforts. TeenyCat was prepared for sieges. Lights, radio, telephone, phonograph, typewriter, an electric refrigerator, a stove. A

generator, telegraph key. Books. Zane Grey. Frost, Fitzgerald, Ferber, Faulkner. Alphabetized! Magazines. *Cosmopolitan*, *The New Yorker*, *Life*, *Vanity Fair*. The Newsletter of the Woman's Institute of Domestic Arts and Sciences, Inc. Catalogues. Sears and Montgomery Ward's. A bathroom with a bathtub swell enough for Gloria Swanson. A projection room. The world rebuilt by Teeny-Cat. Albeit a world underground and soundproof. Bruiser was to learn that TeenyCat would give it all for a world hate-proof. That the fox in his hen house was Desolation. His soul lived in the Gar Hole of Despair. He let them see its opposite face. Creable said you couldn't be intelligent and have one of those faces without the other. That was why Radiance wouldn't "come back." Somewhere deep in her own private gar hole, she knew better than to swim for the surface again. Too much pain. There wasn't much Bruiser could do—just held her hand, dried her forehead, patted her cheek, couldn't leave her alone. The raids happened often. It was Prohibition, after all. Even in Rube Town, they were still under the Eighteenth Amendment. TeenyCat greased palms. The "raids" he got were mostly for show. But he stayed cautious. The Hidey Hole was his books room. Creable was books-keeper. Not just for the speakeasy. Like everybody else, they were into the Stock Market. Big Time. Nobody believed it could crash. Besides, Mr. Federal-Big-G would step in, save all.

And Creable worked alongside him. What she preached for, she did. Helped underdogs. She asked Bruiser if he knew the name "John T. Scopes," not to be confused with Dr. Marie Stopes, who'd opened the first family planning clinic. He knew "Monkey Trial" Scopes, fought over by Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan. Roger Baldwin, ACLU founder, got Scopes to test the laws against teaching evolution in Tennessee. They were trying to make Tennessee—and everybody, according to Creable and TeenyCat—uphold their Constitutional guarantee of free speech. Bruiser could see all that, but Darrow got Leopold and Loeb life instead of the chair, a setback for the ACLU. No worse than the ACLU fighting for free speech and D. W. Griffith claiming to do the very same in the pamphlet he wrote after all the ruckus raised in the wake of *Birth of a Nation*.

When Baldwin founded the ACLU in 1920, US citizens were still in jail for expressing anti-war views. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer ordered the Justice Department to raid homes and meeting halls in thirty cities to arrest suspected Communists and had all "aliens" with radical beliefs deported. Five members of the State Legislature of New York were expelled for being Socialists. "Anarchists" Sacco and Vanzetti couldn't get a fair trial. Anarchists set off a bomb on Wall Street September 16, 1920, and thirty died, but the case

was never resolved. Rosika Schwimmer was barred from citizenship for being a pacifist.

The real kicker? The powers-that-be were after getting rid of and keeping out non-whites like TeenyCat and Radiance. Ergo, Creable was giving her soul to the ACLU to help. She was Flapper Rea, Sister-The-Savior, Miss Goody Two Shoes, alias Miss Creable Wallace, Teacher. “They see Rea the Flapper and think cartoon flapper ‘Dixie Dugan,’ the Ziegfield Follies, Lorelei Lee, or Aunt Fritzi Ritz the Flapper. There’re no women, only Woman. She’s Lillian Gish or Theda Bara. The Virgin Mary or Jezebel. I, Creable Wallace, Girl Wonder, have sewed my coat-of-many-colored self into my own ‘Freudian slip.’” Her favorite Chaplin movie was *The Pilgrim with the convict disguised as a minister*. Chaplin wasn’t afraid to take on organized religion. She and TeenyCat apparently weren’t afraid to take on organized crime. Mickey Mouse had recently taken on Lucky Lindberg. Maybe we’re measured by what we take on. Sister-The-Savior started as a kind of answer to Billy Sunday, the evangelist largely responsible for the passing of the Eighteenth Amendment and Prohibition. It was as simple and as complicated as Creable, when she got old enough to “care,” wanting people to be able to decide for themselves to play with the likes of TeenyCat or Radiance Shaw or to have babies or not. She admired Miss Sanger of birth control fame, Mary Ware Den-net, too. TeenyCat sold Trojans upstairs at The MSPCAB Speakeasy. They both supported birth control.

They were also shrewd. The main reason for dreaming up Sister-The-Savior went back to the work of the ACLU. Clarence Darrow was an agnostic. They thought, if Creable and TeenyCat ever got “known about,” it would be good to have Sister-The-Savior in reserve. They were more or less training to be the next Scopes. Only about miscegenation. They were already, it turned out, married. Radiance and Bruiser were no test cases, but the two of them were. White men weren’t supposed to “take up with” black women, but the authorities and the public were pretty lax about that, given how accustomed they’d become to such liaisons. No, the real problem was with the likes of TeenyCat and her—the case of black man and white woman. The white woman was still seen as property, but it was more than that. If her blood did not remain “pure,” the whole white race was doomed.

Radiance was not only Black but an addict. Addicts would never be in vogue. Not even the Hollywood director who took drugs, indulged in unorthodox sex, and was murdered. Then there was Wallace Reid, the movie star. Injured while shooting a movie on location. The doctor gave him a massive injection of morphine to get him through the filming. He died of morphine addiction. The

public went crazy. His wife, actress Dorothy Davenport, starred in that anti-drug movie a year after his death. *Human Wreckage*.

Creable described Radiance's situation for Bruiser: "Withdrawal doesn't make her the bundle of nerves they prepare you for. It's worse. She's a river of emotions. Raw emotions. Crying, laughing. Yawning. Begging, offering herself and whatever might tempt you. Nausea. Chills and sweating. She'd kill me or you or her own child for a shot. Everything inside her grinds, tears. Under siege by cramps and muscle spasms. Her fingers jump and lurch. She can't breathe, or she exhales, forgets to take in more air. When she surfaces for air, everything is muddled, balled-up, gray. She's 'fried,' 'ossified,' every nasty term for every nasty thing you can be. Crabs crawl all over her, taking off bites as they go, packing sand in the holes. She's locked inside a kaleidoscope that never stops churning, only the color's died. Her bones walk inside her skin. Her brain dissolves into angry worms. The bones that walk have ground God into chalk...." Creable saw a relationship between miscegenation and addiction. "People say—mostly Southerners, though Freud thought cocaine was an erotic stimulant and made him a big wild man—morphine and cocaine drive black men to rape white women. But plantation owners used to give their people cocaine to make them work harder. Later, whites gave some of the blame to Coca-Cola. Blacks couldn't get to it in soda fountains, but once it was bottled, they had access, and the tabloids turned into 'drugloids' to describe the 'colored Casanovas,' 'dusky Don Juans,' 'sepia centaurs with bulging eyes,' and 'black brutes,' all high on Coca-Cola and cocaine, tearing the clothes off us white women. Among the many things people still don't want to hear is the addicts created by the Civil War. Morphine addiction's the 'army disease.' It wasn't dispensed just for pain from wounds but given out for dysentery. Later, it was thought to cure opium and alcohol addiction. Then heroin became the cure for morphine addiction. Women addicts, legion, were prescribed opiates for morning sickness, menstrual pain, everything. They could order them right out of the Sears catalogue. Coca-Cola, that 'shot in the arm,' gave up its alcohol to become the 'temperance drink' but could still be spelled c-o-k-e. It was preceded by Vin Mariani. A mix of cocaine and wine beloved by kings, queens—even Queen Victoria—and at least two Popes. I don't know about Pius XI. He was perhaps too busy condemning us women for scandalous and revealing clothes to drink 'brain foods,' as they were called. It's true that a lot of my flapper sisters vamp for Coke ads. Mr. Edison actually thought Vin Mariani would heal us from wasting time sleeping. But then morphine is supposed to send us to Dream Land. One such drink was called 'Dope,' and President Taft

called cocaine Public Enemy Number One.”

Creable could get exercised in other directions. She didn't cotton to TeenyCat's joke that Moe, of Moe and Izzy, the best cops in all Prohibition even if they were from New York, didn't put on that dress just to get in a suspected speakeasy. And Mr. Rudolph Valentino wasn't just a painted pansy either, even if people did say that second wife of his was part of the “Hollywood lesbian set.” Creable had read Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, which was banned in Britain for its lesbian content.

Her chief heroine was Sylvia Beach, that American in Paris who published Joyce's *Ulysses* when it was banned abroad and at home. The Post Office burned five hundred copies.

They weren't all talk. Radiance knifed Wingnut Rosser because of what he tried to make her do to get more dope. After he was dead, she treated herself to two needles.

