

THE SLEEPLESS & THE DEAD

A NOVEL

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By

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Southport lay ahead of them in the dark and the fog. As they sped toward Kentucky, the cables of the suspension bridge dipped and rose in long swooping arcs on either side of them and the brick towers fled past in surges of shadow. The Ford's windows shut out the chill, severing their small night from the infinite night outside, but the unseen city still came to them as a taste of steel and smoke that lingered in the back of the mouth. The wide Ohio brooded far below, black and starry like the sky, riven with ice floes that could make splinters of the steamboats from Cincinnati.

Harry Tomlin took one hand from the wheel and reached beside him for the bundle Mavis hugged in her arms. She let him peel back the yellow blanket to see the little face,

wrinkled and serious in sleep. He teased his fingers through the pale brittle hair that fell over the child's forehead, regretting that Guy showed so much of Mavis—her sharp nose and olive coloring, her eyebrows so thin they were hardly visible. A resemblance between him and the boy might have helped things. Harry would've liked him, anyway, to have the features that marked a Tomlin, the square chin, the full mouth—he kept his own shut, because of the stains on his teeth—and the large, unmistakable eyes, the tar-black curly hair always dully ashine. He would've liked Guy to have everything but his pale skin, the nightface of a man whose work made him strange to the sun.

Then there was the birthmark. In that way, Guy looked like no one but himself.

Mavis endured his hand on the boy for only a moment before she jerked away from him, thinned herself into the smallest space she could. Her arms coiled tighter around the blanket.

“I wasn't going to do anything.”

“He's finally got to sleep. All that noise and upset,” she said.

“It didn't have to happen. You could be—”

“I'm not going anywhere without him.” She studied Guy's face as if it were her own heart. “You never did tell me how you lost that finger. It bothers me.”

“I didn't lose it. I know where it went.”

“What happened to it?”

“Work.”

She might have prodded him more if headlights hadn't flashed into the rearview mirror, a watery glare hovering in the stainless steel. “Why're you slowing down?” she asked, but she must have known why. About halfway over the bridge, he pulled to the side and set the brake and waited, both hands on the wheel, his breath quickening. He didn't cut the engine. The other

car slowed and then sped up and hurtled by them toward Southport, a blue Pontiac coupe with mud flecked over the fender and two male shadows hunched within. Harry couldn't place them, not with one glance.

The coupe shrank into the dark. The bridge's lights cast a red film over all within sight.

They could turn back, he thought. Try to get lost and shake anybody who was on them; but they'd have to cross the river eventually. As the first Tomlin born in the city, he had a Southport native's fear of the river. He knew how deep the water ran in winter, how cold, how it iced a body like a fillet that the sheriff would have to fish out with a pole upstream. He would chance anything before he drove this bridge twice.

"How long you going to set here?" Mavis asked.

"Till I feel like moving."

"Then I'm getting some air."

"No. Stay put. It's freezing, anyhow."

"I'm about to melt."

He shut off the fan. Frost receded from the windshield. He missed the warmth; until he'd joined the syndicate and bought his first auto, he'd never known any source of heat but a stove or a fireplace. The younger Harry within him still marveled at rolling a knob and feeling the blush of hot air on his knees.

"Keep that window up," he told her when her hand moved to the crank.

"Jesus. Just drop me here and go on."

"I could do that. But you got to leave him with me."

He looked behind them. No cars, only the sprawl of Cincinnati, a skyline etched in lights.

"Listen," he said. "It's all in the trunk. It's yours."

“You expect I’ll just give him up?”

“What else will you do? Nobody wants a son who looks like that.”

“You do.”

His tongue ached at the root: she was right.

Headlights appeared at the Southport end of the bridge, growing with the passing seconds.

“I want out.”

“Hold on. Put your head down.”

“I hope it’s him,” Mavis said. Harry reached into the rear seat and then got out of the Ford. She stayed within, crouched down with Guy. The engine seethed. He knelt at the front left tire, his back to the road. Tires scratched as a car coasted up beside them and halted. It was the same coupe.

“Folks got a flat?”

Harry kept himself faced toward his car. “Just checking something.”

The coupe remained. The driver had a reedy, hayseed sort of voice, like he was from downstate. “I got a lug wrench you need one.”

Harry didn’t know the voice; he risked a backward look. The driver was Rip Morley. He had a chapped, sore-looking face and his brassy eyes held a mean interest. His brother Eugene had to be the shadow beside him. They weren’t anybody with Harry’s outfit, the Cleveland syndicate, like he’d expected. But they were indies, the syndicate’s rivals, mountain boys who wouldn’t sell their greasy little downtown joint even after they’d had their take stolen and their barroom bombed. They’d already jumped another Cleveland guy coming out of his dentist’s office and pitched him out a second-story window.

Harry turned back to the tire, hopeful that he was nobody to them. "I can manage fine."

"You work at The Spot?"

"What spot?"

"Sure I seen him there," Eugene said. "He runs that place for old Leroy."

"We like Leroy. We like his crew."

A thrill stiffened the hairs on his neck.

"I don't know what you fellas are about. I got my wife and baby with me."

"Don't play the fool," Rip said. "Tomlin, ain't it?"

His family's name, gummed in that mouth, was a curse. But he waited to move until the coupe's door opened and then he plunged his hand in his coat and stood and swung around, raising the sawed-off Remington level with the Morleys' heads. He fired before Rip had a toe on the pavement. The shot strayed to the left. Cracks webbed the coupe's windshield and Eugene thwacked against his seat like a tossed puppet, looking no more dead than alive in the dark. Harry pumped the action, the shell clinking on the asphalt, and aimed for Rip's chest. Rip threw himself backward into the coupe, sprawled over his brother's body. The next shot sprayed glass and steel and leather over the interior, but no flesh. Rip got his foot down on the clutch and the coupe shifted and lurched forward and with a roar they were gone. Harry had to jump on the Ford's black hood to dodge the swipe. He leveled the shotgun again and fired twice at the Morleys' tires. The blasts shuddered through the walnut stock and the sinew of his arm. Both slugs went high and gaped holes in the bumper. A loud shot answered him from the driver's window. Sounded like a snubnosed .38—the spark of it like a firecracker, the bullet lost in the echo. He had only one more round in the magazine and he didn't want to waste it, though it maddened him to abstain. If you shoot at a redneck, you had better kill him. Yet there'd been

five rounds fired, and only one body hit. It happened in Southport more than he could believe. Few men in his trade had been soldiers; they knew business, not war. Himself, he had to fire with his shaky left hand because of the forefinger missing on his right. Not that he would have been anybody's marksman if he'd had all his digits—not like his father had been, nipping rabbits in their lettuce garden with his .22 in the black of a downtown night. A tobacco farmer whose son had learned to walk along the city's muddy canals and made his first wage scrubbing the stoop at a whorehouse.

The air dinned in the onrush of silence. He slid off the hood and looked around. The Ford's passenger door hung open: Mavis and Guy were gone. His heart crashed in his chest. He opened his mouth to call for them; then off to his left came a thin howl. Mavis waited over in the shadow of the nearest tower, hushing Guy's cries against her coat. Harry went to them with the shotgun lowered, pointed away.

"They weren't our guys. They weren't with Cleveland. Just a couple nobodies."

Mavis hefted Guy in her arms and retreated from his grasp. The wind off the river bluffed at the belt of her red swing coat, sprayed her blonde hair loose. The stench of burnt powder drifted over them.

"What's it matter who they're with? Their bullets any different?"

Harry reached for her shoulder. She pressed her back to the iron railing at the edge of the bridge.

"He's crying on account of the wind. Come on, let's get him home." A conscious deceit pulsed under his words.

"We're fine here." She chin-nodded him up the road: "Go on. I don't need your money."

"You mean leave you here—out in the dark and you can't hardly breathe for the cold?"

“At least if I’m here, I’ll see whoever’s coming. From left or right.”

“Be serious, Mavis.”

She set her jaw in mute defiance, the child restless in his swaddling.

“All right. You’re nobody’s prisoner. But you can’t keep *him*.” Harry held out his arms for Guy. She slid back from him along the railing.

“Hold on,” he said. “It could be ice over there. What’s the matter with you?”

Her gaze raked him, raw from missed sleep. A nameless fear thickened in his chest as the silence held.

“Is it this?” He stooped, set the gun on the ground. “Don’t fret. There’s nothing in the chamber.”

Guy belched. He lifted his hands toward Mavis’s chin, hands like tiny bleached crabs. She didn’t look down.

“Then what is it? Is it Red? That was for you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Mavis.”

“Damn you,” she said. “Get away.”

Harry came at her and tried for the boy, but in one stunning swift movement she gripped the post behind her and hoisted herself onto the railing. Automatically he backed away, palms raised. Mavis bent at the knees until she had her footing, wincing at the constant icy thrum of the wind at this height. Guy was quiet; the tail of his blanket squirmed in that wind. The two of them looked impossible up there together. A photo of a woman and her child imposed on the horizon of a black river. The sight opened something within Harry, like a flow from a broken scab.

“You’re not in your right mind.” Somehow he kept his voice even; he was in such terror

and disbelief that he seemed to stand within a nightmare, secluded from all possibility. “Let me help you.”

Her lips worked numbly. She seemed wary that even her words could unbalance her:

“No.”

“You couldn’t do it.”

“You. Think so.”

Rage reflected in her eyes now, a spiteful claim to freedom. There was fear also, but of what—him or the dark that tilted below—he couldn’t tell. She stood bowlegged to save her feet sliding on the deadcold iron, trembling like a flu patient, one arm extended and the other clasping Guy in its crook. Silver breath emptied from her mouth.

He couldn’t wait anymore: the abyss walked him toward the railing with his hands out. “Here,” he said, helpless—“Here, come on,” and from below them the sound of the jealous river rushed up, so loud that it became its own silence.

Smoke: 1903

Southport, Kentucky, was hell and paradise for a hundred years before the syndicate ever found it—a mean little island nobody wanted to live on, but everybody wanted to visit. The city had more whorehouses than churches, and it had a lot of churches. Customers doubled the populace every night and halved it when they left at dawn. Before the War, it was mostly soldiers from the old barracks upriver; then, when the barracks closed and the suspension bridge joined Ohio and Kentucky, it was men from Cincinnati who came across the river to loose the animal inside them. They didn't care that Southport sat so low in its saddle of mud that the streets flooded every time a crow pissed out of the sky. They didn't care that after nightfall, this or that gang dragged luckless men down to the riverbank, where shots cracked over the water. Visitors knew Southport lived outside law and reason. They would soon be gone, back over that

bridge, and the morning would be another man's trouble.

That was one way to tell a Southport native: they were there in the morning. Another: they never noticed the smoke. The whole city breathed it: black smoke from a house fire in the Bottoms, from the crematory at the German undertaker's, from the steel mill's stacks; red smoke from a fire in the slag pit; sweet smoke from the barbecue on Broadway; firecracker smoke outside the police station, boys running up the street so scared they were laughing; white smoke from the trains on the C&O bridge, the steamboats crawling the Ohio; dirty smoke from the slaughterhouses over in Cincinnati; silver smoke from the stills dripping out moonshine that would make you go blind for two bits a jug. In the winter it was all under ice but the smoke, the loose wind-torn braids of smoke.

Except on the scarce days when he left the city and tasted different air, Harry had had that smoke in his lungs since his first breath in the narrow redbrick house on West 11th where he was born. His folks didn't own the place. They grudged every month from the landlord by bargains, pleas, and then there he was, a baby, the thing they needed least and wanted most. In the upstairs bed his mother, barely more than a girl, writhed and cried out at his coming, giving the midwife hell (*if you kill me you won't get a bare cent, it'll all go for the headstone*) while outside the door his father leaned his head on the wall and felt sweat gather under his arms. Live or die, he didn't have the money for this. Not to birth the son he wanted. Not to bury the wife he loved. And not for a cheaper decision months ago that he wouldn't have considered, and that his religion, in any case, forbade.

