

ACT 1

THE POSTMAN'S DAUGHTER'S TALE

Memory came back to me, it did, like a sort a vision, the kind you dream when you're barely half awake an so half asleep someone could drop beans in your mouth an you'd just swallow em. This vision, it was, a Jessarose Parchmouth when she's just a young girl, workin one summer the way she did for that bleachblond floozie Mizz Lula-belle Harms who the spring before had got married to Mister Henry Apple for reasons I'll never understand. Jessarose in the vision looked, she did, like I wished I looked when I was fifteen, almost sixteen, that summer she was seventeen, goin on eighteen.

But, hey for hay, I didn't look a tad like her. No such thing. She was a beauty, she was. Not a tomboy like me. She told me, Jessarose herself did, she was a woman with color, but not very much if you ask me, no more n a cinnamon girl, cuz Jessarose wasn't anywhere near as dark as me with a tan. An me as Irish as Paddy's pig. Go figger!

How a girl can be a tenth black an the rest white an she decides she's got color! Not that one's better n the other, just different, the point bein: so why people go an decide that the one little particular bit a what they are is what they are altogether just kills me! Shoot! More n a tenth a me, as you'll find out, is somethin most folks, cuz they're so wrapped up righteous tight in the way they are, don't cotton to very kindly. But it's a part a me. A tenth a somethin ain't much to my mind. I don't mean it's somethin to hide, but it ain't enough to make much a either. It's just there, the way a dime is to a dollar.

Anyway Jessarose was beautiful, she was, all ten tenths a her. I knew that the first moment I saw her, when she was beatin the dog in the chicken yard for good reason, but I thought she wouldn'ta liked me, so I didn't like her much till I couldn't help myself an fell in love with her an she told me I was a crazy girl cuz the world can't go on if girls was to marry girls instead a fellers cuz then there'd be no babies, which wasn't much kinda argument cuz the world always seemed to me full a babies, mostly the grown up kind, so I kept my trap shut.

That ended that conversation, but it didn't end the ten tenths a me plannin on havin a good time with Jessarose Parchmouth. Or even now remembrin. Visions is like that. You can't make em come and you can't make em go. They stick with you. Or they don't. Sometime for a long time. Especially when they're ten tenths a what you are deep down in your heart.

Like this summer I'm tellin about was back some-ways, durin what you might call the mid-century, when a certain person, whose name, ahem, I wouldn't care to mention right now, but you can Guess Who she is, was just ahead a their times. Back about, longer back n I care

to admit, I figger, about when Ike an Mamie had to put up with that suck-cheek Pat Nixon who was Missus to that vice president with her two daughters always dolled up real pretty in pink like princesses at a eternal egg roll on the White House lawn.

“Republicans!” my Daddy always said. But that’s another story.

“Then I took that pup, Laydia,” Jessarose was sayin to me about the dog in my vision, my name bein *Laydia Spain O’Hara*, no smart alex comments, please, on accounta my Daddy, Big Jim O’Hara, won hisself a first place trophy in a stomach Steinway contest playin accordion at the Rainbow County fair the day I was born instead a bein home with my angel mama, her an me shovin, her tryin to get me born, an me tryin to get born, just so I could see what the world was all about. “Then I took her,” Jessarose was sayin in this vision, “this bad little she-pup who oughta know better n chase chickens an pull their wings off, an I stuck the bloody chicken wing way back in her mouth an held her muzzle closed an beat her butt an I kept shakin her head till she started to choke cuz that’s the only way a pup gets the message is if after the first few tries they don’t get it right you next to scare em to death, otherwise they’ll be chicken killers an then you gotta kill yourself a otherwise perfectly good dog.”