The three left behind went underground in the Hidey Hole and waited two months for the world to clear. TeenyCat had always intended to destroy it and the speakeasy above it. Had it rigged to let in the Gar Hole at need. His take was, Capone's boys didn't get Moran, but he still hadn't reappeared. His dick friend told TeenyCat all the good North Side Irishers had gone on the lam, including Moran, and that Capone was about ready to move on all the outlying connections Moran claimed. Which included TeenyCat. He joined Capone, fought Capone, or took off. He wasn't into the drug business. Or prostitutes and the rest.

TeenyCat wanted the three of them to work with the ACLU. Bruiser reminded them he wasn't exactly squeaky clean. They got into “righteous kills.” Radiance playing the Avenger against Wingnut Rosser, Bruiser against his and Creable's father, though Creable couldn't absolve him. He couldn't absolve himself. They had to find a sanctuary. TeenyCat considered the “Back to Africa” Movement, offered Jamaica, where Marcus Garvey was exiled. Creable said she and Bruiser would have to go in black face, blackberry-juice their skin. It would be the same-old-same-old, only in spades. They skipped to thoughts of Nicodemus, Kansas, most thriving of the West's all-black towns. It would be the same-old-same-old, only in spades. The English teacher in Creable stepped in then, with Black poet Countee Cullen painting a “tableau” of two “mixed” friends—“the golden splendor of the day,” “the sable pride of night.” Only the “dark folk” stared through lowered blinds, and “the fair folk” went indignant. They were beginning to think they couldn't find or make a better world.

They scrounged some humor with “the perfect solution.” Seems the Feds had this special program in the West paying shooters to kill prairie dogs, a nuisance

to ranchers. TeenyCat and Bruiser could hire on. The first problem was, their bosses would call Creable in to re-line raccoon coats with prairie dog pelts, and she'd turn bearcat in nothing flat. The second was, Bruiser and TeenyCat would enlist on the prairie dogs' side and shoot the shooters, and the whole thing would start up again! There'd be all three of them against the world blazing away with their tommy guns fit to kill! Rat-a-tat-tat! Ack-ack-ack-ack! And then they were laughing until they cried. Finally, TeenyCat went off on one of his patters about "Lord, how we got the Gar Hole grummies."

They left Illinois on the sly. Sheriff Coggins "found" TeenyCat's car at the bottom of the Gar Hole, put out that the gars had eaten all the meat off three bodies. They changed their names, established their own little town in...a Western state. Creable started a school. If people needed help, they took them in, helped them. Most were referred by the ACLU, which also enabled TeenyCat and Bruiser to get law degrees. TeenyCat published music under an assumed name. They lived in the same house, continued to work on that better world.

In Your Waning Hour

J e f

This is a story about you, and how you ended up here, in this dark basement, with your hands bound and your nose broke. Don't feel too bad about it, even though you're bleeding out and you can't help but feel you deserve this. You do deserve this, of course, but you should know that this was inevitable. This was the only way things could've gone.

Your parents fought. It was always loud and sometimes it was messy. You'd try to get away from it, hide in your room with your music turned up, but your shitty stereo could only go so loud. Eventually there'd be a breaking point—often the sound of a plate crashing or your mom screaming—and silence would take over. From full hurricane to clear skies in an instant, but the wreckage remained. Your mom would come up to say goodnight. If it had been really bad, she'd hastily apply some make-up to hide her fresh bruises and broken skin, but sometimes she was just too tired to carry the façade. She knew you knew; how could you not?

It's not like your father's wrath was reserved for your mom. He hit you plenty too. There was no telling how you'd fuck up and get hit; it was just a question of when. Maybe you'd be home late, although your curfew was never really defined. Maybe your grades were bad. It didn't really matter. All that mattered was that your father threw his paycheck in the bottle and was pissed at himself for it. Really, there was nothing you could do. He hit you, because his dad hit him, and his before him. If you and Sarah had worked out and had a kid someday, you probably would've hit him too. It's just the way that kind of shit goes.

You blamed your mom for letting him be such a tyrant. You suspected—and were right—that your

Wilson

mom blamed you for her still being chained to such a man. She depended on him, mostly because of you. They hadn't meant to be parents. They were young and stupid and only in lust, not love. But you come from a line of church folk, so they were hitched. Your mom stopped being pious pretty soon after you were born, as your father embraced his family's long-held traditions of reckless spending, drinking, betting, and general living. But, your mom was sick, always had been since she was born. She couldn't work, and the medicine was expensive. Having you was even more expensive. Your father had a decent job. It would've been enough to live a comfortable life had your father been a better man, or a better gambler. Money was tight, your father felt weak, and he'd only ever been taught one way to deal with that terrible sense of frailty. When you feel weak, you prove you're strong, and he only knew one way to do that. Your father wasn't a good man, but it's hard to expect that of him.

You tried your damndest to be good; take some solace in that. You tried in school. You really tried, but you just weren't that smart. Or that's what it seemed like. You never sat still in a class, always fiddling, always talking, always "disrupting the learning experience." That's how your seventh grade teacher put it at a parent-teacher conference she somehow wrangled all three of you to. Were it a different time, or a better funded school, somebody would've realized you just had ADHD. You would've taken a pill every day and probably done pretty well, but that's not how it went.

"I am so glad all of you could make it here today!" Your teacher had a cheer and smile that was unfamiliar to you.

"Well, you did say it was 'very, very' important," your mom said with genuine concern.

"So what's so important?" Your father was still handsome in a way that made strangers like him despite his abrasiveness, so long as they generally remained strangers.

"First off—I just want to say your son is very creative. Jimmy is alwa—"

"James. I'm going by James now," you interrupted. Jimmy was a kid's name. You were thirteen now, and you were James. In a few years you'd be self-conscious about how aristocratic James sounded and start going by Jim. Maybe you'd start going by Jimmy again when you were sixty, but you'll never be sixty.

Your father glared, "Listen to your teacher, James." His hand was on your knee,

threatening at any moment to squeeze and send you into a surprising amount of silent pain. It wouldn't have been the first time. Dinner with extended family, dining in public, anywhere where you could be an embarrassment. You have to commend him; it was a creative way to keep you under control.

"Okay," her lips were pursed. "James is a reader, and I love that. But, he's reading when he should be paying attention in class." As she finished her sentence, her face contorted into a bizarre and forced frown to show how deeply and sincerely concerned she was.

"So...tell him to stop reading," your father's brow was furrowed.

"Of course, I do. As soon as he puts his book away though, he starts to talk. Not about class. Just to his neighbors, about anything. Ji—James likes to tell jokes. Or show his friends whatever pictures he's drawing instead of doing his work."

You had stopped listening before she started talking. You were thinking about the Conan the Barbarian book waiting in your room at home, and fantasizing about the totally sweet picture of Conan with three swords (one in his mouth) you were going to draw when you got home.

"That right, James? You messing around, instead of doing what you should?" Your father was ready to be angry.

"What? Yes, absolutely." Wrong answer. It was a risky move, answering in an absolute like that. It wouldn't have gone any better if you had gone the other way though. Your father glared at you with a fury that made your back hurt in anticipation of his belt.

"You see? He doesn't pay attention." Your teacher's lips could purse no further.

Your father's face drew close to you quick. You were close enough to smell the bourbon under the aftershave. "Boy, you need to listen."

He squeezed your leg tight. It hurt, but you could take it without a grimace. You knew the consequences of making a scene. It hurt, but now, as you die in this dark room, that pain seems insignificant—childish.

"I don't know if any of us can get a boy his age to ever really pay attention," your mom said with a smile, trying desperately to defuse the tension.

"Other boys do fine, so long as James is behaving. I'm just worried that there may be problems at home."

"Oh, bullshit!" Now that his character was in question, your father was enraged and on the defensive. "Nothing wrong with this boy, and there sure ain't nothing wrong with our parenting."

"James is a disruption to the learning experience. He disturbs the other

students.”

“Oh I’m sorry? My son disturbs you? What’s so disturbing about him?” Now your mom was in on it, letting out her own type of fire that lurked beneath.

“No, I’m only trying to say that it’s unusual how...”

“Unusual,” your mother sneered. “That’s it; we’re done here. Goodbye, ma’am.”

Your mom was up from the tiny desk in a flash, and you and your father followed swiftly. It was hard to remember your mom like this sometimes. It was easy to remember her just as some weak woman covering her bruises with make-up, but she had her moments of strength. She was smart, too, in that moment. It was a strategic move; she knew your father was getting pissed. If he caused a scene, he’d hate himself. His fists hit hardest when he hated himself. Better to cause a minor scene herself, but even that had consequences. He beat the shit out of you that night. He used a phonebook, which was rare. For some reason, the phonebook didn’t leave bruises, so he could really go to town on your face. Your dad wasn’t good at many things, but he was great at beating his wife and son. It left you in a terrible pain, your body aching but showing no damage. That pain is the only one that even comes close to what you’re in now. Don’t forget, you’re dying now.