So Harry Tomlin arrived in Southport. March 15, 1903, already in debt like his father and screaming like a fox in heat. Harry with his mother's life all over him as his name was scratched in the family Bible. Nobody thought his mother would live. How could she? But she did. So did

Harry. They all lived, because they were Tomlins, and Tomlins were too damn poor to die.

For a long time Harry didn't think about his own birth, the common and necessary violence of his entering the world. Then he had a child to raise himself, alone, and all of it, his birth, his boyhood, became a story he might have to tell his son one day, and so he had to tell it to himself first. He had to decide what had really happened.

The Last Sacrament: 1916

Hunger. He remembered that the most. First the tendrils of pain in the belly, and then, after he was denied long enough, deadness like a limb choked of blood.

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When Father Reichert glided along the communion rail at St. Martin's, Harry wished the old man would set more than one Eucharist on his tongue. He didn't let the wafer dissolve in his mouth like he was told to. He crunched it up and swallowed it right away—brittle, tasteless, the bread of life.

Lent was coming, the season of self-denial, but it was nothing special for the Tomlins. They fasted like monks all year and they didn't need the fear of hell to make them do it.

That winter, it got worse. His father lost his job grading roads for the city. Ellis Tomlin lost jobs often. “The Lord’s at work,” he said, when he had no work himself. He could recite the disasters that caused his dismissal—a fire, a pierced water pipe, a man’s foot crushed under a wagon wheel—like the plagues in Egypt. He was a foreigner himself in Southport, and proud of it. He despised living there, still longed for the tobacco farm the bank had ripped away from his family, and he hugged his bad luck to him as a token of his ill fit for the city. He talked about demons when the fog rode in from the river. He had the frog-eyes and impish mouth of a less devout man, a jester who liked to curse and tease. It was a face Harry loved uneasily, the mirror of his own.

His mother prayed the rosary for a job to open at the post office—somewhere his father wouldn’t get crushed under a boxcar or blown up by a blast furnace. Stiff blue veins wired her forearms, a silent boast of the brooms she pushed and the pots she hefted. Her black hair held a few wild silver streaks like comet trails. She nagged his father to let her go work at the textile mill, but he wouldn’t. He had an excuse ready: “You got no clothes that suit for working out.”

He was right, at least, about that. She had few garments in her chifforobe besides her wedding dress, some underskirts, a nightgown, and two green calico dresses, both left from her dead sister and too big for her, her slender body rarely finding shape in the fabric.

For weeks they skipped putting coal in the stove as his father grubbed for work. Their house became winter; they had to grease the front door’s hasp with lard or else it froze, locked in ice. Harry’s breath ghosted the air wherever he went, inside or outside. His mother asked him quietly, not begging, to come sleep between her and his father in their bed, but he refused. He was nearly thirteen, he had his own bed, and he feared doing anything a baby would. Sister Helen at the St. Martin’s school already called him a runt.

Without really asking, Harry asked his father to let him go work. Over supper he'd wait for a silence and then say, "The paper needs a boy." Or, "Pohlmann's wants help in the stockroom." And another time, "Bowling alley's looking for a pin boy."

His father always nodded, as if pitying the owners their lack. "You got your whole life to work. It's school for now."

Harry ventured, only once, to talk back. "All the fellas at school got themselves a job."

"Sure they do," his father snapped. "They don't get home till after midnight, either. God knows who's skulking in the street at that hour."

"Ellis," his mother said.

Shadows cracked his father's face. He looked sick, cornered. "You're so small," he told Harry. "Anybody could tuck you under their arm and run away."

Harry looked down. He'd never heard of any St. Martin's boy who'd ever been robbed or snatched into an alley. If he'd had the words, he might've told himself his father loved him and his mother enough to keep them safe from the taint of the city; and that he cared so little for them, at the same time, that he'd make them lambs on his altar and say it was for their good. Harry couldn't decide if he was being loved or martyred. That made his resentment burn even darker.

He tried for the job at Pohlmann's, anyway, and was turned down. The owner, a German with broken veins crisscrossing his nose, assessed him over the counter: "You couldn't reach the shelves, little friend." Harry didn't tell anyone that he failed. It hurt him that he'd never worked when other boys had worked since they were six or seven; but it hurt him worse to know that he'd gone against his father by even asking.

The house grew colder.

One night, he found a new blanket folded neatly on his cot, waiting for him. He'd never seen it before, but he could tell it had once been something else. Visible stitching crisscrossed the fabric where sections had been joined. It was hand-stitched from old wool, dense to his touch, lined with cotton to soften the rough feel. The cream dye had faded to a dull sepia.

He waited for his mother to come say goodnight, but she didn't. She and his father were talking in their room. He picked up the blanket and went down the hall and opened their door without knocking. His father stood peering out the window with a suspicious hunch to his shoulders, his nightclothes moth-gnawed in patches, almost transparent in the candle's glow. His mother sat up on the bedcovers with her arms crossed under her breasts. She startled when he came in.

"Honey, what is it?"

"You didn't come down."

"Old enough put yourself to bed," his father said.

Harry held up the blanket. "What's this?"

"It's yours," his mother said. One side of her face, away from the candle, looked unfinished.

Harry went to the chifforobe and opened it. In the dark hung her underskirts and the two green dresses.

"Your wedding dress—why'd you use it?"

His father turned back from the window. "I prayed for it to get warm out," his mother said. "Suppose I got impatient."

Harry laid the blanket at her feet.

"I don't want it."

“You rather have the belt?” his father said.

Harry cast a cool, thin-eyed look at him. His father blinked.

Between them on the bed, his mother opened her arms, trying to smile. “You only get married once, honey.”

“You still wear it,” Harry said. “It’s warm.” But then he took the blanket back.

“Go on. Bed now,” his mother said.

He shut their door behind him. On his way down the hall, he heard his father say, “We still had the farm when your ma made that.”

He dropped the blanket beside his bed. He couldn’t sleep under it. Just the sight of it stung his eyes—not with guilt, but with a fiery, wordless anger that drove the cold from his blood. He was angry at being alive, being poor, being hungry every minute he was awake. His father spoke of the Old Testament as if the prophets lived today, and for a moment he could’ve believed himself one of those ragged men, visited with holy rage. He paced around and around in his room, until he couldn’t feel that rage anymore and was cold again. But now there was a reckless new freedom coursing in his veins, a call to war.

He decided to steal.

The next morning, he left home pretending to head for St. Martin's and instead roamed all over the west side, looking for something to take. It was easy for him to skip school; of his own choice, he had no friends. In fact, for a reason he couldn't pin down, he wanted to be around the other boys in his class so much that it made him afraid of himself, and so he didn't want to be around them at all. It was easier not to see them, to be alone.

He stopped along the sluggish canal when he saw the dead man. He looked like a drunk who had fallen over in somebody's yard and frozen in the night. Frost cottoned his eyelashes; the wind pestered the tufts of brown hair that clung to his scalp. Someone had thrown a beige canvas duster over him from the neck downward, either to return it or hide him. The yard where he lay,

a grassless dirt square, pressed up to a wrought-iron fence whose pickets ran like fangs up and down the block of skinny ashen houses.

Watching the closest house's windows, where the purple drapes were pinned together, Harry patted the man's trousers until he found the shape of a coin. He slid his hand in that pocket. Immediately the man's eyes opened and he reared up from the dirt. Harry fell back on his haunches.

"What you after, kid?"

"Help you," Harry said.

"I don't need help from a damn street critter."

Harry slapped him hard across the face. He'd just gotten on his feet when the man's grasp closed over his elbow and wrenched him back. His breath smelled like cinnamon and moldy leaves.

A broom crashed on the man's head, and Harry scrambled away, free. The broom belonged to a woman in her forties with her peppery hair screwed back in a bun. Her body was solid, farmlike, without seeming heavy. The door to the nearest house stood open behind her.

"You going to leave him be?" she shouted at the man.

"You seen him, Carrie." He spat in Harry's direction. "Little rat touched me through the pocket. Had his hand on my business."

"Who hasn't?" she said. "I ought to chased you out further if you was going to sleep on my step."

The man staggered up and swerved a bloody gaze around. Carrie shooed him up the street with a noise that was part words, part whistles: *Go on pheet get up get on pheet*. Harry watched her intensely. He'd heard his mother chase off stray dogs like that.

Carrie noticed him once the man turned onto the next block. “School ain’t open today?”

He looked at her, serious. “I need me a quarter.”

She clasped her hands at her waist and bowed, laughing. “And I reckon I kept you from it, huh? Jesus, you’re a show.” She waved him in the house. “At least come in and warm up. That rag you got on ain’t nothing.”

Like every residence on the west side, her house was narrow, glazed with kerosene light, a chain of single rooms front to back. Troops of bare-skinned angels decorated the pale green wallpaper. Overhead, footsteps played the floorboards like piano keys, though Harry didn’t hear any voices.

The stove wrapped him in a delicious heat. His nose began to run snot; he sniffed.

Carrie—he would come to call her *Miss Carrie*, like the ladies did—threw a small brown mackinaw coat at him. It was tacky and fragrant with oil. “I’ve no need for it,” she said. “I’ll never have anybody that little here again. I wouldn’t allow it.”

She told him she ran a home for indigent young ladies, reciting those exact words with a teacher’s precision: “But I don’t do charity. They all work.” She asked him his name, seemed to forget it as soon as he spoke—he lied, anyway, and she didn’t think anything of it a month later when he said his name was Harry. That first morning, she offered him a nickel to sweep the staircase and scrub the front steps, then another to sand the banister and varnish it with linseed oil. She seemed to think him older than his age, which pleased him, because everybody else thought he was eight or nine. He kept working all day in the faith that she’d pay him a quarter, but by afternoon, when it was time for school to let out and he had to go home, he’d done five jobs and earned just a nickel for each. No quarter. He wanted that quarter. He wanted to walk in the door at home and show it to his mother and father, and he wanted to be the reason for one

night that they all got a loaf of bread apiece and a big pot of split pea soup made with a ham bone. Instead, he stored his sad nickels in his dusty new coat. When his father asked him where he got the coat, he lied that Sister Helen gave it to him.

His lie was believed; no Tomlin had time to question a good stroke. By the next dawn, he was at Miss Carrie's again in hope of more.

Miss Carrie always looked offended, as if living on the west side of Southport was her only choice other than death. Her accent told of a mountain birth. Harry had never been down east in the coal country where his mother and father came from, but this lady had the same cotton in her mouth that they did. He liked to hear her call a fire a *far*, or tell him to fetch the mineral oil and *greaze* the door hinges. In two days he got through the tasks she could find for him downstairs—he was never allowed upstairs—and when she saw he had nimble feet, the nerve and speed of a rabbit, she set him to be the house’s runner at ten dollars a week. He ran the ladies mail from the P.O., money from the bank, meat from the butcher tied up with twine in big bloody sheets of paper. He ran their laundry to and from an Irish woman who wore a floppy straw

sunhat indoors and out. He ran them five-cent bottles of Coca-Cola from Mr. Orsini, the Italian at the corner grocery who spoke no English and seemed to hate Miss Carrie's ladies, though he loved kids, particularly the runts like Harry. "Hire you so quick?" Miss Carrie said—*How're you*—when he came back carrying a kraft paper bag taller than his head. He asked for his pay in quarters until he taught himself, watching Mr. Orsini make change, how many quarters were in a dollar bill. He'd never learned that at St. Martin's.