Jessarose knew everythin. She was the hired gal that summer out at the old Harms place a mile east a town where Mizz Lulabelle Harms reigned like a bleach-blond movie queen readin novels in the afternoons an writin letters an smokin Ol Gold cigarets. Mizz Lulabelle stayed Mizz Lulabelle even though she was twenty-two an newly married. She wasn’t a *Harms* anymore on that

farm she inherited from her daddy the year before. She gave up bein a *Harms* for becomin a *Apple*. Her last name, the one she grew up with, when she got married, just up an evaporated like she suddenly became somebody else, somethin like gettin married was bein in some kinda undercover adventure an hidin out under a alias. For all the world to see, Mizz Lulabelle became the new-painted *Missus* part of MR & MRS HENRY APPLE on the mail box which was on my Daddy's rural route, him bein about the best U.S. letter carrier up aroun Jacksonville in southern Illinois where the Ferris Wheel was invent-ed, close by Canterberry where we all lived.

Anyway, Jessarose left off beatin the poor dog. It was a black-an-white excuse for a animal an ran off with its tail between its legs an hid in the ivy next to the pump house. Jessarose was two years older n me as I said that summer, an Mizz Lulabelle was seven years older, so I kinda studied both a them like mysteries to see which one might be what, how they might be the same or be different, an which one I might grow to be like. To me they both a them was women, grown women, an I was curious about women because that day a the county fair when my Daddy came home with his accordion an his blue ribbon to find me born, he found my angel mama dead as life, an the midwife shakin her head, an my Grandma Mary Kate O'Hara bawlin, wearin her valuable white cap from when she was a Red Cross volunteer nurse durin the First World War.

Somehow sometimes I think I actually remember all their yellin an whinin that first day when I made my big entrance durin the high-noon hour a the first day a summer, the longest day a the year. Maybe I just remember my Grandma told me over an over she vowed never

to let my Daddy, her own son, ever forget he was gone away when he was needed, like his bein there woulda made some life-or-death difference, but all those women back then wouldn'ta let him within ten miles of a birthin. Anyway, outa spite, that's why my Grandma named me *Laydia Spain*, outa spite, just as a constant reminder to Big Jim, who was her only child, a how he had been irresponsible an disgraceful with the O'Hara family name, an they both a them was stuck with me, my mama, Leona Lynch O'Hara, bein dead an havin no family herself except somewhere maybe back in Ireland.

If I could get a stamp that'd let me mail a letter back to 1939, I'd ask my angel mama not to die. An I'd ask her to fix me with a proper name, not some song with sheet music at the dime store, so just anybody can finger through "Lady of Spain" that says "*Tempo di Beguine*" an "Words by Erell Reaves" an "Music by Tolchard Evans." Just weird Erell and weird Tolchard an me, Laydia Spain, tortured for all time by every squeeze-box arteest who ever pumped, or was gonna pump, an accordion. Jeez!

So one thing's for sure, I know what growin up without a angel mama, exceptin your Grandma, is all about, especially when Grandma Mary Kate, who was so wrinkled she died when I was ten an she was sixty years older n me when she left me with Big Jim who told me I was a big girl, an he always called me *Sport* cuz he hated the musicalamity name my Grandma gave me, an left me alone at home in rain an snow an sleet an sometimes dark a night to deliver his special deliveries, more special I felt sometimes than I was to him. But I don't think that now.

Anyhow, I watched Jessarose saunter back to the clothes lines, her long slender arms stretchin up hangin out sheer curtains, white as brides' veils, billowin so white in the noonday sun they made my eyes burn.