You tried hard to be good, even when it wasn’t lucrative. Your dad ended up getting in close with some shady guys. Wealthy shady guys, mob type guys, but they’d get pissed if you called them mobsters. Not that you would dare. You knew they did bad shit, evil shit. Your father liked to brag about it when he was real deep in the bottle. He’d keep it vague, but give just enough information to let you know what a badass he was. Once though, he showed you where he hid his packages. He was drunk—he would never remember that night—but he pulled you close and brought you to the garage. He opened his red toolbox, the one high on the shelf and pushed your face real close to it. It was full of cash, hundred dollar bills. He twisted your face back to meet his and said, “You think you’re a man? No. That’s when you know you’re a man. When you can support your family. Money. That’s all there is.”

You wouldn’t know it from the way he walked and talked, but he was just a grunt. An errand boy. He delivered money and drugs and occasionally buried a body if someone made him. That money in the red toolbox didn’t belong to him. He’d get a five percent cut of whatever he delivered, but that was some other man’s money. He was on his way to be a mid-level grunt though. He was doing bigger deals, burying people less often. It paid better than any job he had before, plus he could do it on the side, and keep his day job. His day job didn’t

pay shit, but it had health insurance for your mom.

He tried to get you in on it as a summer job when you were eighteen, when it started being lucrative. Just taking money places, nothing rough, probably nothing illegal, but you hated your father by then. His money was dirty; it sickened you to even live in his house. Your mom was the only thing keeping you there. She was sicker now, she'd go soon, and you wanted to make her comfortable. Your father grew almost sentimental as she grew sicker. He was in his late thirties, but he finally felt like he had some control. His job made him feel like a big shot, and it gave him plenty of opportunities to feel like a man, so he hit the both of you less. In a gross way, he really did love your mom. That wasn't enough to endear him to you. You didn't need or want his money. You were working a decent enough job for the Post Office. It wasn't anything special, but you got to spend a lot of time alone and were sure to get a raise every few years.

That same summer, you met Sarah. Sarah, from Davidson's Used Books. Sarah, who thought Conan the Barbarian was "stupid, sexist garbage," but also understood why you hold it so dear. You don't like to think about Sarah these days, but it's important, here in your waning hour. She's why you're here. She was smart and interesting and beautiful. She was beautiful the way the main girl in an 80's teen movie is before she takes off her glasses and lets down her hair. She had strong opinions and was keen to share them in fits of monologue that left other people uncomfortable but you entranced. She blew your mind regularly, but, honestly, yours is an easy mind to blow. Corporations are evil, God might not exist, Republicans are keeping you down. Her idealism invigorated you, in a way that only a smart, empathetic young person can.

Your mom died a month after you turned nineteen. You were convinced the funeral would be the last time you saw your father, but you were wrong. You saw him tonight. You and Sarah moved in together right after the funeral, and things were good, until they weren't. She was nice to you and she made you feel good. She made you feel attractive, handsome in a way that nobody ever had. She was there to talk to. She knew about your father, one of the only people who did. You knew about her too. She was real, but she was restless.

"Why are we still here, Jim?"

"What do you mean?" These conversations were frequent and exhausting.

"Like, what are we doing? Just living in this shit apartment, working these shit jobs. Why don't we leave? Go do something we want to do."

"This apartment's not shit; neither are our jobs. We're just trying to make it by, Sarah. We've got to do what we've got to do."

She groaned, "That's so boring, Jim. We're young! We should be doing what we want, not what we have to."

“I wish. Can we just keep watching the movie?”

“Yeah. Sounds good.”

You always knew she wanted to travel; she wasn't ready to settle down. You didn't think you were either, but you convinced yourself this town was impossible to leave. She didn't tell you she wanted out. She just left. One day she was gone, off with Kyle. She didn't tell you why she left, but you know. Or you thought you did. Kyle's family was rich. The first thing Sarah and Kyle did together was travel across Europe on his family's dime. You could've never taken her to Paris, or London, or even Vegas. Of course it came down to money in your mind; it was the only thing you knew. It wasn't the money. You were wrong. You were stuck.

She left two months ago. You're twenty-two now. In some way, you'll be twenty-two forever now. Forever an almost-adult. Her absence ate at you. Her presence had muffled the screaming rage in your heart, and, now that she was gone, it cried out loud. You were alone, in an apartment you couldn't afford, in a town you'd never loved, with no family, and no friends. It was because you were poor. You couldn't go to college because you were poor, you couldn't marry Sarah because you were poor, and you couldn't leave this town because you were poor. You tried so very hard to be good. It wasn't fair. You did the right things, and you were poor and alone and without options. On the other hand, your father had been an evil man his entire life, and now, newly single, newly wealthy, he was in the prime of his life. That wasn't justice. One time Sarah told you that “the rule of law is a myth.” You didn't know what that meant, but it sounded cool. Sarah said that it meant that justice couldn't exist unless there were people enacting it. You told yourself you would get justice.

You told yourself it would be just to break into your father's home and steal the money he never had when you were young. Money that was always put to the bottle, or on bad bets. Tonight, you'd go to the garage, where he had shown you that red toolbox. You'd take all the money in it, and leave. Go somewhere far away, start over. You could find another job. You could forge another life. But that's not how it went.

“Who the fuck is out here?” your father called into the garage a few moments after you knocked over a paint can in the confusion of the dark. He wasn't supposed to be here, but, just a few minutes after you arrived, his car pulled up and three guys got out, one of them your father.

He flipped on the light, “Jimmy, what are you doing here? ... What are you doing with my toolbox?”

“I'm taking it, Dad. This is the last time you'll see me.”

“No. You're not taking that, because it's not yours,” he was trying to stay cool.

“It’s not mine, either.”

“It’s reparations. All my life, you’ve done nothing but hurt and take from me. Go back inside.” You had never talked to your father this way. Tonight was different. You changed a lot since your mom died. You wouldn’t attribute it to Sarah, but you should. She made you confident.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he stepped forward, his hand raised.

“Fuck off, Dad. Mom never loved you; neither did I. I’m just taking what I deserve.”

“You don’t ‘deserve’ shit,” his hand dropped heavy, connecting firmly with your face. You hadn’t felt your father’s wrath in a long time. You weren’t numb to it anymore. Instead, it flared up memories, these memories. You felt the strings that make you up pull tight and snap. For the first time in your life, you fought back.

Your father was still stronger than you, but he was slower and uncoordinated. You managed to get on top of him, throwing him to the ground. You knew then your nose was broken, but the pain wasn’t paralytic; it was gasoline to your fire. Your fists landed again and again square in his face. Your knuckles were raw. His face was mangled. Each connection made you feel stronger, like you had control, like you were a man. It was always within you, that inferiority that compels men to do terrible things. You punched him for what felt like an hour, but it was really only three minutes. He died after the first. It wasn’t your fists; it was his heart. Years of drink and smoke had collected in his arteries, and the shock of his only son beating him savagely had caused a heart attack. After your fury was sated, you sat there, full of shame at what you had done. His face was unrecognizable. You had to leave. You were going to jail. No, I’m not, you thought, and headed for the house.

You went back into the house, and, in your frenzied state, you forgot that your dad had two associates with him. You’d never seen them before. One of them, Edgar Valentino, has a cocaine habit. He had recently indulged and was jumpy. They heard the struggle in the garage. When you burst through the kitchen door, Valentino was there. He was scared, you were bloody. He shot you. He thought you were from a rival gang. It was a mistake. This was all a mistake. Now you’re here, in your own goddamn basement, dying. Valentino freaked out, kicked the shit out of you, broke a few ribs, tied you up. Now, he’s on the phone with some people, trying to figure out what to do. It’s too late to do anything for you.

More than your ribs or your nose or the gun shots, the shame hurts. Patricide is an evil crime. Your father was an evil man, certainly, but plenty of people have evil fathers. Very few kill them. You feel bad about this; you should, but it’s time

to let go. It's time to go.

Sarah will hear about this. It'll break her heart, but she won't make it to the funeral. She's in Spain, drinking wine. She's going to tell Kyle that bullfighting is barbaric, and he'll laugh, but they'll both go, and he'll hold her tight and agree that it was awful. You don't want to hear about this. It's time to go. This all seems so random and pointless. It was pointless, in a sense, but it wasn't random. There was really nothing you could do. This is who you are, who your family is. This was how it had to be—how it was always going to be. Let go. Let's go. It'll be better. This is how it had to be, but that doesn't mean it was fair. Nothing is.

She opened the unlocked front door expectantly but no one greeted her: the bitches were out with her father. Carolyn dropped her pack by the door and elevated her nose slightly. Steamy peanut butter aroma met her, and she sniffed. She smiled and went directly to the kitchen. Rows of hot cookies sat in the middle of the kitchen table, on top of a red-and-white checked tablecloth, cooling on a wire rack. “Thanks,” she said, though still alone.

Her mother approached from the back of the house. “How was school?”

Carolyn stood up straight and pushed her long, sandy blond hair behind her ears. “Same as always.” She sat at one of the painted white chairs that surrounded the kitchen table and stared at the cookies. Her mother poured a tall glass of milk and set it in front of her.

“Can I?” Caroline said, taking a cookie.