The house's ladies all looked grown to him, though he couldn't have guessed if they were fifteen or forty, or even said what age really meant besides height. They paled their faces with rice powder, rouged their cheeks to the polish of fresh fruit. They wore black velvet and silk crepe, things that were like costumes to Harry, and they gave him hard lemon candies he didn't want and played with his hair like he was a dog, like he was somebody they'd once known and now missed. He came to love their weary, feminine scent because it meant money.

Miss Carrie wanted him gone early every day. "There's worse things in these alleys," she liked to warn him, pointing down the block, "than last night's drunk." He didn't know what she meant until the day he was running a sealed envelope to another ladies' home and saw a man thrown against a bar window. The glass shivered but didn't crack and one half of the man's raw red face flattened to the surface, mouth and nose bulging weirdly, an eye socket filled with blood the color of a busted grape. Harry stopped on the sidewalk, paralyzed. The man was only displayed in the window for a second before somebody yanked him back into the shadows within. There were men shouting and chairs crashing over. It was just past eight, the hour when the steel mill's third shift hit the streets craving a drink. This place at the corner of West 7th and York, no bigger than the Tomlin house, was run by a German couple and had no name, the ceiling low, the counter stained smoke-dark from old-world tobacco and spicy meat. Harry

thought it was a good bar. He ran the ladies an occasional beer from here, breadly-smelling and served in a glass mayonnaise jar he had to return; the owners were always pleased when he came back with the jar held carefully in both hands. He listened to the brawl as long as he could stand, with a feeling between pride and fear: the moans and grunts and thwacks of fist on flesh. Eventually he swallowed and walked on, the envelope pressed between his fingers—which felt so thin now, fragile—thinking of men being what men were.

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Miss Carrie sent him out with more envelopes, and soon, every week, she had him taking a stuffed paper bag to the police station two streets down. She trusted him so much that it made his chest ache with a kind of unearned guilt, as if he'd actually cheated her. He wasn't cheating anyone, really, except his mother and father—he'd let them believe he was going to school all this time. The parish school they paid ten dollars a year for. He felt sure his father would belt him if he admitted where he worked, and that suspicion gave him a vague, blurry shame about the money he might have shared with them. He stashed it in a hollow behind the peeling wallpaper in his bedroom and spent it only on tinned sardines and crackers for his midday meal. Week after week, the knot of cash slowly grew in the wall like a tumor behind his crucifix. He hoped he'd know what to do when there was no more room. But he wasn't enough like his father to pray about it.

If he wasn't running, which was rare, he lay on the crusty brocade couch in Miss Carrie's parlor and listened to the phonograph. She showed him how to set a record on the turntable, position the needle, wind the spring. Usually the ladies slept through the singing that piped up out of the brass horn, but one day a trio of them came down wearing only satin slips and danced around him to "Let Me Be Your Sweetheart" until Miss Carrie swept in from the privy outside

and barked them back to their rooms. Their eyes were laced with blood, as if they'd been drinking; and Harry, still a boy but older than anybody in the house understood, spied the dimples in the satin where it strained over the ladies' thighs and buttocks, their rhythmic bodies and smooth bare legs, with a blush of alarm. In their absence, he looked around at the parlor and recognized that the angels on the wallpaper, which he'd never studied closely, were not angels but nude women with smooth curving comma bodies and skin in every shade from ivory to amber. Their hair—black, blond, gingery red—finned out behind them in the attitude of falling from a terrible height, pulled thin by gravity. Navels the size of poppy seeds pocked their bellies, third eyes that stared deeper than their flat, unemphatic gazes. Somehow, to Harry, that detail seemed the most private and startling.

The needle ran into the next song. He sat up on the couch with his hands sunk into the cushion, as if he'd just woken, and recalled the drunk's complaint months ago in the street—that he, Harry, had touched his business. He hadn't known what the man meant, but now that same secret part of him pressed hard and sore in his knickers, and his heart bumped in his chest, elsewhere, all over him. The women in their slips, he felt, weren't the cause of this; they'd simply brushed against a deeper thing within him. The accusation was what thrilled and deviled him. The crime of skin touching skin, his hand on another's body. The drab, smoky world around him pulsed with sex; he felt like he understood, finally, what *business* was for Miss Carrie. It was a heat he'd never suspected in the people he knew. Not in the priests whose cassocks hid their bodies, the nuns lost within their habits. Not in his parents, ever; their bed was unknown country to him, a place to kneel beside and pray.

The housekeeping had him alone with Miss Carrie the next morning, sweeping the chimney with a brush tied to a curtain rod. The blue gingham handkerchief masking his face

made him brave to ask her, as she trimmed the lamp wicks and refilled the oil, “Ma’am, why do the customers only come at night?”

He spoke as if there was nothing to be shy about. It seemed to work.

“It’s the street we’re on,” she said. “Fellas work in the city come back this way. That makes us a nighthouse.”

“There other kinds?”

“Sure. They’s a lot of dayhouses open mornings on the streets going north, cross the bridge.”

“For the fellas that can’t wait?” He laughed behind the mask.

Miss Carrie looked up, hawk-faced, from the bulb she was polishing. Her eyes seemed to register his height, his pitch. “Just how old are you, Harry?”

“Sixteen, ma’am.”

“Try me again.”

He cleared his throat. “Old enough I’m asking.”

She went back to the bulb. “You ought to stay young a little longer. Don’t ask nobody those things till you got a beard on you.” She looked shaken, gray, remorseful. She might have known her dismissal would only worsen his curiosity. Maybe she’d had her own children once.

His father found a job driving the neighborhood's milk wagon. Within a week he lost it arguing with his Methodist boss over eating meat on Good Friday. In spite of his grumbled warnings about what happened to women in factories, Harry's mother tried for a position at the textile mill in the east side. But there were no openings, so she went around to the neighbors and took in laundry. The pots of soiled sheets she boiled on the stove gave their kitchen a sour humidity.

One night the three of them sat down to supper in their familiar triangle around the unvarnished pine table. A cracked clay pitcher rested on the floor beside his father's leg for when he wanted to spit. Harry sat on a stack of missals borrowed from church to raise him level with the food—hominy reheated on the stove, their meal for the last three nights. They ate it between his father's jobs, the corn grown along their back fence in the summer, the lye leached from wood ash. To Harry, it tasted like giving up.

His father said grace and began to eat. Harry didn't. His mother hadn't set down a plate for herself. She kept her face downturned and ran her finger up and down the seam of the table. Minute by minute, the lowering of the paraffin candles at the table's center tightened the circle of

light around them.

“You feeling poorly, ma?”

Her finger stopped on the wood, and she brushed a pale strand of hair behind her ear.

“I had mine earlier.”

A kernel dropped from his father’s spoon. He brought a handful of his shirt to his mouth and licked the scrap from it.

Harry nudged his plate across the table. “Have this.”

“That’s for you,” his mother said. “I done grown up all I can.”

“I’m full from dinner.”

“School must feed you well,” his father said.

Harry looked at him, then back to his mother. He pushed his helping to the edge. Her hand came off the table, as if spiders crawled on the tin plate.

“What’s the matter? You mind food?”

Her eyes filled with grief.

“I won’t eat it,” Harry said. “It’ll go in the bin.”

“Suppose you get better at school.” His father leaned, spat into the pitcher.

His mother shook her head. Not to argue, it seemed, but to ward off the tears that pressed at her eyes.

His father said, “I wish we put things in the bin. I’d like to be that kind of folks.” He rammed a last spoonful of hominy into his mouth. Harry’s mother got up and walked from the room. Her footsteps winced up the staircase.

Harry shifted. The stack of old books creaked under his backside as he waited—for what, he didn’t know. The candle light gave the stubble on his father’s jaw the sheen of iron filings.

“How’s it over to St. Cecilia?” his father asked, not looking up from his empty plate.

“What you mean, pa?”

“School.”

“I go to St. Martin’s.”

His father’s gaze climbed Harry’s shirtfront, grudgingly, until their eyes met. In the street beyond their thin door, a horse cart slushed up the muddy road.

“Your ma took in Sister Helen’s wash. She asked how you’re faring at St. Cecilia.”

Harry glanced at his abandoned food. The steam over the hominy had dwindled to a hair.

“You told Sister we moved you to St. Cecilia. She ain’t laid eyes on you once back to January.”

He had a feeling of cotton in his mouth. He swallowed dryly. His father raised his hand and scratched his cheek, his anger pressed down beneath his admiration. He admired sinners who were inventive and wily in their trespasses, more original in their evil than the faithful in their obedience. He scraped back his chair and stood. Harry expected him to unwind his belt from the loops of his brown canvas pants, but instead he went to the smoking cabinet in the corner and took out his snuff tin and a woman’s handbag. He set the handbag on the table in front of Harry. The black oilcloth was flaking, and the flap sagged like a dead man’s lip. Harry could see the bills that crimped within. His money.

His heart drummed hard.

“Over a hundred dollars. A hundred dollars.”

“You went in my room.”

“I had time,” his father said. “No job to do.”

Harry smiled briefly, without meaning to.

“You can’t have made it from decent work.”

“It’s honest made.”

“Then why keep it hid?”

His father pinched dip from the tin. He drew out his lip and fit the dark wad in the side of his mouth. Harry shuddered inside himself, as if he were watching an animal feed at a trough, though he’d seen this act almost every night as far back as he could remember.

“I tailed you this morning,” his father said. “I still hunt kindly well. City hasn’t spoiled me yet.”

“I did it all on my own count.”

“But say where you work. Say it.”

“It’s money just the same, ain’t it?”

His father grabbed the handbag and tossed it in his lap.

“That’s your mother’s own bag. It just any bag to you?” He peered at Harry over the candles, and then sat back against his chair. He said softly, “You’re fraid I’ll whip you. But anymore, I can’t even whip myself good enough.”

Harry bit down on his cheek. “Then what you going to do?”

“Ought to do something.”

“You going to keep the money?”

His father spat brown juice in the pitcher. Harry slanted his eyes away.

“I couldn’t touch a hand to it.”

“Ma’s hungry,” Harry said, his hands clamped down on his knees.

His father spat again. “I dare you to pity us.”

Harry was still. He realized that the man he faced didn’t know how to deal with him.

Whether to throw him out in the street, drag him to confession, make him drop his sinful earnings in the collection plate—all the things in his son's blackest daydreams. He was waiting for Harry to decide for him.

At last, Harry pushed his chair back, slid off the stack of missals. He circled the table and picked up the cooling plate of hominy from his mother's side. He held it out to Ellis for a moment. Then he set the plate down in front of him.

Ellis sat with a straight back and his knees wide apart, his arms crossed, looking through Harry at something just past the bounds of light.

"Damn this city," he said.

Harry hung his mother's bag over his shoulder. When he shut the house's door behind him, he turned up the alley and sat down by their cistern, his back pressed into the brick. His stomach was fisted into a hard lump. He worked up a kind of faith that before the hour was gone, Ellis would call out for him from the door, his mother would hurry into the alley and pull him back inside; they would just know where he was. Then the hour passed and they didn't come and he stood, too ashamed to go back in, and headed up the street. After a minute he began to run as if Ellis chased him, flying up the block before that dry sinewy hand could close over his wrist. The handbag swung at his side. A lady in a rose pinafore poured her dishwater out a window, into his path, and he dodged around the dirty gray cataract. He figured he'd be away from home for a night; he'd tell Miss Carrie he'd gotten a beating and she'd let him sleep on her couch. He couldn't have known it would be months before he'd walk in his family's home again.

In some dark cavern of himself, he would come to accept that Ellis hadn't really wanted him to stay—had given him up to the city like Abraham giving up Isaac on the altar. He would have to suffer before he'd know why.