"Child," Grandma Mary Kate said, "before I die I gotta tell you somethin your Daddy can't tell you, because your Daddy don't know." She told me all about female troubles like the secrets a the curses only women know, an lyin back on her deathbed coughin an wheezin an spittin up phlegm, she made bein a grown woman sound like so much plumbin, an so much sufferin, an no way came near explainin the surprisin feelin I would feel later on watchin Jessarose's waist an hips an breasts an arms while her small hands an delicate fingers was pinnin Mizz Lulabelle's brassieres an panties an slips on the clothes-line rope, walkin so elegant between the flappin sheets, like they were silhouette stage curtains, an she was the star a some show that hadn't been written yet. It was that star-struck kinda feelin I had flickerin in my thighs an the pit a my stomach that made me ache with somethin that felt far sweeter n anythin Grandma Mary Kate ever said, but then she was a Irish Catlicker which is what the non-Catlickers, like Mizz Lulabelle who was a pillar a the Lily a the Valley Baptist Church, called us back then, when half the Catlicker holy-two-shoes girls in my eighth grade at Our Lady a Sorrows pretended they wanted to be nuns, an I told em I wanted to be the Mother Superior, an they called me smarty-pants, an ran off tattlin an cryin I was the devil herself an should be excommunicated. I was too no-nonsense prickly to be a obedient Catlicker so nobody ever called me a downgrade like that, or any other downgrade. I wasn't too much a church girl. At least, inside I wasn't much a one, in spite

a my Grandma an my teachers, who I nicknamed the Little Sisters a the Pinched Face a Jesus, wearin those white starched pillow cases so tight aroun their faces they looked like lips an noses an eyes escapin outa the flap of a unsealed envelope. Besides, I'da given anybody who called me a *Catlicker* a mouthful a bloody Chicklets just for their disrespect. Wasn't nobody gonna call me nothin I wouldn't say first about myself. Not nobody. Not nothin. Not ever. Not when you got a name like *Laydia Spain*. I was frank an I was fresh, an not bothered at all when those poodle-cut girls in high school laughed at my tryin to audition for the mixed glee club, singin what nobody ever expected to hear, a female version a "Ol Man River."

So anyhow I turned away from Jessarose walkin in the sunshine down between the long lines a laundry. I headed full-steam toward the Apples' screen-porch. "How y'all doin, Mizz Lulabelle?" I said, hangin up on the porch rail. I liked her cuz everybody in town always said she was a wild thing. It was the Wednesday after Mister an Missus Henry Apple drove back from their honeymoon in St. Louis in a brand new 1957 Plymouth that Mizz Lulabelle foreverafter called her "Plymouth Belvedere," likin to put more hoity in her toity sayin "Belvedere" the way she did, hittin the *dere*.

I didn't mind her though. She finally wrecked the Belvedere with her wild drivin, knockin down the next-to-last Burma Shave sign, the sign with the punch line, sayin, "Spring has sprung...The Grass has riz...Where last year's...Careless drivers is...BURMA SHAVE," but what's more, she had interestin hands that fluttered aroun her even more interestin breasts, makin me feel even more drawn to her like she was this terrible warm

furnace I needed to cuddle up next to cuz I was so cold even though it was almost Memorial Day which I think is when summer sorta officially begins.

I even liked her bleachblond hair. Besides, as I said, before the Plymouth Belvedere, she already had a reputation for drivin her red Ford convertible fast among other reputations she had, but the Harms was so rich an so connected in Rainbow County that none a the mud ever slung at Mizz Lulabelle ever stuck. Not for a minute.

She was even homecomin queen. Acourse. Acourse. An who can ever remember who was the homecomin king? Even if his highness was captain a the football team an blond with lotsa perfect straight white teeth an all that magazine Pepsodent Smile sex-appeal toothpaste stuff.

“Why, Laydia, I’m doin just fine. Me an the Mister are still honeymoonin. Isn’t it thrillin?”

Acourse I couldn’t say what I really felt about what Mister Apple was obviously doin to Mizz Lulabelle to make her sashay around in her pink cotton skirt held out by maybe a gazillion crinolines, walkin in her little black ballet slippers out onto the porch with her sweaty ol glass a Coke-Cola with just a touch a vodka, carryin one a those paperbacks from Kresge’s Five an Dime titled *The Sins of Vivienne Chastaine* that she read right after *Peyton Place* which, when she handed it to me, fell open to that scandalizin page everybody everywhere was talkin about that summer where Rodney Harrington tries to do somethin to Betty Anderson, not the Betty Anderson on *Father Knows Best*, but the other Betty Anderson, in the backseat a the car, an she hits him in the head with a rock an almost kills him.