They used to make cookies together on Sunday afternoons. Her mother would pull out pieces of sticky dough from the mixing bowl, pat them into flour, and roll them between her palms until they formed smooth balls. She’d place them on a cookie sheet, three across and four down. Carolyn would push the bottom side of a fork into them, until they were almost flat and had four lines pressed into their tops. Most of the time, she liked baking and laughing with her mother. Now that she was in ninth grade, however, she didn’t have time to bake, even when she didn’t have homework, or when her friends were busy.

Today was a Tuesday and Carolyn appreciated coming home to warm cookies. She finished one and drank the thick, cool milk in one long gulp. An enve-

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lope addressed to President Gerald R. Ford was propped against a red plastic napkin holder. “You wrote him?”

“There’s no reason I have to get your father’s permission to have a credit card. I earn plenty.” Her mother contributed twenty-five dollars every week to Carolyn’s college account from her job working mornings at the library. Picking up the envelope, her mother said, “If anyone can do something about it, it’s the president.”

“Going to Dottie’s in a sec,” Carolyn said, carrying her glass to the sink. She walked down the hall to the bathroom.

“Be home for dinner,” her mother said to her back.

“Every night, I know.” Carolyn turned in to the bathroom. She used the toilet and, while washing her hands, turned her head one way and then the other, staring at her image in the mirror. She frowned at the gentle blush in her lightly tanned cheeks, the scattering of freckles across her nose, the healthy sheen in her hair, and ignored these qualities. Instead, she focused on two tiny zits, one on each side of her nostrils. The longer she looked, the bigger they seemed. She wondered if they’d been there all day, and if everyone at school had noticed. After rubbing alcohol swabs over them, she walked across the hall to her bedroom.

Carolyn closed the door and grabbed a hairbrush, attempting a hundred strokes in each spot, as the teen magazines recommended. She lost count and tossed the brush onto her bed. Slipping off her jeans, she tried on the lime green mini-skirt that she had bought with Dottie the previous weekend. Dottie had gotten five and worn two so far this week. Carolyn knew that her parents would never let her wear a mini-skirt to school, even if she wanted to, which she didn’t. She turned to see what she looked like from every angle, glancing over her shoulder at the back of her long legs. I could wear this to the party on Friday, she thought, and borrow Dottie’s purple pantyhose. Not that she’d been invited. Dottie was going, however, so there was still a chance that she would get a sympathy invitation. She took off the mini-skirt and stuffed it into a drawer underneath a wool sweater. Dressed back into jeans and a red tee shirt, she grabbed a light blue jacket and walked down to where her mother stood, waiting, by the front door. Carolyn turned her head slightly as they exchanged gentle cheek-kisses.

Her mother pressed two cookies into one of her hands and the envelope into the other. “Thanks for dropping this in the box.”

“It’s on my way.” As if forestalling a question, Carolyn nodded. “I’ll be home in time to set the table. Six o’clock.” She raised the envelope. “God, Mom, I can’t believe you wrote the president!”

Her mother held the door open and peered out. “Your father took the girls for a walk after his shift.”

“As if,” Carolyn said. She would have been nearly bowled over when she came in the door, if they’d been home. “Later.” She stepped outside. It was nearly dark and had gotten much colder, although it was only four-thirty. She hunched her shoulders, and said into the brisk air, “November.”

The five long blocks to Dottie’s were as familiar as the way to her own house. At the end of her block was a blue post box with several daily pick-ups, the last one at five. The letter dropped into darkness and she waited for the creak as the metal door swung closed. Back on her way, she noticed headlights coming from behind. When she walked at night with her friends, they would listen to an engine before deciding what to do. A V-8 almost always meant the cops or the State Patrol on rural duty. Her friends hardly ever did anything wrong, but on hearing the distinctive roar they would dive for the ditch until the cop passed. The other option was that a V-8 was a truck. On the streets of Carolyn’s village, she and her friends could almost always identify who was coming. Carolyn listened to the approaching engine and the distinctive roar. Not a cop. A truck, but she couldn’t tell whose. She contemplated diving down, but didn’t want to crush the cookies. The vehicle slowed as it approached, easing into second gear. Automatically, Carolyn sped up. She looked around at the houses—scattered sporadically along the block and set way back from the road—and saw no one peering out from a distant kitchen window. Paying attention to the vehicle’s engine again, the soft rumble told her that the distance between them had increased. Still alert, Carolyn counted out loud in a weak and tinny voice, “Only two blocks to go.” She cleared her throat and tried again, this time belting out, “I’m almost home.” Looking left and right, she was grateful that no one was around to hear her calling into the florescent early twilight what wasn’t true.

The truck strained as the driver accelerated without shifting gears. The gap between them narrowed and Carolyn thought she could hardly hide now. Running was also out, for she didn’t want to appear rude in case she knew who it was: as if she thought he—it had to be a he—was a threat. Two-and-a-half blocks, she said to herself.

The truck pulled up next to her and the driver slowed into first. “Caro-lyn?” a husky male voice called out.

The timbre was vaguely familiar. She turned to the driver and gave a quick gasp. “Phil Johnson?” She kept walking. He was much older—maybe twenty—and worked on the line packing trombones. Her father was a supervisor down at the musical instrument plant, and just last week over meatloaf, he’d said, “I’d of fired that Phil Johnson yesterday if he weren’t Fred’s nephew.” Fred ran the entire plant. The most her father could do was complain about Phil Johnson at the dinner table. Walking briskly, Carolyn wished she’d asked what he’d done that was so bad.

The road had no shoulder; the blacktop simply merged into grass on either side. After a few feet, the grass dipped into a ditch. Carolyn glimpsed back as Phil eased his pick-up onto the grass on the right.

He left the door wide open when he got out. Using a falsetto, he mocked her, saying, “I’m almost home.” He laughed. “You’re walking the wrong direction, little lady.”

“Am not.” Carolyn kept walking toward Dottie’s.

Phil took long, exaggerated steps until he was next to her, walking in unison. He looked down and grinned. “You live back there.” He pointed behind them, toward her house.

“How do you know?” The village had only a few thousand people and most folks knew where everyone else lived. But there was something creepy about the way he seemed to enjoy watching her squirm. Her heart pounded and she wondered if he could see it pushing up and down against her breast. She summoned up her nerve. “I’m where I’m supposed to be. Why are you here?” He brushed his arm against her, then moved it away. She thought he must have trouble seeing in the dusk, for he did it again, and then again. The next time she stepped away. “Excuse me!”

Instead of moving aside, Phil angled closer still. He reeked of cigarettes and the earthy odor of male sweat and, when he opened his mouth, of beer. “You’re not afraid of me, are you?” He draped his left arm around her shoulders and grasped tightly.

She tried to yell, “Stop it,” but it came out more like a soft plea. She twisted her shoulders to get away but he gripped her expertly, using only one arm, and she couldn’t escape.

“Cliff’s a big college boy now, isn’t he? Far away, at school.” Her brother was the first in her family to go to college and she was proud of him. But the way Phil said it made it sound as though Cliff had done something wrong. She thrust out her chin. “He’s a sophomore.”

Phil whispered into her face, so she got a full dose of beer and tobacco breath, “You’ve got nice legs. I’d love to see you in your mini-skirt.” He turned in front of

her and made her stop. He grinned and ran his free right hand along the outside of her leg, skimming his way from her knee to her hip.

She shivered and pleaded, “Don’t. I said, don’t.”

He cocked his head, as if doubting her sincerity, but pulled his arm away and tucked his hand behind his back. “You sure, because I can make you feel real good.” He moved closer, expertly slipped his right hand under her jacket and tee, navigated his fingers and palm inside her bra, and seized her right breast. She gasped and ducked low, backing up to get away. Her arms ripped out of her jacket sleeves as she wriggled out from his grip. Running ahead, she wanted to yell, but all she could manage was a hissed, “Get away from me!”

Phil laughed, and mimicked, “Don’t. I said, don’t.” She was partway down the block when he yelled angrily, “Think you’re too good for me, don’t you?” He held up her jacket. “Looky here.”

She stopped in horror.

He smirked and laughed again. “Thanks, Caro-lyn. I’ll put this on my pillow tonight.” He scrunched her jacket into his face.

Carolyn spun around and ran. She heard the pick-up turn and squeal away, but she kept running until she got to Dottie’s block. At the sound of an approaching car—even though it was the easy rumble of a V-4—she dove out of view, staining her clothes and bare elbows on the hard brown earth. The car stopped and a door opened. Someone walked to a spot above her.

“That you, Carolyn?” a girl’s voice said.

“Dottie? God, it’s you!” Carolyn scrambled up.

“You look awful.” Dottie shook her head. She turned to the car and spoke to the driver. “We’re walking the rest of the way, Dad.”

Dottie’s father nodded. “Hello, Carolyn. You don’t have to drop down for me.”

She replied, “Mr. Clover,” and he drove up the street. She turned to Dottie.