Ellis Tomlin had come to Southport after his tobacco farm was lost in the '90s panic. He was the one son who'd stayed to till the family land; when the bank seized the farm, he was the one son to lose it. His lungs were too weak for him to work the mines. When Harry's mother found they were expecting, he brought them north. In Southport they lived at first like arrivals from the old country—raising chickens out of milk crates, chasing rabbits out of their lettuce garden with a rusty billhook, squinting shyly at the locals who only spoke German or Italian. Raised as hardshell Baptists, they got by on handouts from the Sisters of Charity and, in a kind of requital, asked to be received into the Church. Soon they were like natives, they breathed the city smoke without tasting it, they barely thought to wipe the coal dust from their shoes. But in his heart Ellis still lusted hopelessly after that farm like a promised land denied. When Harry was younger, his mother used to whisper their story to him after she put him to bed, her voice drifting and repeating like one of Miss Carrie's records under a skipping needle. She might have just been talking to herself, thinking he was already asleep. Harry would fall deep inside her words and wake up remembering all she'd said, and he would feel himself to be older, harder, like a larva that had turned into a wasp—filled with all the threats and temptations of the city. It was the only place he'd ever lived, and until now, running across the west side as night came on, he hadn't felt like he belonged here. He felt sick with hate and pity and love for the man who'd let him go, and for the mother he'd left behind, whose ragged handbag and the money within it were the last sacrament he received from his father's table.

Over at Miss Carrie's on West 7th, the door was pegged open, as it never was in the daytime. Customers crowded the street outside. Some of them looked like the first shift from the steel mill, scorched men in overalls who worked over fire and had to shave their faces raw. They smoked, occasionally turned their heads to spit as they waited. A happy song rode the still, humid air—not the tinny voice of a man from the phonograph, but the live voices of women, unsynced, tuneless, and real. A shadow entered an upstairs window and threw some small, flimsy thing down at the men with a shriek, and they shouted with laughter. One of them lobbed a taunt up at the window. Harry heard it without hearing the words.

Weaving into the crowd, the men's waists rising around him like smokestacks, he darted

toward the front door. The draft from within was redolent of steam, like when too many bodies were in a hot room.

A heavy arm, gingery with fine red hair, swung down across the door.

“No place for a kid. Get back to your folks.” A barrel-built redheaded man stood over him, his shadow big enough to cover Harry twice. Another man, leaner but with the same small green eyes, possibly the big man’s brother, peered from behind his back.

“I got to give this to a lady,” Harry said, nodding at the handbag.

“What’s her name? I’ll give it to her.”

Harry toughened his grip on the bag.

“You’ll give it to her, will you?” The skinny brother laughed with a boy’s high, cracked pitch. His eyes were glassed as if he’d drunk or smoked something funny.

“I don’t know. Any of them,” Harry said.

The brothers laughed together.

“I don’t know what you heard,” the big man said, “but this ain’t no candy store.”

“It’s kind of like one—” the other began, and the big one told him to shut up.

“I work for Miss Carrie,” Harry said.

“Go climb a tree,” the big man said, irritated now. “She don’t need to bother with you.”

“I’m powerful curious what he’s got to give her,” the skinny one said, and his fingers twitched out for the handbag. Harry slipped back from his reach, moving fearfully through the crowd, though he doubted the brothers cared to chase him. He was only a gnat to them, forgotten as soon as he was out of sight—one blessing of being a runt.

With nowhere else to go, he took the bigger brother’s advice and made for the alley beside Miss Carrie’s, where a black locust tree furred up between the houses, higher than the

roofs. He slung the handbag over his shoulder, notched his nails into the bark, and climbed, scaling up into blackness and leaves. Birds slept upright around him. He'd done this before, surveying the city to find some church or other landmark Miss Carrie gave him in her directions, but he'd never gone to the top. He beat the sunset there by minutes. The green sky above his head paled down to a burning orange line over the hills in Cincinnati. Up here on the highest branch, his view unbroken by twigs, he could see all of Southport, the motley roofs, the cathedral, the suspension bridge over the Ohio whose cables could have been a line of stitches holding up that sky. The sight filled him with a bloodrush of possession and longing. He missed his mother, and even Ellis, but felt that leaving them had sealed a tunnel behind him. He couldn't go back home tonight; maybe not tomorrow, either. The admission started a tender ache behind his eyes. His stomach fisted again, his features knotted with pain, but the tears were caught inside him, too big to let out. He kept his face dry. Maybe that meant he was more of a man than when he'd left the ground.

An older Harry would think one day: *If he'd just beat me. If he'd just worn me out good.*

*

Full night arrived. Cincinnati brightened as Southport vanished under him. A small red passenger boat scudded up the canal.

The need to sleep whittled at his attention. He was wary of relaxing his hold on the bough and falling like the young man who died in the Bible story; there was no St. Paul around to raise him. But he didn't know if he could outlast the line of customers. Even if he did, Miss Carrie might not put him up for the night. She never had him around after dark.

Just as his grasp on the tree began to soften, all noise ceased within the house—a sudden quiet like among sparrows when a hawk wings into the sky. All at once a fight between two men

exploded out the front door into the street. The customers scattered, fled. Miss Carrie's silhouette came into the door and stood still, watching the men trade blows. One, shorter than the lanky guy he faced, kicked the taller man's knee and drove him backward, onto the ground, and flipped him over. His hand blurred into his pocket and came out holding something that he drove into the downed man's right shoulder blade. The man screamed. Harry's mouth opened, and he didn't quite hear the sigh that left him. For an instant he saw—believed, even hoped—that it was his father holding the knife, cutting himself into the other man.

“Pinned like a bug.” The short man had his knee down on the tall one's spine.

Miss Carrie cleared her throat from the door. “Leroy.”

“How about the neck?” The one she called Leroy lowered his head to his captive's ear as the man continued to moan. “Should I get it over with?”

“You owe me for the ones you scared off,” Miss Carrie said.

“Hell with that.” Leroy didn't even look at her. “I paid you to keep her just for me. You owe *me* back.”

“The gals do what they want. I can't watch them every minute.”

He got up. He put his boot on the other man's back. “Lucky you're not a mother now, I guess.”

Miss Carrie leaned on the jamb. Her voice sounded unlike anything Harry had heard from her before, terrible, ancient. “Want me find you a new one? I know you like 'em fresh.”

Nobody remained in the street now but for the two of them and the man on the ground. Leroy bent, withdrew the knife. The other man gasped. A puddle of him blackened the cobblestones. Leroy kicked him over and dragged him by his ankles to the edge of the canal, his head bouncing rhythmically over the pavement. He was limp when Leroy rolled him in the

water. A lazy splash sounded, then nothing.

Leroy came back toward Miss Carrie, keeping out of the door's light. He stepped over the dark streak on the stones.

"I got to drink that water, you know," she said.

He spat. "I'll find me another house where I get what I pay for. I'm not about to share a gal with every bastard's got two pennies."

"Make it easy on yourself. Take one home."

"I got one there."

"She ain't good for much, is what I hear."

Leroy looked at her. Miss Carrie looked back.

"If you were a man...but I reckon it's bad enough being a woman."

"On your way, Leroy."

"Look after yourself," he said, and started up the block.

Harry's eyes followed Leroy as he passed under the locust tree, the slow swing of his arms, the way the moonlight appeared to trail him. It would be years before Harry could say what drew him to the man. Leroy was as short as any Tomlin, but he walked like he was the city. Like he'd die before he licked crumbs off his shirt. He walked like sin wasn't even a word to him, like he belonged to the world of sex and loved who he loved hard enough to hurt somebody. Harry feared him, yes, but his fear was corked up, buried under a desire to be near him. He shifted off the bough and climbed down. His legs burned icily as the blood flowed back into his sleeping muscles. He rested his weight on his arms, like a double amputee, and when he got to the ground he tripped and shambled out of the alley with a drunk's gait. The handbag jounced at his hip as he caught up to Leroy. He had no plan for what he'd do, only a frantic hope. "Hi!" he

called, breathless. “Hi you?”

Leroy turned. He wore inexpensive clothes, a white shirt with a pointed collar and brown twill trousers. He had a chipped face like an old Roman statue. His eyes were flat, falcon-gray, and his cheekbones chiseled down to sharp violet indents as if he never ate enough.

“Hi,” Leroy repeated. “You from down south?”

“No. Been here my whole life,” Harry said, as though to defend himself.

“Must be in your blood.” Leroy slipped the knife from his pocket. Harry stiffened as he flicked it open, squinted at the blade, then rubbed the flat of it clean on the callused heel of his hand.

“I know you, don’t I?”

Harry hesitated. Maybe he looked like some other boy. Yet the shadow-life that issued from Leroy’s question—a life where they already knew and trusted and worked with one another—felt as real and believable to him as a hand within a glove.

“I want a room,” he said. “I want a job.”

“What do I want a midget for?”

“Try me. I can run.”

“I got a runner.”

“Not as good as me.”

Leroy laughed without his eyes thawing.

“I even got this.” Harry felt himself laying a bet as he dropped the strap from his shoulder and held the handbag out to Leroy. “Look in it.”

Leroy took it, raised the flap. He glanced up. “Who’d you nip it from?”

“Nobody that wants it.”

Leroy studied him, waiting for the joke: a thin white slip of a boy, tangle-haired, dirty shadows around the eyes. Wild and frail.

“You don’t know what I do, son.”

It was a question. Harry matched his gaze. The canal lapped, swished.

“You’re a damn sight bolder than a runt ought to be,” Leroy said after a moment. “But you can’t have too much of a bad thing, can you?”

He counted a couple bills from the stash, tucked them in his breast pocket, and handed the bag back to Harry. “Charge you for the room, is all.” His eyes narrowed. “You not some orphan, are you? They going to find your dad dead in his tub and come after me?”

“No, sir.” Then, “My dad’s been dead a long time.”

Leroy gave another of those hard, sudden laughs. He turned and walked away and Harry followed him. They crossed Southport together, into Canalside, a rich neighborhood where Harry hadn’t been before. He never saw Miss Carrie again. He didn’t even know her last name, and nobody he ever chanced to ask did, either.

The Woman From Canalside: June 20, 1933

Harry got sick on the drive back from the dump. Leroy had them stop on the bridge—he didn't want his Chrysler's interior messed again. He stood next to Harry at the railing, patting his back in either pity or mockery as he hung his head over the side and coughed his supper into the river. Red and Benny used the delay to inspect the car, wipe down the red leather seats with their hankies.

It wasn't the suspension bridge where they stopped, the main artery into Southport, but the L&N bridge shared uneasily by automobiles and the railroad, where the gravity of a train's passage threatened to pull a body onto the tracks. This far into the night they'd hit a lucky spell, a lull between trains when they were the worst thing on the bridge. Darkness reached all around.

Cincinnati was a distant, glowing island behind them.

Benny strolled over to the railing while Red gathered up the clothes from the rear seat, the watch, the gold-rimmed glasses. Harry heaved once more, praying for his stomach to ease. He glanced up at Benny with shame. Benny Quill was lanky and sandy-haired, undeniably of Irish stock, though he'd never lived anywhere but Southport and had none of his father's County Kerry brogue. The freckles peppering his face darkened whenever he was tense, impatient to move on, as he was now—so vigilant of his surroundings that he wasn't minding his face. He and Harry managed The Spot together with little help from Doc Barber, the club's frontman up until tonight. They'd known one another from when they were boys, running the numbers game for Leroy, but they weren't speaking now beyond an unavoidable yes or no.

"Hell with that white lightning," Leroy was telling Benny. "Dump that swill in the gutter. We're talking about a swank club. Swank people want bourbon. They want champagne. They don't want piss some guy stirred up in his bathtub."

"It's homebrew," Benny said, mild, "but we got it at a premium."