Big Jim always wanted me to read. “Ya gotta, Sport. Otherwise the Postmaster General won’t let you take over my rural route an deliver the mail when you grow up, less you can read all them fine hand-lettered envelopes an lift a sack a mail easy as a man.”

Anyway *The Sins of Vivienne Chastaine*, which Mizz Lulabelle said was about a woman surrenderin, was pretty interestin, just as long as it wasn’t me doin the surrenderin. Mizz Lulabelle lay back on the porch swing like somebody who didn’t need to surrender, cuz, even though her daddy’s money always saved her reputation, as I said, she never was one known around town to have put up much of a fight.

That’s how she caught Mister Apple who everybody thought was more good-lookin than she deserved while he was still at the pharmacy college in St. Louis an no more n about twenty-eight hisself. She suddenly had this real urge to get married to somebody fast. Everybody in Canterbury knew, but never said anythin to Mizz Lulabelle’s face about the way she used her charms, an a whole lot a Maybelline, an the promise a the deed to the old Harms farm that was her farm, as I said, all to herself that last year since her daddy died free an clear. But it wasn’t the farm, or the Playtex Cross-Your-Heart, that lassoed in Mister Apple.

It was somethin else. Actually, you might say, it was the usual thing in short engagements an fast weddins. Except for Mister Apple, Mizz Lulabelle was the only one who knew she had a little apple dumplin already in the oven the day she marched down to say, “I do,” an cut her three-layer cake.

I figgered, sittin on the porch steps lookin at her, there’s gotta be more n one kind a woman in the world.

I didn't have any hoo-ha notion a how many there was, but I knew as sure as the radio on that hot summer porch was playin my favorite song, "Moonglow and the Theme from *Picnic*," with Mizz Kim Novak, who I idolized, that I was gonna find out an try em all on for size that I figgered might fit, cuz if my thigh-feelin ran true to my heart, I knew I was gettin warm an only had to touch the girl or the woman or the lady, who, like Mizz Doris Day with her *Calamity Jane* hair style, sang "Once I Had a Secret Love," an triggered my own very secret-love feelin to flare up, to find out what I was like, sorta like other women was the mirror a me, or the opposite a me, or, I'm sorry, I can't explain it better, cuz most all the songs I ever heard that put easy words in my mouth about love an stuff are high-school prom songs about girls an boys touchin each other, never girls touchin an kissin girls, an why, with all the new girl groups singin, is that?

I thought that up myself.

Like I was born knowin it.

Like I invented it.

Like I owned it.

That's probably why my angel mama took her first look at me an, whew, breathed her last. She knew I was born somethin different an more wild n she could handle an she just died. I mean, she did. Like I was a different kinda female than her. It's not like I killed her on purpose or even killed her at all. Back then when I was what you might call a girlchild, I was careful an quiet as a bug in a rug. I kept my secret female invention to myself. I never said anythin to anyone until I dared to try my line out on Jessarose to see if she'd come off with me to the hay mow in the barn an she said, "No," cuz she knew what I meant, but the way she said, "No," I knew

she meant *maybe*. I knew she didn't mean *no, never*. She just meant *no, not now*.

I figured I was right. There was other girls like me. Jessarose, I'da bet, was born knowin what I knew, but she wasn't gonna admit it, so she thought, an I made up my mind, she could go on denyin it till some fine summer afternoon I proved her wrong by kissin her lips an her breasts and her velvet thighs an she says *yelYesYES!*

I also sensed Mizz Lulabelle knew some other kinda secret my Grandma didn't tell me. I sensed she liked doin what she did with men she knew and with men she hadn't even known but by some nickname she'd drop like *Ray* or *Buster*. I didn't understand it but I figured it was okay, maybe even upliftin for her, cuz Mizz Lulabelle never ever sang the blues.