“You’ll never believe what happened.” She rubbed her hands along the outside of her arms, trying to keep warm and keep from shaking.

“Why’d you jump? Christ sakes, I saw you do it.” She made a large swooshing movement with her arms, mimicking Carolyn.

“He pulled up behind, slow-like, and—”

“Who?” Dottie said, turning so she was walking backward and facing Carolyn.

“He was horrible, and I said, ‘Don’t.’”

Dottie stopped. “Who was it? How far?”

“On the way over, maybe two blocks.” Carolyn shivered and pointed toward home.

Dottie smiled, the kind that she’d been using lately, that made Carolyn feel that there was something Dottie knew that she didn’t. “You’re not hurt. Come on.”

The girls ran up the block to Dottie's house, holding hands like they'd done since they were little. At Dottie's driveway, they dropped hands and looked at the stars that illuminated the dark street. The streetlight at the far end of the block shined directly down, making a circle of yellow light on the road.

Dottie made another swooshing movement with her hands and laughed. "Into the ditch."

"Stop," Carolyn said, though she saw the humor in it, too. "He pulled over and tried to walk with me and put his arm around me and reeked, just reeked, and he wouldn't let me go, and then...then I got away. But he has my jacket."

"Tell me everything," Dottie insisted. "We should call the cops. Benj is on duty." She sounded excited, like it would be an adventure to report to one of the part-time village police officers, whom even the teenagers called by their first names. And like she knew Benj's schedule by heart.

"Between my house and here." Carolyn tapped the street with her shoe. "Two minutes ago."

Dottie wrapped her arm around Carolyn and the two started up the driveway.

"You're okay, though? You know who he is, right?"

Now that she was receiving comfort, Carolyn cried. "Phil Johnson!" Saying his name, she cried harder. "He's old and disgusting."

Dottie pulled away. "Phil? You mean Phil?" She leaned toward Carolyn. "Phil Johnson?"

The way Dottie referred to him—as though he was quite far from old and disgusting—made Carolyn instantaneously stop crying. She gestured up with one hand, indicating how tall he was. "Johnson. Works at the plant with our dads."

She wiped her wet face with the back of her hands.

"He was probably flirting a little." Dottie shook her head. "Lighten up. Besides, Phil hangs with me. I have to show you what he gave me."

"Since when? He's horrible."

Dottie used her fingers to massage the back of her head, then ran her fingers through her long brown hair. "Phil said something at the plant—that's why I have to get picked up after band practice." She rolled her eyes, then pressed her fingers to her lips, indicating for them to be quiet, as she opened the front door.

The girls stepped in.

Barely three feet from the front door, Mrs. Clover stood at the stove preparing dinner. "There you are, Dottie," she said, stirring a pot with a wooden spoon. She raised her eyebrows. "Is your father going to have to get you after his shift every day?" She added a can of cream of mushroom to the pot and turned to Carolyn. "How are you? I saw your mother at the library this morning."

"Mrs. Clover," Carolyn said.

Dottie looked into the pot. “What’s for dinner?”

“Noodle and ground beef casserole,” Mrs. Clover said. “Every Tuesday it’s the same.” She shook her head and said to Carolyn, “You’d think she’d know that.” Mrs. Clover wiped her hands on her half-apron. “If you want to stay, I’ll call Beth.” She dialed Carolyn’s house, turning the numbers one by one in the black rotary dial. The girls’ mothers had been best friends since they were girls and still called several times a day.

Before Mrs. Clover finished dialing, Carolyn smiled politely but shook her head. “Thanks, Mrs. Clover, but—”

Dottie interrupted, saying, “We have homework.”

The girls ran the few steps across the living room and holed up in Dottie’s bedroom. There was space for them to sit if they were both on the bed or if one sat on the bed and the other on the floor. Dottie sat on the braided round rug that her mother had hooked with multicolored loops.

Carolyn slipped off her tennies, hopped onto the middle of the bedspread, and crossed her legs. She shuddered, as if reliving Phil’s stealth attack. “Was it awful, what he gave you?”

Dottie stood with her right heel pressed against the door, so it couldn’t be opened. Her father, she’d told Carolyn last week, had unscrewed the hardware on her door lock. Dottie pulled up her shirt. Her bright white bra covered her delicate breasts. A tiny silk rose rested in the cross where the cups met, stitched on courtesy of Playtex. Prominently displayed above her heart was an immaculately round, deep purple hickey. “Ta da!” She pulled her shirt back down.

Carolyn held her stomach and grimaced. “He did that? You let him?”

Dottie sat cross-legged on the floor. “He took me to the movies and said I could get anything I wanted. Popcorn and soda and a Baby Ruth!”

“What did you see?” Carolyn could hardly believe that Dottie hadn’t told her already.

Dottie giggled softly. “Can’t remember. We sat in the back and made out the entire time. I think that’s what gave it away—my lips were all swollen in the morning.”

Carolyn looked at Dottie and wondered how this had happened, how Dottie had a hickey from Phil, and even liked him. When she thought of him she wanted to puke—or run. And she could tell that they weren’t going to call Benj, even though she now knew what Phil might have done, had she not escaped. She thought about Drew, the boy in homeroom whom she’d held hands with, but that was as far as she’d gone. That was not counting when she’d kissed him in a dream, and even been wet down there. Carolyn rocked back and forth on the bed. “You can’t have gone out with him,” she said. “We’re always together, except for band.”

Dottie pointed to the wooden toy chest below her window. Over the years, she had used the chest as a step, climbing to freedom when she'd been grounded.

"I'm meeting Phil at eleven." She held up a chapstick. "Tonight, I'm prepared."

"Oh." Carolyn nodded.

Dottie pointed to Carolyn's tee. "No red, remember. Wear blue, then your eyes are even bluer. With your blond hair, God, you have everything."

Carolyn tucked in her shirt. "I have to go." She scooted off the bed and Dottie followed her out.

"Don't be such a prude," Dottie whispered as they walked across the living room. "It's not becoming."

"I didn't mean anything," Carolyn whispered back, as the gap between them opened further.

When they passed the kitchen, Mrs. Clover said, "Last chance, Carolyn. Dottie can set another place for you."

Dottie opened her arms in a wide circle, laughed, and said, "Whoosh!"

"Thanks, Mrs. Clover, maybe next time," Carolyn said. Once outside, she looked around anxiously. She thought that if she ran, Dottie would see her out the window. Instead, she strode deliberately down Dottie's block, standing tall and making a steady sweep with her head to the left and the right. At the end of the block she picked up her pace, walking faster, jogging, running slowly, finally running flat out until she reached the safety of her driveway. She grabbed her sides with her hands and rocked forward and back, letting her heart rate return to normal before opening the door.

* * * * *

The bitches blocked her entry, wagging their tails and pressing their wet noses into her crotch. She pushed their faces away, patted their backs, and stepped inside. The dogs wandered away. She moved to the kitchen and pulled open the silverware drawer.

"Did you wash your hands?" her mother said, coming into the kitchen quietly with the dogs padding behind.

Carolyn whirled around, holding a fistful of knives. "I didn't see you!"

Her mother rested a hand on Carolyn's back as she walked to the other side of the kitchen. "You're rather jumpy." She rubbed her hand between Carolyn's shoulders. "You didn't stay long."

Carolyn said, "Mrs. Clover invited me."

Her mother peeked into the oven. "And miss my Shepherd's Pie? The mashed

potatoes took forever to beat, but I got them nice and smooth.”

Carolyn finished setting and went to her room. Still in her dirty jeans and shirt, she flicked off her tennies and curled up under her covers. After only a moment, she brushed her covers aside and stood up. She focused into the mirror above her dresser, tilting her head one way and then another. Not seeing anything different, she frowned. Checking her closet, she moved one hanger to the side, then another, until she found what she hadn't known she was looking for: an extra large, gray sweatshirt that Cliff had worn in high school. She slipped it over her shirt and immediately relaxed her shoulders. Twirling around with her arms out, the sweatshirt billowed like she was the Pillsbury Dough Boy. She stopped and it settled to slightly above her knees. Pulling out her math homework, she sat at the chair in front of her desk and started doing problems.

At six, her mother called, “Dinner,” and she, her father, and the dogs, descended on the dining room. She poured herself a tall glass of milk, and two glasses of water for her parents. After grace, her father dished out Shepherd's Pie. The dogs sat on either side of him, tracking and sniffing the scents as the food moved from the casserole to the plates. Cliff's place—the fourth side of the table—sat empty, reserved for use during his vacations.

Carolyn's father pointed to the food. “My favorite.”

Her mother smiled. “I know.”

“Mom wrote to President Ford,” Carolyn said.

Gently scolding, her father said, “I'd have signed for your credit card, you know that, Beth.”

Her mother sipped her water. “I never had to sign for you.”

Carolyn reached her feet under the table to where the dogs had settled and rested them lightly on a furry back. She wondered when her parents would notice that her jacket was gone, and what she would say, or should say. She finished eating and stayed at the table while her father had seconds.