"You mean *he* did." Leroy arched his thumb back toward the dump. "He bought the cheapest shit so he could skim more off. How I caught onto him. We got folks in breadlines everywhere, but I guess I don't pay enough."

Harry wiped his mouth, his elbows still sitting on the railing. "I'll get the good booze, don't worry. I'll order it all. We'll do it up."

Benny, lighting a cigarette, rolled his eyes.

"I know you will," Leroy said. "I know little Harry runs the whole place."

"Sure you're all right?" Benny asked. Harry didn't reply, partly because he knew Benny didn't care about the answer, and partly out of surprise: it was the most words he'd gotten from

Benny since Christmas.

Leroy nodded Benny over the tracks, where Red had gone. “Go see what he’s doing. I’m not standing around all night.”

Benny walked off. Leroy’s Chrysler Royal— a machine known well on the streets of Southport, maroon in the daytime but pure black at night—cut a gap into the stars visible from the bridge.

Harry straightened up, blew out a long breath. He was empty now except for the adrenaline that still buzzed in his veins. He felt like he was baking to death inside his single-breasted navy suit, but at least he’d kept it clean.

“I’m good now.”

“Takes a stomach for that kind of job,” Leroy said.

Harry frowned.

Leroy grabbed his shoulder. “Don’t get sore. I got good news for you. Just wait till they get back.”

“Give me a hint.”

Leroy shook his head.

“I’m not going back to the racetrack, am I?”

“Course not,” Leroy said. “I count on you at that club. You know that. You’re my details guy. Benny’s the heart of the thing, but heart never paid the bills.”

Harry gave him the smile he wanted, but his own heart dipped as he took in Leroy’s meaning: *I want Benny, but I need you*. It was the kind of heads-and-tails fondness he knew to expect from Leroy, who was always, beyond all feeling, his boss. He’d been with Leroy for longer than he’d lived with his own father as a boy—all through Leroy’s days leading his own

indie crew, and now as the top guy in Southport for the Cleveland syndicate. Harry relished the man's trust, though as he got older he was realizing, with increasing despair, that he only had it because Leroy didn't think he could be any harm. Like how you trust a cat with no claws.

"Here they come," Leroy said. Red and Benny sharpened out of the dark, Benny crushing a heel down on his smoke. "What took so long? You iron the pants first?"

Red said, "I checked for his name. Tags and stuff."

"He'd be the type," Leroy said, agreeable. "He'd sew his own name on his drawers. He would."

"When you wake up after a bender," Benny said, "it helps knowing which pants are yours."

Harry laughed, quieter than Leroy and Red, just to feel that he was laughing with Benny. He and Benny piled into the rear bench seat, but sat no closer than before, even with Doc gone. Red Masters, the syndicate's trigger man, drove one-handed next to Leroy up front. He had a poxy face, skin pitted like a half-melted candle, and he loomed tall and broad in his gabardine suit, the seams tested by his shoulders.

The Chrysler's interior turned humid. Their collars softened; a black curl of hair glued to Harry's brow. They raced off the bridge onto Scott Street, flying past the tollbooth, whose attendant merely waved at Leroy's familiar ride.

Leroy reached back and shook Benny's hand, then Harry's.

"It's a party back at The Spot tonight. You guys just got promoted." He was excited, ruddy with pleasure, like a man telling his sons he'd bought them a boat. "I already got it through the boys in Cleveland. As of right now, you two are the frontmen."

Harry looked over at Benny, whose held his gaze on Leroy.

“You each get a five percent stake, plus salary. Not a penny over. How’s that sound?”

Benny nodded, careful not to look too happy. “Sounds pretty good.”

Harry forgot to speak. Five percent each was Doc’s stake divided two ways, so this favor wasn’t costing Leroy anything extra. But it was The Spot—the syndicate’s best nightclub in Southport, even in Cincinnati. The take was over \$90,000 a week. An electric sensation of joy and foreboding danced up his spine.

Leroy squinted at him. “You’re quiet. You feel up to it?”

Harry blinked. “Yeah. Course I do. Just didn’t expect it.”

“You ought to. You and Benny are my boys.” Leroy snapped open his lighter and lit a Marlboro. Smoke unwound from the end, forming to his hand like a second, ghostly fist. “Benny does the bar and the band, and you, Harry—you keep the games and take on the books. You been an ace with numbers since I found you running for that whorehouse. What were you, six? Knee-high to a midget. Carrying a bag of cash like you’d robbed the fucking mint.”

Harry laughed obligingly. Benny offered a smile as thin as his patience. Both of them knew Harry had been handling the club’s books for years so Doc could devote himself to getting plastered on rock and rye at the bar.

“Benny’ll do the enforcement,” Leroy went on. “He’s saddled with a wife and a couple offspring, so I know he’s got the sand to throw a guy out on his ear.” He pointed the bright ember between his knuckles at them. “But listen. I need you fellas to clean up at that place. Absolutely clean up. It’s not enough to be in the black. I was short on the tribute, thanks be to Doc, and I owe the boys the difference next month. Plus interest.”

“We’ll kill it,” Harry said. He was conscious of his own sour breath.

The railyard rushed by them, half eaten in shadow, and the Chrysler angled upward with

a growl as it climbed to the promontory high above the river.

Leroy pulled on his smoke. “Doc—I won’t say that name again. Forget I did.”

Benny fanned his legs open and shut as though eager to escape, to see the place that would now call him the boss. Harry knew—and he was sure Benny did, too—that they hadn’t been brought along tonight because the top guy lacked for help. Their presence for the job was Leroy’s warning as much as his gift: from now on, he’d be scouring their books for anything dodgy, a rat sniffing for scraps. Benny would have to be more careful. He wouldn’t get Harry’s help again.

The Spot opened every evening from Easter to Christmas except when the county seated a grand jury, looking for somebody to indict. When the club was under different management in the '20s, a rumor had scuttled through Southport that hidden men with Tommy guns were posted up and down the circular drive that looped guests to the entrance; but with the place under the syndicate for the last decade, nobody had had to worry about it being robbed. Not until Doc Barber's supposed larceny, at least, and that was an inside thing.

In one night, The Spot could host a wedding reception, the mayor's birthday party, the police chief's retirement bash, a meeting of the Freemasons, and a Procter & Gamble dinner for every salesman on the payroll, and still nobody would sweat for space. The parquet dance floor

held the luster of a fresh waxing, barely appreciable under a madness of feet. The stage often carried acts known by a single name, first or last, and the mahogany half-moon of the bar confined a dozen bartenders who tapped, poured, stirred, and mixed in a relentless honeybee frenzy, the rare shock of a broken glass lost in the beat of a bass drum. Waiting for regulars past the circus and the booze, a long corridor laid with rose carpet as dense and deep as quicksand led to the gaming room in the back. This was Harry's nightly domain. He was the pit boss, the floorman overseeing the dealers and resolving disputes, tallying the take in the counting room, chalking the odds on the board for the afternoon's races or the night's game. From opening until long past midnight the slots clanked like hell's orchestra, the ball skipped on the roulette wheel, cards snapped down on green felt, and dice tumbled in the chuck-a-luck cage. Quiet as he was, the noise was what Harry liked best. The racket helped him ignore the sight of clients losing twice his dead father's annual wage to a game, proud to be the kind of men who could lose and never really lose. He'd had to learn to blank his face when a guy bet his Cadillac on black. Try not to remember how his folks had eaten the same dry hominy night after night when his father went without a job. Try not to think about his mother sitting without a plate in front of her, claiming she'd eaten supper before he got home.

He hadn't forgotten who he was, like a lot of men do around money. A hungry boy's habits suited him. He had his own car but liked to hoard tokens for the Green Line trolley, pick them off the floor of The Spot's coatroom. He rented a small and hardly furnished room over an alley where the breeze sifted through the nailed-shut windows, a place to wash up and sometimes, in the club's off-season, to sleep. His office at The Spot had a pulldown bed, but he seldom slept there, either. In truth, he rarely slept at all. Too many shadows moved around his bed, attending him like nurses or druids, a steady drum of conversation about what he had done

and what they ought to do with him. When he wanted rest, he liked to smoke out on the club's terrace, dozing on his feet between pulls, like the poker players who sat in the same game for a day and stole their sleep in five-minute comas. It was on that terrace during his and Benny's party that the waitress approached him.

*

Her name was Mavis Howard. She wanted to talk with him alone.

Harry startled awake. The two of them stood away from the party, at the railing. Somewhere behind them, Leroy and Benny were getting soused at their table, laughing and hollering with whoever wanted their ear. Guests, all syndicate guys with their wives and girlfriends, drifted about the terrace sipping highballs and smoking, their skin dimly waxed by the light of lanterns. Harry's own cigarette raveled smoke off into the dark, the ember at his fingertip. He dropped it off the balcony.

"We got this whole corner to ourselves."

"Too many folks out here," she said.

"You got a problem?"

She swayed on her feet so that his figure blocked her from sight. To any of the guests, he would look like he was talking to the moon.

"Yes. You could say that."

"What kind?"

"The kind you helped Red Masters's wife with."

He snatched her shoulder. Not hard; he might have been swatting a bug off her.

"Who told you about that?"

"I heard it around."

“You heard it. All right. How long’s it been?”

“Since what?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Long enough I’m talking to you, Harry.” Mavis matched his stare, eyes blue and hard, unafraid, though not angry. She came from the west side of Cincinnati and still wore the uncomfortable innocence of a girl raised to say her prayers before bed—a thing he couldn’t scorn without damning his younger self. She was about twenty years old. The club’s black blouse sat loose about her waist, partly untucked.

“Look, I need some kind of help. It might could wait. But not really.”

He looked away, feeling for some reason that they’d talked about this problem before, though they hadn’t. Then he beckoned her into the club.

“Better we go inside.”

The backs of his knees throbbed from a night’s standing, and he was glad to move. Mavis shadowed him closely. He caught her paying a glance toward the table where Benny sat with Leroy. A spark raced through Harry’s nerves, and in that moment he decided where he would lead her.

Before they got to the door, Benny looked up and noticed Mavis and Harry going off together. He gave them a quick feral grin, as if Harry were doing what Benny himself did whenever he took the hatcheck girl up to the roof after closing. A strange emotion filled Harry’s throat, a sort of backwards jealousy. He turned his head: Benny just had to be put up with, particularly after midnight. Benny with his reckless mouth and whiskey in his blood.

You know me, Harry would have told him if they’d been talking. *Not during business hours*. They would have laughed together. Because he knew and Benny knew that every hour

was business to Harry Tomlin.

Inside, he pointed Mavis to the stairs in a back corridor. A jazz echo reached them from the cabaret stage as she followed him up the steps. He glanced back at her: in the gloom, the mole on her jawline looked like a black scarab, a bit of jewelry. Between him, Benny, and the late Doc, she always seemed most eager to deal with Harry. He liked her—she was a fine waitress, on time, no complaints. She'd take on a dozen tables when another girl missed a shift: "I don't care, I'll make all the money." But something about her kept him alert. The intensity in those blue eyes, like she could stick a straw in you and suck you dry. Even when he avoided her, she loved to seek him out in corners or whisper to him behind the bar. She might have thought he was some kind of eunuch, safe, sterile—not a hound dog like Benny—but, honestly, he was just wary of syndicate women. Not many girls got favors like she did; Cleveland, in fact, had called him about giving Mavis a job before she even walked in. "Let her work what she wants," the phone told him. "If she's there, she's working. If she's not, she's not."

Secretly, no matter his caution, Harry enjoyed being close to an untouchable woman. He liked being near power better than having it, and Mavis, he guessed, had to be tangled up with an important man. More important than her daytime boyfriend, Pete from the racetrack, who hadn't been seen around Southport, anyway, for some time.