Or so I thought that day that wasn't exactly a cold day in June.

Mizzy Lu, she, oh yeah, attracted me. When she put her Ol Gold between her red lips, an then struck the match to light it, I was a moth to a flame. Sittin on her porch steps I felt this what I call now puppy love for her sorta like what I had for Jessarose but different. Where Jessarose was quiet as a actress before the curtain goes up, Mizz Lulabelle was always squealin like Mizz Marilyn Monroe gettin air blown up her dress an twirlin like she was the toast a the town, enjoyin all the attention at some swell party only she knew was goin on.

Relaxin in the porch glider, Mizz Lulabelle did her french-inhale, showin off, an right then an there, I felt that thigh-somethin risin to the pit a my stomach, lookin up at Mizz Lulabelle smilin in the glider like she just got her brains bounced out the night before an was just

killin time till Mister Apple came home from the Rexall pharmacy to bounce her silly again. She made doin what Grandma Mary Kate said was a woman's Christian duty seem like one a our home-grown Ferris Wheels with all the lights goin roun an roun in the opposite dizzy direction. I figgered, woolly-bully for Missus Apple who's got her fanny set down in a patty a butter!

But I felt kinda sad knowin I had feelins deep inside me that Mizz Lulabelle had never thought even existed, or even guessed I might somehow sometime someway feel about her. Maybe I wasn't supposed to be like Jessarose. Maybe I wasn't supposed to be the quiet "Laydia Spain O'Hara" my Grandma wanted. Maybe I was to be like Mizz Lulahoop an spin aroun in red convertibles an take on some bouncin man's name as a alias. Maybe I was supposed to be the "Sport O'Hara" Big Jim wanted.

None a that second-hand thinkin what they wanted would do. I was determined to be what I wanted, an do what I wanted.

Whatever it was.

Within reason acourse.

So I took aim at Mizz Lulabelle an tried to trick her into talkin about S-E-X on the outside shot she might hint she had certain feelins for, well, you know who. Or at least shed some light on the subject.

"Mizz Lulabelle," I said, "what's it like to be married?"

"Why, child, I'm hardly a expert. Our two-week anniversary's this comin Saturday." She leaned forward an her face brightened. "But it is, I can assure you, more glorious than anythin you can imagine in the picture shows."

“What’s the difference?” I fished. “What can you do now you couldn’t do before the weddin? How do you feel different n you felt before?”

“Why before the weddin certain...feelins...wouldn’ta been proper.”

“What feelins?” I pushed her cuz she was always such a liar. “Feelins in your heart,” I asked, “or feelins like maybe in Mister Henry’s hands?” I laughed at my little dirty joke.

“You certainly are a questionable little gal,” she said.

“Questionable, I am,” I said.

“You know about the birds and the bees.”

“I know Rhett Butler carried Scarlett O’Hara up the red staircase, but that’s all I know exactly.”

I liked Mizz Scarlett a lot, cuz, if she’d a been real, insteada up on the screen at the show, or if the book’d been real, us havin *O’Hara* as the same last name, keepin our names an not disappearin like Mizz Lulabelle into any husband’s name, she’d a been like my Great-Grandma, Big Jim’s Grandma, and Grandma Mary Kate’d been Mizz Scarlett’s daughter, which’d account for the stubborn streak in me; but I never liked Rhett a lot cuz when he had a choice for true love he didn’t give a damn.

“Scarlett, the next mornin,” Mizz Lulabelle said, “had a certain smile on her face.” Playin the new bride to the hilt, she tried to smile the same smile Mizz Scarlett had, but on Mizz Lulabelle’s face it looked like a pinball machine goin TILT after a extra hard bounce. “It must be difficult for you livin alone with your Daddy. To find out things, I mean.”

She was goin for the bait. “What things?” I said.