“Learn anything in school?” he said.

She pushed her hair behind her ears. “You got out early.”

“Did you and Dottie share the cookies?” her mother said.

Carolyn jerked her head up. “I don't know. I mean, yes?” She wondered where the cookies were. Probably on the side of the road.

“Dottie likes them almost as much as you do.” Her mother stood up. “I have a treat for dessert.”

Carolyn and her father cleared the dinner dishes and stacked them by the sink. Her mother pulled a platter of frosted cupcakes from the fridge and carried it to the table. “Carrot cake cupcakes.”

“I'm not hungry,” Caroline said.

“More for the rest of us,” her father said.

Her mother sighed. “But I made a double batch. There’s another dozen in the fridge.”

“Thanks, anyway, Mom.” Caroline went to her room, tucking her hands into the sleeves of her sweatshirt. After she finished her homework, she brought a book to the living room. Her parents were on either side of the sofa, reading magazines. The black and white TV was off and the curtains were drawn in front of the picture window. She sat on a stuffed chair and started reading.

Her father tipped his head toward her, and said to her mother, “Does she think I can afford to send her to college, too?”

“Shh,” her mother said. “Carolyn, honey, what’re you reading?”

Without looking up, she said, “Crime and Punishment.”

“We have that at the library.”

“Mmm.” She turned away from her parents and entered into the story.

After a while, her father said, “Your turn to take the girls out.”

Carolyn looked up. “Already?” She checked her watch. “It’s ten,” she stated, startled that almost two hours had passed since she’d started reading. She walked to the coat closet and picked up the leashes. The dogs whirled around her legs, wagging their tails and watching, almost nodding in anticipation. She put her hand on the doorknob and got goose bumps on her arms. “Dad?” she said, raising her voice slightly and speaking in the direction of the living room.

“What now?” he said.

Her mother called out, “In the same room, talk to each other in the same room.”

“Will you come with me?” Carolyn said.

Her father walked slowly to the front hallway. “It’s your turn.”

She exhaled sharply. “Here.” She handed him the leashes. “It’s dark out.”

“It’s always dark for the evening walk.” He scowled, but took them.

Carolyn tiptoed into the kitchen. She quietly pulled open the refrigerator door and took out the top platter of cupcakes. She set them on the kitchen table and eased off the aluminum foil cover. There were nine left on this platter. She considered for a brief moment before concluding that she needed to eat three cupcakes for her father to return safely, plus three for each dog. Nine.

The first cupcake went down easily. The cream cheese frosting was sweet and delicious, and the walnuts were soft and tasty. The second one was good, too. She poured a small glass of milk and prepared for the third. Halfway through, she thought she heard a noise outside and walked to the front door, holding the partially eaten cupcake. Reaching to lock the door, she stopped. That was stupid, she told herself. No one is out there. She finished the cupcake. Standing in front

of the platter, with six remaining cupcakes, she made a new determination: the bitches could take care of themselves. On occasion they simply stood in front of the door and growled, their guttural sounds rising to ferocious barking, with the hair on their backs upright, until the threat passed. She closed up the foil, replaced the platter into the fridge, and waited in the front hall. Her stomach bulged and any compensation that she expected was lost in a cream cheese burp. A few minutes later, her father bounded through the door behind the dogs, and hastily unleashed them. “Look what I have.” He held up her jacket.

“Where’d you find it?” She grabbed it and ran to the washing machine on the small, enclosed back porch. She started the water, added detergent, and dropped the jacket in.

Her father tailed her into the tiny room. “Phil Johnson happened to be in the neighborhood and saw me walking the dogs.” Her father raised his eyes skeptically. “How did he get your jacket, young lady?”

Her mother came from the living room and squeezed in. “Phil’s on your shift,” her mother said, nodding to her father. She looked at Carolyn quizzically.

Carolyn pointed to the washer, and said, “I can’t hear you, the machine’s on,” even though she could hear perfectly well over the agitation.

“Did he do something?” her father said.

Her mother touched her father’s arm. “We would have known.”

“He kind of followed me to Dottie’s.”

“Today?” her father said, raising his voice. “He followed you?”

“He stays in the truck, though,” her mother stated, as though she had heard a similar story down at the library.

Carolyn stared at the floor. “He kind of walked next to me?” She thought her parents could surely figure out the rest.

“Walked.” Her father nodded, as if reassuring himself. “You weren’t in his truck.”

Her mother put her hand on Carolyn’s shoulder. “How’d Phil get your jacket, honey?” Carolyn turned toward the wall. Her mother responded by declaring, “I’m calling Benj!”

“Don’t rush into anything,” her father said.

Her mother pulled Carolyn in for a hug. “Oh, honey, he didn’t...did he?”

Carolyn held on tightly and wiped tears along her mother’s shoulder. After a minute, Carolyn stepped out of the embrace. She sniffed and blinked and forced an artificial smile. Reaching her arms across her chest, she gripped her opposite shoulders, trembling at the recalled sensation of Phil’s arm around her, gripping tighter and tighter, at how quickly he’d slipped his hand where she wanted Drew’s to go. Her parents looked at her plaintively. She knew the right answer.

“He never touched me.”

Her mother glanced at her father. “Thank God.”

Her father nodded knowingly back. “He’s a jerk.”

“I’ll stay up and put your jacket in the dryer so it doesn’t get wrinkled,” her mother said. “I can press it and it will be good as new. You can wear it tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” Carolyn said, though she planned to wear Cliff’s sweatshirt to school. “I’m tired.” She stepped into the house, but turned back: her parents were staring at her, expectantly. “I’m okay,” she said. “Really.” They nodded, but she saw doubt. She forced another smile. “Don’t worry, nothing happened.”

Lynn

Robert Frost here. Most of you, I have to believe, would accept that I was a poet.

I long since grew weary of the so-called elite blathering on about the art of war. But, even the aggrandizing Machiavelli's *The Art of War* and *The Prince* are frequently downright poetic. I rise from the grave, albeit not a war grave, for me at any rate—I rise from the grave to bring the case for *The Arts*—plural—and *War*. *The Arts and War*.

All of you have probably heard that “the lights went out” on the world in 1914. In *War Through the Ages*, prose writer Lynn Montross noses out something poetic in pointing out that the highly creative Colonel Otto von Hoffman,

[r]ecalling the humiliating German defeat by the Slavs in the fifteenth century....suggested that the [recent] victory [of the Germans over the Russians] be named after that ancient field, which lay close at hand. For similar reasons of morale, he helped to cultivate the legend which represented [Paul von] Hindenburg, during his years of retirement, as having studied the Masurian lake region with a view to saving the fatherland on some vague future occasion from the Russian hordes. It made a pleasing and inspirational story which the German people accepted without reservations; and before long the old Junker's national leadership served the cause more effectively than his military ability.... So did art come to the aid of fact as all countries strove to “humanize” the remote and godlike figures of the supreme command. Only the methods of modern publicity could accomplish this purpose in a war [World War I] of such vast dimensions

Veatch Sadler

that many a conscripted citizen never set eyes on his general during the course of a campaign.

Thus do myth, story-telling—the arts in general—pull us to be more than we are. Plato may have banished poets from the Republic, but if poetry lies, it does so to good end.

We read poems to and tell our children stories but experience inordinate difficulty purveying the history of war as noble. I call the upcoming example, a family exchange, “Of War and Wars.”

You don’t dread the one on “the birds and the bees.” Your wife will do it. The bear is the one on “war and wars.”

But she resists: “You have to do it. I’m not doing it.”

“But where will I begin?”

“You had a relative way back in World War I. Start there. It’s as good a war as any.”

You deal first with your son as having to be easier than a daughter. Especially when the subject is war.

You call in your son, then address him. “‘The War to End All Wars’ . . . didn’t. It was, nonetheless, called ‘The Great War.’”

You die. Your son, wanting to help, asks you, earnestly—

“What caused this ‘War to End All Wars?’”

“Well, this environment for war grew up. There was this assassination, see, in this place called Sarajevo. There was this Triple Alliance and Triple Entente.”

Long before you tail off, your son is looking at you funny.

Your wife shrugs, then throws up her hands.

I was almost forty when World War I erupted. It didn’t exactly turn me into a poet, but I can’t say the same for my best friend. I refer to the English writer Edward Thomas. He was a major reason I gained success as a poet.

See, it was like this. Truth to tell, I wasn’t having good fortune in America at that stage, and I took my family to England for nearly three years with the express purpose of seeking my fortunes as a poet. I was lucky in many regards, not the least of which was that that precise moment had to have been one of the all-time

periods for literary friendships. I was where so much about poetry was happening. The Poetry Bookshop, which belonged to Harold Monroe, was major. Poets gathered. Poets read. I wasn't one of them at first but later came on strong, as the saying goes. You have to know and understand—Monroe's was the start of poetry readings. We—Elinor, the kids, and I—actually lived over that bookshop for a time. And I moved among the best of the day and got to attend what were known as “Yeats evenings.” I met not only Edward Thomas but Ezra Pound, the first American to give my work a favorable review.