Mavis paused at the top of the stairs. Her fingers fretted at the groove in the banister.

"Your office?"

"The roof. I want to smoke." He palmed open his office door: "See all that paper? One cinder, it'd go up like *that*."

He kept walking, knowing she'd have to follow him.

The light from the corridor fell on the bat that hung under the second flight in the

stairwell. Either Mavis didn't see it or she had seen it before. It had to be dead, hanging there all this time. He ought to get rid of it himself. But the thing had been there so long, the stairs would have looked naked without it. Occasionally, in the deep drowse of balancing the club's ledger, he would think about how, if he ever heard a cry down the hall, he'd know exactly what somebody had seen on their way up to a smoke break or five hurrisome minutes of love on the asphalt. He would swallow a laugh even though he was alone.

They came out into vast night and the hum of vents. The lights on the suspension bridge reddened the undersides of the clouds. That same glow showed him one half of Mavis's face, while the other half fell into shadow.

He clicked his lighter under a fresh cigarette and inhaled.

"Listen. There's a doctor—"

Mavis laughed. She bent, rested her hands on her knees.

"You all right?"

"It's not funny," she said. "It's not."

He understood. People laugh at what scares them most.

"How much is it?" she asked.

He told her.

"Would you front me that?"

"Why me? Talk to the fella that had the fun."

"That's where I'm stuck. He'd end it if I told him."

Harry cocked his head. "Married?"

"He doesn't like a mess."

"So, he's married." He thought about Benny, who had every born Catholic's aversion to

women seeing a doctor for this sort of thing. “Guy sounds like a real gift.”

“I’d pay you back when I could.”

“I don’t expect you will. But I like doing favors that won’t get repaid.” He chewed the second inch of his smoke. “I want to know who he is.”

“How’s that your business? Does the price go up if it’s the King of France?”

“Price, hell. I want to know if the guy’ll shoot me.”

A blush burned the visible half of her face. “Fine, Harry. It’s Pete. Pete Darling.”

“Pete hasn’t been around since Christmas.”

“You’re his friend?”

“He had his own book at the racetrack. Going behind the boss’s back. You want to know where he is now?”

Harry looked out at the river, its black curves sketched by the city lights.

“You don’t have to help me,” she said.

“I know that. I just want to. All I need’s one answer.” He dropped his smoke. His forehead ached from trying not to see her. His mother had come to Southport in the same bad way—young, expecting, no choice but the choice to try and live.

“Pete’s the one.” She slid her gaze away, lifted one ankle from the asphalt. “I don’t want to lie.”

Today, like most days, he trusted his memory more than anybody’s word: by his accounting of dates, Pete had to have been nightgowned no less than six months ago. But he didn’t care that she lied. The terrible project of helping her and himself was already colluding in his gut like his own bastard child.

“Sure,” he said. “All right. I’ll get with you in the morning.”

“You’ll take me there?”

“Sure.”

He set a hand, thoughtless, on her forearm. She looked down at it sharply and her breath caught in her throat. He took his hand back, slipped it in his pocket where he liked to keep it. “Shift’s about over, anyhow. Let me drive you home. Pretty late to be on that streetcar by yourself.”

“I do it every night.”

“So I know where to pick you up tomorrow.”

She didn’t turn him down, only hesitated for a moment and then headed back into the stairwell with him.

“Look,” he said. “See that thing there?”

She glanced up at the bat in its dusty sconce, curious but unbothered. “Time was I used to sleep with those over me. Careful, he’s fresh.”

“You mean alive? That one’s about as alive as my shoe.”

She opened the door into the hall and at the first tickle of light the bat unfurled and shrieked toward Harry. He cried out and fell backward on the steps. A white geyser of pain soared up his back. The bat looped into the rafters, chattering there unseen.

Mavis set her hands on her hips and laughed.

“You hurt?”

His pain settled quickly to an ache. He got up, not saying anything, and smoothed the dust off his shirt. Her laugh was surprised, helpless—she hadn’t been up here before. So it probably wasn’t Benny’s, either.

They rode downtown in his Ford. A breeze dragged at them from the cracked windows, and the woody scent of tobacco clung to the beige mohair seats. Though it was a different car, with different riders, Harry could see shadows wrestling in the rearview mirror—his brain still hot with what they'd done to Doc hours earlier.

Doc Barber had long legs and a high waist, like a grasshopper, which became a joke with the club's staff because that was his favorite cocktail. In Leroy's Chrysler he'd worn seersucker trousers whose hems hovered clear of his naked feet, his gold-rimmed glasses sweating down his nose. He couldn't push them back up, and nobody did it for him. He sat between Benny and Harry on the ride to the dump, glancing sideways every now and then, bumping his bony knee

into Harry's, once, twice, a plea in Morse code, as if little Harry was actually the decider in this company. Harry kicked him back halfheartedly. His ankle rubbed the chains around Doc's feet.

"Lots of tramps in boxcars," Mavis said as they passed the railyard.

"You ever been a tramp?"

"I've heard about them."

He supposed her relief made her talk—relief that it was all done, arranged. They juddered up the main avenue over cobblestones meant for horses' hooves. St. Mary's Cathedral loomed at their left, its rose window glinting like a second moon.

"Point me from here."

She lifted a hand but kept her finger curled, eyes roaming.

"Are we far?"

"There." She jabbed, suddenly convinced. "Left."

He took them onto West 14th, a wide street fronted by rowhouses.

"You by yourself in the place?"

"Couple of girls and me."

A fork waited ahead. She picked at her lip.

"Surprised you risk it down here. More than a block from that church," he said, "you're liable to get held up and robbed."

"You know the neighborhood?"

"It's where I was born. Brought up."

The light from dim windows brassed his hand on the wheel. "Were you born like that?" she asked. "Without it, I mean."

"Don't worry yourself. I still got the one I use the most." He wagged his middle finger

gently.

She kept quiet after that. He couldn't tell what the reason was, the joke or her own troubles.

In the silence, his recollection of Doc's sendoff surged back. How Red stopped in the dump, doused the headlights, and Benny got a canvas bag from the trunk, filled with wads of one-dollar bills bundled in dirty rubber bands.

This how you want to do it? Benny asked Leroy. Waste of cash to me.

Smalls bills, Leroy said. It's worth the message.

"Harry?" Mavis said, for the second time.

At her signal, he swung to the curb beside a long, yellowed fence papered with racetrack fliers. One window was lit in the apartment over a German grocery, Pohlmann's.

"Here?"

"Yep. Door's around back."

"I'll walk you."

"Don't bother. You been nice enough, Harry." She shrugged out of the car, then leaned back in. The blouse hung off her slender frame. "What time tomorrow?"

"Pick you up round nine. I'll bring the money."

"All right. Good night," she said, and tapped the door closed. Manners learned from the St. Somebody school.

He watched her round the grocery. As he drove past, his headlights washed up the alley and flung her silhouette over the bricks. She wasn't turning into a doorway.

He swung the Ford around and gunned back up the street and turned into another alley. He put on the brake, cut the engine. Ranksweet gas fumes crowded up around the machine. He

sat expectant, not trusting there was time to smoke. The rearview mirror looked back on a moveless street.

As he waited, Doc's groans rose again behind him. The man had wriggled in Harry and Benny's grasp, each of them holding an elbow as Red turned back in the driver's seat and untied the twine. He let Doc spit the gag on the floor and then crushed the first brick of bills into his mouth, creaking open his jaw, forcing it in. His throat glugged like a bullfrog's. The veins in his neck fattened to dark threads, his windpipe cinched shut. The first scream stayed down in his ribs; he could only grunt, hiss through his nose. As Doc's face shaded purple, Harry pointed his gaze out the window and pretended the arm wrenching in his grip belonged to a rogue slot he had to fix at the club, one that fought him as he greased the springs and levers. *I wonder why I don't sleep.*

Benny, he was sure, watched the deed for both of them. He would want Leroy to see that he didn't flinch, as if that proved his mettle in the business—if he could hold a dying man still, he could control overhead, book the best acts, make the line for the sports book. Harry envied him and felt sorry for him at the same time.

We could've done it with the twine first, Leroy observed. *This is a goddamn circus act.*

Before long he saw Mavis walk over the mirror's steel, bulbous and unreal, aiming north back the way of the cathedral. He sat in the car for a ten count before he got out and tailed her.

She seemed to head for the river by a shortcut between a darkened bar and a cindery grassless lot. At the cathedral, she turned and took the bridge over the canal, a shallow branch from the big river; for somebody so lost finding her own place, she knew how to cross Southport as well as he did. No light but the moon's fell on her skin. With the black blouse and skirt on, she was just pale hands, a white neck that flickered with the motion of her hair. He had to wait until

she was nearly on the other side before he followed. The water wished below on the concrete pylons, louder than his steps.

When he crested the arch, she was gone. He clamped his teeth. Before him spread the Canalside neighborhood, where money lived if it cared to be seen. She'd vanished into the dark rows with the profundity of a ghost. Harry knelt below the railing and stared out between the balusters. He chanced to catch her as she hurried under a streetlamp. A moment later a yellow square opened and blinked shut in the dark of one house—not the side entry for a cook or a maid, but the front door. A film of sweat sprang up between him and his shirt. He didn't have to cross into Canalside to know that house, even at night. It wasn't a brothel, wasn't just any henhouse. It was where Leroy always kept his woman.

The Needle: June 21, 1933

The Green Line ran from the east end of Southport over the bridge to Cincinnati. Harry and Mavis caught a streetcar at the West 14th stop shortly after nine o'clock. It was his favorite ride: dark or daylight, the cars never stopped, and the conductors asked nothing of you but a token. They didn't try to be your friends.

The two of them settled behind a wire-mesh window that diced the sunlight over their mahogany bench. Mavis held her red leather handbag on her lap, though the curve of her stomach was barely apparent.

"How'd you sleep?" he asked.

She let out a long, heavy breath. "Fair." She looked like how he felt when he only had

coffee for breakfast: raw, electric, a live wire with the rubber and tar scraped away.

The appointment was at ten. Every now and then, Harry turned back toward the cathedral to watch their progress. Anywhere he went in Southport, the cathedral was his compass; he knew how it looked from every corner. A habit from his father, one of the few he hadn't tried to lose.

If they were late, then the doctor—a Bavarian who spoke a rigid English—would leave. He didn't wait around.

“How far do we have to go?” she asked. “You didn't say where it is.”

“What, are you sick?”

She grimaced at a jolt from the streetcar.

“I didn't eat breakfast, that's all.”

“Afraid there's no time now. Sorry.”

“I just thought I wasn't supposed to. I don't know. We aren't far, are we?”

“It'll be over quick,” he said. “I could take you for lunch.”

She knuckled sweat from her lip. Her deceit hadn't angered him; it was smart of her not to trust anybody. She couldn't have survived men this long and still acted as if they all deserved the truth.

She said, “He wouldn't do this at his office. What kind of place is it?”

“It's clean, don't worry.” He glanced up the rows behind them. Nobody else on the car except an old woman jogging a curly-headed boy on her knee.

They curved down West 11th with a trembly speed that felt like a ride on the Coney Island roller coaster over in Cincinnati; Leroy had taken him on that thing when he was a boy. For some reason he wanted to tell her this was the street where he'd been born and raised, but he didn't.

The old Tomlin house—rented, never owned—still stood at the corner for the termites to pick. Burnt to a shell by two tramps trying to keep warm with newspaper and kerosene. He remembered worse than fire, of course, in that house. Fish swam in their living room every time the Ohio breached its banks, big whiskery gar nosing into their pantry. Once they'd had black snakes writhing up between the spongy floorboards. His father had hacked at them with a spade from his drowned lettuce garden. Harry felt a kind of bitter gratitude for the house; it had given him a place to be saved from.