“Things every girl should know,” she said. “But I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?” I said. “I probably know a zillion things you could tell me, but I just want to hear what you have to say.”

She blushed, then sorta puffed up like the Visitin Health Nurse at school, who four embarrassin times a year picked through each one a our heads a hair under a purple light combin for cooties, which was a problem back then, cuz they’d shave your head on the spot. But all puffed up, Mizz Lulabelle, decidin the Visitin Nurse imitation was fun, kicked her ballet slippers to the floor, sat up in the swing, lit another cigaret, an said, “Well, Laydia, since you don’t have no mama to tell you, I’ll tell you.”

She flipped open *The Saturday Evening Post* magazine in her lap an showed me a ad that was a drawin of a exhausted Indian brave layin back in a white-cotton hammock with a big smile on his face while a skimpy-dressed Indian maiden stood beside him lookin real pleased herself. “Read what it says,” Mizz Lulabelle said.

“It says, ‘A buck well spent on a Springmaid Sheet.’”

“That’s a sheet he’s layin in stretched between two trees.”

“I ain’t blind. What’s it mean?”

“It’s a joke. One thing meanin two things.”

I found out later how much I liked understandin how that could happen. Somethin seemin to be somethin but bein somethin else besides. “I’m all ears,” I said.

“Okay, Laydia, I guess I have to tell you, an since I’m tellin, I’ll tell you everythin.”

I’m sure you can imagine the rest.

Red staircase, Springmaid Sheets, an all.

Truth is, I never coulda really imagined what Mizz Lulabelle told me in a million years. All what husbands do. Not that I had never seen Big Jim accidentally in that

department. Not that I had never seen those twin second-cousins a mine, Brian n Byron, doin their weenie dance at me to make me cry an scream. *Weenie-dancin* was what they called it. They liked to die laughin, but they never knew exactly why I cried an screamed. I figured when my time came, I'd be awful disappointed if I didn't find somethin better at the top a the red staircase than a dancin weenie. Besides, I didn't wanna get carried up the red staircase. I wanted to carry someone up it myself, which is somethin Big Jim didn't know as to why I insisted on helpin him tote up his heavy mailbags often as I could. I was strong for my age, an with one hand tied behind my back, I could beat up Brian an Byron an both their bunny-hop weenies anytime.

Mizz Lulabelle was pleased with her *Confidential* magazine recitation. "So," she said, "now you understand how God the Father planned it for the man an Mother Nature planned it for the lady."

"I always figger," I said, "there's more n one way to skin a cat."

"No there's not," Mizz Lulabelle said. "There's only one way. I just told you. The man on top an the wife on the bottom." Her eyes rolled back in her head an she added, "Most a the time," then she laughed, partin her red lips like a crazy girl rememberin gettin lost in the funhouse, "but variations on a theme don't anyway need to concern a girl so young as you."

"I don't mean that stuff," I said. "Jumpin Jesus!"

"Don't swear around me, Missy." She hesitated. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I mean can only a woman an a man do it?"

One hand flew to her breast an landed in a dust of Fabergé Woodhue powder. She squinted her eyes an

stared at me like she thought I was thinkin the unthinkable which I guess I was. Then curiosity killed the cat.

“What exactly do you mean?”

I chickened out. I couldn't tell her. I mean the truth a my secret vision, cuz I figgered she'da puked, so I distracted her an said, “Knock Knock.”

“Who's there?” She took a sip from her Coke-Cola.

“Little ol lady.”

“Little ol lady who?”

“I didn't know you could yodel!”

“Oh,” she said, “you're such a stitch! I'll try that one on Mister Henry when he comes home from work.” She looked at her Lady Speidel wrist watch. “Ou-Yay ave-hay oo-tay am-scray. I must make certain Jessarose finishes up what ironin I have for the Mister in the icebox while she gets supper on the stove.”

“Ood-gay eye-bay, Izz-May Ulabelle-lay.”