In 1914, Edward visited us. At the time, we were staying with mutual friends, the Abercrombies, at The Gallows. What happened you might at its best call “Gallows humor.” Edward and I frequently went walking in a wooded preserve close to there. Our “walks-talking” were quite famous. He mentions them in one of his own “war poems,” “The Sun Used to Shine.”

There came a day, quite beautiful it was, when Edward and I were out on one of those blessed and blessing walks. Just as we left the woods, where we were, literally if not figuratively, trespassing, I must admit, and stepped onto the main road, one “Bott,” the head gamekeeper, confronted us. He was carrying his accustomed shotgun.

Preparing for how I'd present this to you, I learned that a bott can stop the flow of molten metal from a blast furnace. This chap tried to get in the way of burgeoning poets and their coming flow of what some have been pleased to call “golden poetry.” Fortunately, a bott works only temporarily. The infamous Bott the Gamekeeper was not temporary enough to suit me!

You see, Gamekeeper Bott was portrayed in the area as something of a bully, and Elinor and our children were scared to walk about freely because of him. The minute he spied Edward and me, he stared at me and muttered, loud enough to make sure I heard, “Damned cottager!” He had many more choice labels, but that one rankled most. I was never, I do herewith admit, fond of the English caste system.

Sadly, while I was angrily rising to the challenge, Edward was, well, to put a point to it, slinking off in apparent fear for his life. I followed him, though I kept looking back at Bott, who was alternately raising his shotgun and then his fist in the air.

Once we were off and away, I didn't know quite what to say to Edward, and we quietly continued our walk. But I couldn't accept what had gone on. I suffered a change of heart and, with Edward more or less in tow, sought Bott out at his home. When he came to the door, I threatened to beat him if he ever harassed any of the Frosts again. Bott stepped back inside, grabbed up his shotgun, and came out to point it, not at me, but at the innocent Edward. He drove him, in the

greatest of haste, away. I was sorry on the instant that I had brought Edward to this sort of confrontation once again and followed after him.

If you can believe it, the local constable subsequently served me with a summons charging that I had threatened the gamekeeper with physical harm to his person. A number of my and Edward's high-placed English friends, especially Lascelles Abercrombie, spent a great deal of time clearing up that contretemps. I could never get that episode from my mind.

The situation was sad all around. Some persons thought that the incident was another verification of "Mr. Frost's sensitivity to personal insult" and "tendency to self-dramatize." I thought the most damaging view, perhaps because I could not fathom what was meant, was that I "simply did not know how to talk to such persons as gamekeepers." Smarting, I would later take the measure of the kind of person Bott was accused of being in the poems "A Hundred Collars" and "The Code."

But I'd like to point out the saddest result of what I came to call "The Gamekeeper Incident of 1914"—precisely, its effect on Edward Thomas.

Edward had married while at the university and meant to make his way by his pen. Certainly neither he nor I ever imagined making our way by the "sword," as it were. He had to write some fifteen reviews a week just to keep the family going. You can understand how such grubbing—well, I don't like to admit it, but I scrambled through the same kind of briars, for we two friends had many of the same difficulties. Even when we first met, Edward, I later learned, was contemplating suicide and was thought to have had the means—a pistol or poison (maybe both)—on his person. One of Elinor's and my sons, sweet Carol, would later take his own life. Elinor, suffice it to say.... To make the point, let me say that repression and all-out mental problems were the bane of both households and families, as they are of so many who fight in wars. Edward had sought help at least and was "talked at" for a year before abruptly abandoning his therapist. Black moods pursued him. He couldn't help taking them out on his family. In fact, he would leave for lengthy periods to avoid hurting its members more. His wife Helen and my wife Elinor...well, difficulties pursued them. Suffice it to say that they weren't just wives of artistic husbands but women with ambitions of their own. Early on, I have to admit, when Elinor seemed to reject me, I left for the Great Dismal Swamp, where I contemplated offing myself

Through everything, Edward clung to the notion that he awaited a savior, and he knew instantly (or claimed to know) that I was said savior. By the time we two met, in 1913, from outward appearances, he was successful. By the lights of ordinary mortals, he was successful in his writing life. He could claim

thousands of articles and reviews, a novel, biographies.... He came to the aid not just of me but of other literary figures. I guess my later experience with Ezra Pound, battling his own craziness, was a kindred story in a way.

Edward's favorable review of the poetry collection I published in England in 1913, *A Boy's Will*, set me right. But I knew that what he truly wanted for himself was to leave Grub Street and be a true poet. He deemed poetry the highest form of literature. All of his prose, as pedestrian as he may have felt it, was poetry. I told him so. He ended, alas for his ending, a poet, who, at my urging, went back to his prose, picked up its beauties, and turned them to poems. We agreed on so very much. What the two of us called "cadence" had at that point no resonance of military marches. To us, it meant the sense that poetry must be listened to, not read silently, for its telling sound.

But The War happened.

Yes, The War happened. The Great War, The War to End All Wars, happened.

In 1914, with The Great War at his heels, Edward turned poet, fathered 144 poems from December 1914 to December 1916. He used a pseudonym. Those poems were about the countryside and nature but came to be "shot through" with the debilitating effects of war on the mind and spirit if not its physical rot and immediate scenes.

The British had enough war, thank you very much, to get Edward labeled, ultimately, a War Poet! Not only was he commemorated in the Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey but as a Poet-Soldier, beside an Actor-Soldier, in Old Battersea Cemetery.

The critics were as hateful as his publishers had been.

Then, too, Edward was gnawed at by his behavior in the Bott episode for the duration of his life.

Unfortunately, I, to my eternal chagrin, helped with, rather than healed, the erosion of my friend and his world.

I'll never forget the moment when War struck the two of us. We were a-seat on a stile close to our cottage, near Little Iddens in Gloucestershire, one day in 1914, when word came that Britain had declared war on Germany. We were still "free" enough to wonder if we'd be able to hear the guns from our location. I have to admit, as I told my friend Ernest Silver in a letter dated August 1914, THE WAR—in all caps—was exciting at first, but then I began—had—to think of my family and of the finances that were so scant. What were we going to do? I could think in such terms for some time because America remained neutral. After the debacles of the German U-Boats, however, President Wilson declared war on behalf of America on the second of April, nineteen hundred and seventeen. Six months after fleeing before Bott, Edward was still twisting in the wind about

reasserting his manhood. While he had twisted, the zeppelins found London. I had already taken my family home to New Hampshire. Edward had agreed to follow and had sent his son Merfyn along with us. Merfyn's name, by the way, like those of Edward's other legitimate children (as another besetting difficulty

rears its head), shows his Welsh descent. Our families meant to live side by side in America.

Edward was in his usual twist-and-turn about what to do. Should he go to the aid of his country? He once told me that his true countrymen were the birds. Should he follow through on his promise to me? To my everlasting shame, I am guilty of making the decision for him. I will continue to blame myself through all eternity.

It went this way. I sent Edward an advance copy of "The Road Not Taken," so "advance" that it was then called "Two Roads." I meant the poem as a gentle ribbing about the indecisiveness he had so often shown on our walks together. I just didn't think what it might say to him. The whole world took that poem seriously, so why shouldn't he? I was suggesting in it, finally, I believe, that all roads are about the same.

I have to admit that, when I was trying to decide where to take the family to amend my own writing situation, I flipped a nickel while Elinor ironed. That nickel chose between England and Canada for us. Would Canada have made a difference? Would an Edward Thomas have been waiting in Canada to have such an impact on my life?

Receiving that poem, "Two Roads," which Edward perceived as a rebuke recalling his cowardice in the Bott encounter, was the deciding factor. He was angry with me and sent me, from France, a letter asking what I was trying to do to him. He had already enlisted when he wrote it.

Even so, my friend made a definitive statement. Think of that. A far larger definitive statement than most of the world knows, much less dreams about. In July of 1915, he enlisted in the Artists' Rifles. Talk about war and The Arts! Art student Edward Sterling had established the 38th Middlesex (Artists') Rifle Volunteer Corps on the twenty-eighth of February in eighteen hundred and sixty. Its members included artists, musicians, actors, architects, and many others involved in the creative arts. I repeat—talk about war and The Arts!

It took me a while to understand the connection. The statement. The profundity. His death has remained so devastating. So devastating.

Edward did not have to go to war. The "draft" was not yet in effect. At thirty-six, with a family, Edward did not have to go to war. He was promoted to corporal and, in November of 1916, commissioned into the Royal Garrison

Artillery as a second lieutenant. He was in France slightly over two months when he was killed in the Battle of Arras on Monday, the ninth of April, in nineteen hundred and seventeen, almost immediately after reaching France. On Easter he was killed. The blight on his life again prevailed, for, having survived the battle, as he stood to light his pipe, he was brought down by the concussive blast wave of one of the last shells fired. He had a collection of my poetry among the possessions he took to France. He was buried there in the Military Cemetery at Agny.