Mavis turned toward him on the bench.

“Okay, Harry. Tell me where we're going.”

“The Madison.” They were near enough now that he could say. He hadn't wanted to scare her off.

Her pale fingers squeezed at the handbag. The Madison was a syndicate hotel, but so was every hotel in Southport, which had left him to pick the best lion's den.

“The Madison's a nice place,” he said. “There's a room he likes.”

“Who?”

“The doctor. Who else?”

She nodded. She smoothed her hand down the front of her pale green blouse. Her fingers traced her navel. He felt a rise of tenderness toward her, as he would for a niece he'd been given to watch until her mother returned. But no one, he figured, was coming to help Mavis.

The roofs climbed higher as they entered downtown—department stores, banks, the courthouse, the Falcon Cinema. Cars slunk and dodged in the half night of the street.

“I wonder if I ought to do this.” She glanced sideways at him.

“You ought to.” He checked his watch. “But you got ten minutes.”

The car creaked into a stop. She watched the old woman get off onto the concrete island with the little boy. She shook her head.

“My aunt...”

“Your aunt what?”

“She brought me up, across the river. It was just me and her left after the flu. She was— she used to be a nun. She didn’t take kindly to any man. I hate what she’d think of me if I let some rusty-knife quack cut me open while I laid there.”

He didn’t answer right away, even to tell her the doctor wasn’t like that. His mind darted back instead to the ruin of his family’s house. A brief mirage of his mother wavered in the charred bedroom—a skeleton-space now of bricks and lintels. In that room she had given him birth, inflicted on him the gift and violence of living. She was even younger than Mavis when she did it. Could he have told her not to have him?

“It’s up to you,” he said. “Just don’t tell him I had my hands in this.”

She sat still. The Madison’s tan limestone façade edged above the buildings ahead.

“You didn’t think I’d know it was Leroy?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Sure you know what he does to folks that go behind his back,” he said. “Folks like Pete.”

“I won’t tell him, Harry.”

“There was one gal, I think her name was Lorraine or Loretta—I don’t remember, something he liked, cause it was so close to his name. When she tried to quit him, he Mickey-Finned her drink, knocked her out flat, and then he threw her in the fab furnace at the mill. It’s what I heard. I always wondered if I breathed in a little piece of her one day. All this smoke over

town. I wouldn't have known."

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed.

"Why tell me that? You want to scare me into doing this?"

"I guess I do."

"For my own good, or cause you're in it now?"

A sort of breeze, like the voices in the street, rushed under his skin. He laid his hand on hers. The warmth of her pale skin numbed him. It wasn't usual for him to be close with anyone, to touch a body not his own.

"Put it like this," he said. "I wouldn't have my mother share a ride with him. Much less a kid."

She withdrew her hand from his. Looked ahead.

"Almost there," she said.

The brakes dropped, grinding on the rails, as the Madison filled the windows.

"You going in, too?" She was rising.

"Yes. Just not together with you."

She stopped.

"I'll be behind you," he said. "You take the elevator. Me the stairs. We'll meet up there."

"What room?"

"Eight-oh-eight. Tell the guy."

"I know how to ride an elevator," she said.

They stepped off on the concrete island under bare blue sky, she at the end of the car, he at the front. The air around them borrowed a faint charge from the electric lines slung overhead—the buzz and the grease a restless constant of the city, qualities he registered as rarely

as he did his missing finger. He waited for a clearing in the hot traffic. The streetcar skated onward, and he saw her send a longing glance after it. But when an opening came, he signaled her with a flap of his hand and they crossed, parallel to one another. She entered the hotel ahead of him. Dingy gods leered down at them from the masonry.

The lobby teemed with guests and bellhops, echoes whisking through the mock jungles of potted plants. He always pretended not to see the luxury of it. She made her way to the elevators, then looked back to find him.

Two minutes, he mouthed at her.

She nodded and got on. The operator closed the gates with a deferential downtilt of his head. In Harry's last view of her, the bars crosshatched her face like the grille between a priest and a penitent in the confessional. But he was too far away to whisper anything.

Up the stairs, up up up. Sixteen flights. Somehow, he beat her there. He waited at the elevator doors with his eyes on his watch. One minute left.

Three minutes past ten, a door opened at the end of the hall and the doctor came out carrying his black leather satchel at his side. He walked behind Harry and pushed into the stairwell.

Another minute. A sour unspent laugh filled his chest. He pushed the button for her car.

"The girl you just took up," he said to the operator before he'd opened the gates. "Green. Where'd she go?"

The old man narrowed his eyes.

"I didn't take her up."

"I saw you do it."

"She told me down," the man said. "She got off in the basement."

The bottom floor of the Madison had no guest rooms—just the laundry, the boilers, the kitchen, the phantom shapes of broken furniture under sheets. The operator, though, took her down without question. It was Leroy’s hotel; the curious didn’t work there for long.

She stepped off the elevator into a dark, steamy corridor between the laundry and the kitchen. An aroma of beef stew haunted her stomach. She had to get away, but she was so hungry it made her dizzy.

The kitchen workers looked like chess pieces in their black pants and white aprons as they lurked in the vapors over the pots and sinks. Two dishwashers, boys not yet old enough for a beard, glanced up at her as she ladled herself a helping of stew. Then a cook saw her and

marched over with a greasy towel wrapped around his palm. It was always the one white man who had to remind you he wasn't colored.

“Ma'am, that's somebody else's meal.”

“You don't have to tell me.” She rubbed a proprietary hand over her stomach. As if in answer, a sensation like bubbles tickled up her abdomen, and she froze.

The cook frowned. Then he shook his head and went back to his pass. One of the boys laughed and the cook smacked him on the back of the neck.

Mavis spooned the rest of her stew in a trance. She hadn't expected to feel it so soon. Wasn't it too soon? Her ignorance shamed her; her aunt had never borne children, and no woman, in her hearing, had ever described what it was like.

It felt like a feather, this thing that punished her from the inside. It was so fragile.

No, not it—the child.

She followed the corridor to the light, came out on the avenue, and headed east until the federal bank eclipsed the Madison behind her. Harry must be looking for her. He was meticulous, he would search every floor. The roof, even. Eagling his eyes out over the city for her. He was in the syndicate, but he seemed to care for her like the kind of strict uncle who would have kept her from ever dealing with syndicate men. His fear of her, that she'd tell Leroy about today, gave her an unusual pleasure. But he didn't need to worry. A new intention filled her now that the child had quickened.

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On the bus back to Canalside she sloshed like a hot-water bottle on the vinyl seat, bulging against her garter, wishing for the toilet. Harry, like most syndicate men, wouldn't take the bus, only the streetcar or his own machine: they all wanted something they could control, or if not

control, jump off at any moment.

When her neighborhood—Leroy’s neighborhood—rolled into the window, she felt a familiar disbelief that ruin could live in the same town as these beautiful, unnerving houses. Canalside was a jagged horizon of Gothic turrets, scaly slate roofs that hid coffered ceilings, spiral staircases, fireplaces so big a man could walk into them. After living half her life in Cincinnati and Southport, she still had a new arrival’s distrust of the city—all cities. They wouldn’t last like the mountains where she was born. They were border places the river could drown whenever it wanted. As it had before.

Chicken hawks circled over the bus stop as if they’d sighted carrion along the shining canal. She crossed under their glares to the house. She could always find it by the sharp gables that peaked over the maple trees like her aunt’s dark, penciled eyebrows. Its high blackiron casement windows fronted the street, veiled in sunburnt drapes behind which a rare shadow might blur up or down the staircase.

Only two people were ever here besides her—Leroy, who came only at night, and the German housekeeper, Augusta, a motherly, embarrassed woman who tried to leave before Leroy arrived and pretended to be deaf if she couldn’t. Now, in the afternoon, the place was empty. Dust flared in and out of the lazy slants of light from the windows. There was a covered dish with meatloaf and carrots for her in the oven, left by Augusta. She never made anything for Leroy, because he wouldn’t eat it. “That Hun,” he called her. “She’d like to poison me. Any of them would.”

She neglected supper to hunt through the house. She took the knives from the hooks on the wall and hid them under a flour sack in the pantry, put Augusta’s flatiron in the hamper, and looked in every drawer and behind their bed and in the mattress for the gun she was sure he kept.

She didn't find it, but its absence was no comfort. He still had his two hands. Those could be enough. She had real hope it wouldn't happen, particularly once he knew about the child. She just wanted to make it hard for him if he had an impulse. He never touched her except with desire or concern, but Harry's story about the furnace, damn him, wormed under her faith. She didn't believe it. She'd had a man like Leroy before, and they had to have somebody they never hurt. For their own sake. Fear of themselves was all that could master them.

Only rarely—when he won a mint on a race, when he drank more scotch than he ought to—Leroy gave himself to a younger man's impatience and pulled her to him as soon as he came in, smoothing his hands down her thighs, crushing his mouth to hers. He'd bring her down on the couch in the parlor, knock the pillows away as she fought her clothes off. The first part was always theatre, but after a while, as his desire raised heat from her, she lost any sense of watching herself, of being in the house at all. And then, and then— Near the end, at the extreme of feeling, he might mutter *I love you* between gritted teeth as if the words had been pulled from him with a fish hook, and she would answer him back. But she didn't feel love just then. Only a great tenderness at the way he framed her face with his hands and leaned into her; a kind of relief at pleasing him; and annoyance as she thought ahead to the soreness that would be her souvenir for a day. Love was impossible in a fever. It was quiet. It was there in the morning when they sat close together at the dining table over coffee and eggs he'd made himself. He liked to reach up and roll his thumb over the mole on her jaw. "Your little bug," he called it. He seemed to get carried away with that startling lust only when he wanted to remember he wasn't old yet. To her, though, he would always seem old, simply because he'd lived longer than anybody in her family had.

Usually they coupled quietly, noises that hardly rivaled the tick of the grandfather clock

downstairs, nothing that would make the neighbors laugh or wince. If Augusta was still in the house, slow with supper, Leroy would wait for her to leave, the slap of the back door echoing down the hall, before he moved toward Mavis. Some nights, he was grim, even angry, as they made love. There was a time he lay on top of her in bed, his face buried in her hair, and he reared back from her with a look of outrage like a corpse sitting up in a casket, and punched the walnut headboard over and over.

“It won’t happen. Not tonight.”

“We haven’t been here a minute.”

“Forget it.” He slid off her onto the bare mattress, putting himself away, buckling his belt. He turned toward her, but spoke as if to his own reflection in a mirror. “I was at my great-nephew’s first communion today. *Great-nephew*. Those damn kids everywhere.”

He didn’t weep at his grief, he cursed at it. She knew enough to resist any curiosity about his wife, Kathleen—especially what made her barren.

“What’s the point of this?” he asked. “My time’s come and gone. But that’s got nothing to do with you.” And rather than sleep in the bed, he got up and left. He set a five-dollar bill on the dresser first. What was it for—an apology, or just a fee for her trouble? Their bodies were so often together, yet the orbit of his real life escaped her.

She shouldn’t have wanted to comprehend him; he would have lost something in her eyes if she could have explained him to herself. She supposed she loved him, but she knew enough, too, to understand how young she was and that she probably fathomed little more about love than how to spell it. He wanted her working a shift at The Spot any night he couldn’t see her: that urge to claim, to corral her off from other men, she thought, must be how he loved. How he dealt with other people lay apart from his care for her, a nighttime necessity of his trade. Nobody

could reinvent the business he was in. Leroy's was gambling, whoring, running the numbers; a priest couldn't have done it.