I will—must—say it. That death was fraught with many poetic trappings. Symbolism, irony.... Not the formidable Bott nor War itself could finally stop the flow of molten gold that streamed from—that was—Edward Thomas. He was the only brother I ever had.

I succeeded in getting Edward's poetry published, posthumously, in America.

Yes, I was able to do at least that much.

And there is a coda of a kind. I wrote the poem "War Thoughts at Home" as a tribute to my dead friend, but it did not appear among my published works. Perhaps I repressed the entire episode in repressing it? I simply do not know. The case is that Robert Stilling, a graduate student at the University of Virginia, discovered a reference to it in a 1947 letter of Frederick Melcher, another of my friends, and subsequently found it handwritten inside a copy of *North of Boston*. It dates from January of 1918. Perhaps you'd care to make its acquaintance. Nature, birds, and a woman have cases to present and know that war is never over no more than Edward's in France.

Thus I tried to capture war, as it had captured Edward and thence me, with the art of poetry. And, at the same time, I remembered my friend's true countrymen, the birds, making us recognize once again, as did Edward Thomas, that art can tell—and tell deeply—of war without concentrating on the blood. Art, in this instance poetry, thereby enables us to think of ramifications far beyond the field of battle. Edward's own poem "Rain" is an exacting example, though written from his very Army hut.

To re-write myself, "Something there is that doesn't love a wa[r]."

POETRY

ANGELS IN SUM-

*J E A N I N E
S T E V E N S*

I believe angels exist in hot weather
to keep an eye on Queen Anne's Lace,
inhale vapors of Spanish moss,
harness shooting stars,
pick pink truffles emerging from dark loam:
all the things they own.

Angels relish the taste of salt
that forms on work shirts,
happily gather all the white petals
that drop in June moonlight,
rush to sprinkle new dew on furry toadstools.

They weave gossamer from webs
of August into new wings for winter,
scour recycled bins for parchment to snip
into flakes for the first flurries:
all the things they own.

These are not God's major angels
who are too busy with myth,
these are lesser beings taking temp work—
available only in summer.

If I could give them a flavor
it would be pineapple sherbet.



**THE CHILDREN I'LL NEVER
HAVE**

*A N D R E W
M C B R I D E*



The children I'll never have walk Padden Creek Trail with me
under protest. I want to teach them to wander and question,
to wonder and think for themselves. I want to show them

the lessons of water, patience and urgency, the gorge
and newly cut channels, how water can cut the land,
leaving everything revealed. I want to show them how

the creek disgorges fresh water and cargo in the estuary
whether the tide offers up still pool or expanse of bird-picked mud.
As we set off, the son I'll never have is fixated on his e-device,

at times looking at the ground, at times tweeting or texting.
The daughter I'll never have follows him, is engrossed
in whatever she's reading on her e-reader. I want the children

I'll never have to examine the text of this creek and begin reading
its strip of woods. I'm hoping we'll hear and see Steller's Jays,
Crows, Black-capped Chickadees, and Pileated Woodpeckers.

I want to teach them to observe: these clots of tan-white foam
caught at the edges of pools, the mangled automobile chassis
downslope near 10th Street, the rusting iron barrel in the lower creek.

I want to kindle their interest in the natural world, in repairing
and protecting what's left. As fall deepens, I want them to see
leaves turning, how samaras twirl-wing down to water or ground,

how an orb spider spins her web or drops a maple leaf on a strand
of silk. As we walk, I'm not afraid they'll see a dead raccoon
or dead bird; I want them to know that death is part of life,

that there is nothing to fear. As we make it to the estuary,
I'm hoping we'll see Great Blue Herons and Belted Kingfishers.
Secretly, I'm also hoping for battery failure, or better yet—

failure of two e-device batteries. I'm not giving up. I want
to show and teach the children I'll never have. Today it's enough

DOOR TO

MICHAEL

He strode up as I was mowing
with his clipboard swinging
and pressed shirt gleaming
and an amiable, persistent,

self-deprecatory manner
of “Look at me being all persistent!”
an apologetic, explanatory
appeal for understanding

as in “This is what I’m doing.”
And I wasn’t rude, just firm,
cutting off every sentence
with “No thanks, not today,

gotta get this done,”
until he stepped back
with his hands held up
in an *I’m leaving you alone* sign,
feigning fear
of my feigned mowing intensity.
Why wouldn’t I see
before he turned away

how he’d ironed the shirt,
practiced the spiel,
and I was who knows which
number asshole on his route?

MILBURN

Only later, in the almost dark,
closing my living room drapes
did I see—
him coming back

up the middle of the street,
white shirt still aglow,
a touch of jauntiness still there,
but not much.



CAROL V.
DAVIS

Man and dog sprawl on a bed,
their relationship unclear.
What love passes between them?

The man does not age in the painting
nor blink, his solid stare off to the side,
head thrust back, barely on the bed,
arm under and across the dog.

These are the basics, a room devoid of color.

His thoughts drift to later when he will meet friends,
talk about his irrational boss, those small
complaints that consume us.

The dog will die some years later,
but on this day, poised for the painter,
they lie as if nothing else matters,
as if they will always be this young,
this muscular, legs twitching
for the long run, oblivious
of the scars that await them.

MICHAEL MILBURN

In the movie a guy accepted
his neighbor's invitation
to a night out with her friends.

"Just casual," she said,
but when she came to pick him up
he stood mute behind his front door
as she kept knocking.

At least I haven't come to that, I thought,
what with all the cars
I've had to talk myself into getting out of
outside houses with parties
visible through the windows,
people striding up front walks, ringing, going in,
or cars I had to get myself into in the first place,
or my own houses I've had to fight to leave.

And each time I think
that maybe this time
I'll give in and not go,
just stay home
and all the doors will remain closed,
doors leading to experiences
that promise fun to other people,
at least to the ones gliding through them
who would not believe
what I'm enduring
trying to look like
I want to do that.

J E F F
B E R N S T E I N

BUSTED



My high school got busted
in the middle of the night.
The whole school. One hundred and four
students and teachers alike.
It wasn't what you think.
We weren't at school. We were planting
beach grass between the high water line
and the dunes of Duxbury, Massachusetts
at that rare double tombolo
where two narrow spits of land try
in vain to deflect the waves
rolling across the North Atlantic.
When we'd enthusiastically approved
the project at an all-school meeting,
our new science teacher said we'd help stop
further erosion, not that anyone or anything
can hold back the storms. (They arrive
as northeasters, reclaim pieces of our folly,
the highest priced houses along the beachfront
lose their toes, can't feel their feet,
topple into the Atlantic).

The summer camp where we unrolled our sleeping bags
that long ago night probably had never seen
teenaged girls and boys sleeping in the same cabin.
It was mostly innocent, almost all of the lust
was contained in our hearts -- weed, a few pills
(Quaaludes in the day) and the like scattered
in our backpacks. Somebody's mother visited,
Didn't cotton to what she thought she saw.
She called the authorities who sent a missive
out on police radio to every neighboring town
within shouting distance (bad news
traveled fast across those old lines).
Each department launched emergency plans
like lurid rockets, readied for the midnight raid,
I remember being awakened from a deep sleep,

APHRODITE

KATHARYN
HOWARD
MACHAN

Inspired by the white marble Venus with the Apple created by Danish sculptor, Bertel Thorvaldsen, circa 1813. It is on display in the Thorvaldsen Museum, Copenhagen.

Long beauty, perfect beauty: only I
deserved the golden apple his hand cupped
in curving palm. To rock-slung hills, to high
pale walls and windowed halls where families supped
and women wove rich stories on tall looms
I carried him in dream, and there he found
the one I promised him. And if the rooms
around her were a king's, her choices bound
by marriage vow? No matter. Mortal time
commences, carries, ends like a thin poem
contained with meter, ruled by foolish rhyme,
unlike my own free dance of ocean's foam.
I wanted that bright prize, my power praised,
though men's blood tore their breath as towers blazed.



S U S A N

R I C H A R D S O N

She takes up the shovel her father last handled the day he died,
arteries swollen as gutters after a melt, and bends to scoop
then straightens to twist and toss the white reflecting light
blinding as pain. Who would ever believe such feathery doilies
(like the lace ones her grandma peppered all through the salon)
could amass such a heaviness when packed in together?

Every winter reclaims the vow she made on her father's coffin,
to move to a land of sun and clear sky, Arizona, California,
their sidewalks marred by only evanescent hail or rain.
There, when clouds finally pile up, darken and grumble,
the downpour plays out minuets on one's skin.

Yet twenty years later she slumps to the same drive, shovel clanking.
As her own heart bursts open like a Kansas sunflower,
she can picture a climate where snow falls so rarely
her father cha-chas out in his tropical shirtsleeves,
clasps that white in his arms and then rhumbas through the evening.

**TROPICAL
SNOW**