She forgot about Augusta's meatloaf. Near dusk, her stomach roused and she ate it cold in the kitchen as she waited for his arrival. No matter her terror of birth, or being a mother, an unwed one, she felt a kind of raw, animal courage when she remembered she wasn't alone in her body—an urgency that made her stubborn and coldly direct and certain about everything. She wondered if her thoughts could race down the cord like a telegraph wire to reach it. Him. Her.

She prayed a sort of rosary.

I'm expecting, she said.

Get out, one bead said. Another: *You're not, you're lying*. The last: *Come here, it's okay*.

She believed the last one. He claimed he was past fatherhood, but he still mourned the lack—those phantom sons and daughters he'd never had. If she gave him life, he would give her what she asked in return.

The sun descended over Canalside.

Leroy arrived later than he ever had, in the hard black of night. She woke on the couch in the parlor and sat up with the *Daily Racing Form* still in her hand, the corner spotted where she'd dried her nervous tears. An ammoniac smell of the canal—vinegar, dead fish—washed through the house. Leroy was holding the front door open for somebody to follow him in, hefting a large object.

The man setting down the load was Red Masters. She couldn't name what Red did for Leroy besides drive him, but she had ideas. Everything she learned about Leroy's work came from overhearing him on the phone, sifting rumors at the club. She'd heard the business about Red's wife and Harry from Benny Quill.

Leroy called out from the hall: “You up, baby? I kept you waiting too long?”

His voice started a pulse of dread behind her eyes like the rhythm of the grandfather clock chipping at the hour.

She stepped into the foyer. “I couldn’t stay awake. I started reading last week’s odds...”

The two of them laughed.

“Surprised you didn’t go cross-eyed.” Leroy brought her knuckles to his lips for a kiss, then grinned at Red. Half of Red’s mouth smiled. He stepped by Mavis to go sit in the kitchen, as Augusta would, and she held down a shiver. Leroy had never allowed anybody to come with him here before.

They’d brought a Singer sewing machine from the store on Beechmont in Cincinnati.

“An electric,” she said. “My aunt had one with a treadle. How much was it?”

Leroy shrugged.

“It’s not for you, anyway. It’s for your favorite old kraut.”

“She’ll love it. Her nephew will just have to carry it home.”

“Have him call ahead.”

He’d gotten in the habit of buying things for Augusta. He’d discovered that Mavis wasn’t taken with useless fineries, jewelry, and that her affection for the old woman was the best way to give her gifts.

He took off his hat but didn’t hang it on the rack. He let it dangle from his fingertips. “I can only stay a bit. Got a trip north in the morning.”

“Cleveland?”

He twitched up a smile, but said nothing. She tried to return the expression. The pressure in her ears built to a throb as if her head had sunk underwater.

“You like this?” He thumbed the machine’s handwheel a quarter turn.

“Course I do.”

“She leave you a decent supper?”

“Yes. She always does.”

He dropped his hat on the console table.

“What else is the matter?”

She opened her mouth, but she couldn’t say it. With a drop of her heart, she heard her dead aunt back in their apartment on Vine Street, storming about a drunk in their parish who’d hit his expectant wife in the belly (*For a man a child’s just an idea till it’s born. Till it’s screaming in their face*) and caused a bloody stillbirth.

She said, “There’s trouble back home. My cousin’s ill. I got a letter.”

“I thought all your folks moved up here. Before the flood.”

“Not her.”

He set a hand on her shoulder, rubbed back and forth. “I’ll send her a check. Or better, a train ticket. I’ll get her an apartment here.”

“She won’t come. She’s ailing too bad.”

“You want to go see her?”

“I want to stay with her a spell.”

His hand stilled. “How long’s a spell?”

“She’s the last kin I’ve got.”

“How long is a spell?”

“Till she’s better. I don’t know. Five, six months?”

He lifted his hand away. His gaze punched through her with the exactitude of the needle

on that sewing machine.

“You’re too good to be anybody’s sick nurse.”

“Understand, I’m tore up about it.”

“What’s this gal’s name?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “You got some other reason you want to get away?”

She shook her head.

“Some fella at the club? I’d hoped that place would keep you busy—”

A chill speared down her back. “No. Not that.”

Now he waited. She rested a hand on her stomach, as though swearing on a Bible, and she told him.

He gathered a hard breath into his lungs. The lines laddering his forehead deepened. They’d never been cautious, but he didn’t seem to believe it was necessary. He’d talked about his season being past, as if he were a field gone to weeds.

“That’s all right.” He remembered how to smile. “That’s grand.”

“You’re happy?”

“Sure. I just never thought I could—” A surge of blood colored the hollows under his eyes. He was proud; he seemed to stand alone with his pride, remote from her. Then, “Why’d you come out with that lie?”

“I figured I’d have to go away. I didn’t know what you’d—what we’d do.”

“Of course you knew,” he said and hugged her to him, pressing his palms to her lower back. The child floated in the bowl his hands made. “I can just feel it. You don’t have the shape, really.”

“It’s farther along than you’d think. I felt it today.”

“Really? I guess it’s not a sure thing until you feel it. You could lose it and not even know.”

She nodded.

“So, what’ll we do?”

He knelt on the Wilton carpet like a pilgrim in prayer, his knee denting the red roses, and tilted his ear at her belly. He looked up. Under the chandelier he appeared younger, radiant.

“I didn’t think I could. You just never can tell with life.”

“I can have it here, in the city?”

“Yes. You’ll have it here.”

“I don’t like saying *it*. I hope it’s a him. For you.”

He stood. “Whatever it is, we’re naming it Leroy.”

“What about the last name?”

“Listen,” he said. “I still have to go tonight. I can’t get out of it.”

“You couldn’t say you’re sick?”

“No. But I want to mark this. Give me two minutes, I want to—” He pushed through the kitchen door. She heard him groping in cabinets, clashing around in drawers. He and Red conversed in flat mutters.

With that lie about a cousin, she’d aimed for his pity. She’d wanted to disarm him, pretend she was resigned to running and had to cook up a story out of fear. It was such a relief to see him pleased and excited that her entire body relaxed, like a glove whose hand had opened. Her bet had paid off.

The kitchen was quiet for a few long minutes. Then Leroy came back alone, holding a flute of champagne in either hand. He waved her into the parlor.

“Why didn’t you sit down? Sit down. Get off your feet.”

She eased herself down on the couch. “What’s this?”

He landed heartily on the cushion beside her. They were alone in the stained-glass light from the Tiffany lamp on the end table.

“It’s a toast,” he said. “To this little family of mine.”

“Oh. Red’s not joining?”

“He ain’t family. That’s why he eats in back.” He laughed. The drinks hissed lightly in the silence. He offered her a flute.

She tried to tease him: “It’s still not legal.”

“Bull. Dry times are on the way out.”

A sore hollow opened in her gut. She took the flute. “You want your son breaking the law before he’s even born?”

“Got to start them early.” He raised his flute and tapped the rim to hers. “Here’s to Leroy.”

“Leroy,” she said. “Junior.”

As she went to drink, she tipped the flute back too far and spilled an ounce down the front of her dress.

“Oh, shoot. I’m sorry.”

Leroy stopped before he drank his own, his lips pressed thin.

“Could you get me a napkin? I need to wipe up.”

“Sure, sure. Let me just—” He stood, set his flute on the coffee table. He held out his hand for hers: “Want me fill that up?”

“No, this is enough. Thank you.”

“All right. Okay. I’ll see if Red’s got a hankie.”

He walked down the hall. The kitchen door swung open, swung to. Sweat welded the flute to her hand; she could barely swallow the spit in her mouth. Harry Tomlin suddenly seemed like the only honest man in the city, and he wasn’t coming to help her. She had to help herself.

Could she be wrong? No. She couldn’t afford to doubt herself.

She swapped her flute for Leroy’s on the coffee table. Then she paused, listened: no voices in the kitchen. He would be back soon. She got up and leaned out into the hall, where the staircase’s mahogany banister slanted up and away. She damned herself for her earlier caution, taking the iron from the closet and putting it upstairs, out of reach. She’d deprived herself of a weapon.

The sewing machine edged into her sight. It was by the door where Red had left it. SINGER blazed out in yellow from its black cast iron. The steel needle glinted.

Watching the kitchen door, she stole over to the machine. It was just like her aunt’s: she could almost hear the dead woman telling her to turn the handwheel counterclockwise, raise the needle, find the clamp screw. If she could loosen it, she could pull the needle from the bar. Then hold it between her knuckles, stab a hole in his eye or throat... But her fingers were slick. The screw wouldn’t turn; it was too tight. She smacked the machine, feeling tears start to break from her eyes. She held them in. Then she went back in the parlor and picked up his champagne and sat. The tide of her fear foamed up like the bubbles in the glass, threatening to engulf her. Far away, within her, the child uncurled and flexed.

Leroy returned a moment later with his hand out. “Red’s hankie.”

“Thank you.” Her voice sounded thick.

He waited for her to dab at her dress, then took up his flute—“To second tries,” he

said—and they clinked. She drank the champagne down. It was sweet, wonderful.

He didn't drink with her. He held his flute before his nose, his eyes finding her through the glass. He smiled—the first smile that asked no effort of him that evening.

“I love it. You're the trickiest whore I've ever met.”

She made to jump up from the couch, but Leroy held her back with one hand, his palm flat and hard on her chest.

“How could you call me that?”

He made a shushing noise, the warning of a timber rattler.

“Take it easy. No, don't do that. Hush,” he said as the tears came. A sob caught behind her teeth. She turned her face to the wall and wished herself through it, on the bus, going over the bridge.

“Take it easy,” he said. “You sly gal.”

“I didn't want to hurt you.”

“Look at me. I'm not mad. The stuff's just to clean you out.”

“What's that mean?”

His hand softened. He cupped it to her neck. “You know me. I don't care for a mess.”

“You could've said so. There are doctors.”

“What do you need a doctor? They just cost money. If it's not out by morning, I'll take you to the doctor.”

“You'd skip Cleveland for an abortion,” she said, “but not for me.”

He whistled, very gently—a sound of disbelief at her, a boundary violated.

“Girl,” he said, “you're going to drink.” He reached up and grabbed her by the hair, brought the champagne toward her lips. Her heart beat like she had two hearts within her.

She still held her own empty flute in her right hand—she smashed it on the rim of the glass lampshade and struck out with the jagged stem. Champagne slopped to the carpet. She scratched a wild cut from his nose to his jaw and he shouted in pain and jerked back from her. The wound wept blood down his cheek. He touched himself and saw the red, and touched himself again as if he'd lost his whole face: that was her last picture of him as she fled the parlor and then the house.

In the yard, she flung the gate open and ran into the street. She could feel Leroy enter the house's open door behind her and shoot his gaze down the block. Through his eyes, she watched herself run in terror under the streetlights. His howl rent the dark between them. If it had any words in it, she couldn't tell what they were.

Within a minute, she was at the corner. The bridge was near. Her lungs seared as if she'd breathed in fire from the mill stacks. The tears kept up: rage at him, rage at the afternoon girl who'd trusted him, rage at her body for ever touching his.

She slowed to get her breath and glanced back down the row.

Outside the reach of the lights, a figure taller and wider than Leroy lumbered after her. Red Masters. His approach had a patient gravity, his boots cracking the dry grass, scuffing over the coal dust that made the ground a second night.

She dropped a desperate curse and ran on. A burning arrowhead dug into her side; she would wear down before she got over the bridge. To her left, though, was another, quieter summons: the river low and busy in the canal. She waited until Red's steps closed in on her, then lobbed herself up over the railing. There was nowhere to catch her feet on the sheer stone wall as she fell. The sickle moon disappeared, eaten by the black water that closed over her head. She swallowed a rotten mouthful of the river, turning over and over, caught in a fetal ballet with the

current. The dark roared around her, alive and unforgiving as a womb—nothing for her hands but to claw and grasp, nothing for her child but to wake.