I wasn't gonna be anybody's little ol lady. A Spain or nowhere. An certainly a nobody's like Mister Apple, the druggist. As I said, I was fifteen that summer an Jessarose was seventeen, maybe eighteen, and Mizz Lulabelle was twenty-two, turnin twenty-three, four weeks a bride an almost three months pregnant when somethin she did, or Mister Apple did to her, caused her to get terrible sick with female trouble, an she lost her baby, with Jessarose cradlin her head to her breast, right there at home upstairs in their bed where first her mama an then her daddy had died, an if I was her after all that dyin, I could never sleep in that bed again, or make love there again, cuz I couldn't help thinkin a all those dead people, especially that little dead baby. It was no wonder Mizz Lulabelle, for weeks, lay propped up on her pillows

receivin ladies comin to tell her about their own unfortunate but significant miscarries.

In my life, I swear, I never heard so much about female trouble. It like to scared me off a every plan I had about findin out what kinda female I might grow up to be, considerin all the different kinds a ladies I was seein, comin an goin at Mizz Lulabelle's, with all their woes an miseries an resentment, talkin about stuff like "The Pregnancy Veil" that happened to Margaret Tribbey who was pure white till she got pregnant an gradually turned dark tan, which I saw, cuz she was at my Grandma's card parties, when she was white as much as when she turned black, an some wives shed their Pregnancy Veil, an some don't, like Margaret, who was lots of places I was, an always talkin about her condition, sayin look it up in a doctor-book and you'll read it. I made up my mind I wasn't gonna be anyone a them who was more wife, an maybe even more mother, than they was a woman or a real-life human.

Back then I figgered from the way they put it, the cause a female trouble was husbands. My mama coulda understood that, no offense to my Daddy. But somehow just blamin husbands didn't seem fair, cuz husbands are just women's children grown up. Still, just in case, I vowed never to have me one. I wasn't ever gonna let somebody else cause me trouble, includin myself, if I could help it, especially not boys like Brian an Byron who were someday gonna be some poor gals' husbands.

Anyway the procession a ladies came an went. I sat all alone in a white swing hung from a branch of a big elm tree in the yard outside the Harms' big white house nobody could call the Apples' house yet, just starin up at the pretty windows tryin to catch a glimpse a Mizz

Lulabelle's face. She'd watched her baby be born dead, sorta the opposite a me watchin my angel mama die when I was born. Both her baby an me were like my Daddy said, "Special deliveries."

We had somethin in common.

I picked some black-eye Susans an sent word up to her by way a Jessarose that I was sorry for her. What I didn't say was what happened to her gave me one more reason why I never wanted to make babies, not ever.

One afternoon while I was watchin the Harms place an waitin for I don't know what, Jessarose came runnin down the porch steps. "Come on," she said. She pulled me after her like she was bein chased, an so I was too, like a accomplice. It felt excitin. Her an me sneakin off together. "I got to get away from this house an that woman, an that man, an all those ol biddies for a minute or I'll die." Near the pump house, she finally slowed her pace an put her arm around my shoulder. "It's been three weeks since Mizz Lulabelle lost her child. If she doesn't get up soon, she's never gonna get up at all."

"Why not?" I asked. "She still bleedin?"

"It's not her body," Jessarose said. "Girl, it's her head." She circled her right hand aside her right temple with her index finger pointin through her skull into her brain.

We walked away from the house, under the clothes lines, past the barn filled with cooin pigeons, an took the path that led out toward the cornfields Mister Apple leased out to Checkerboard Bob, but that's another story. We were headin toward a pasture chewed close as a miniature-golf puttin green by one Guernsey cow, an then

on toward the banks of the crick sheltered by scrub willows where Indian arrowheads'd wash up on the sand after the spring rains.

"Corn'll be knee-high by the Fourth a July," Jessarose said, lookin out across about a gazillion miles a flat Illinois cornfields. "Mizz Lulabelle...." She hesitated.

"Mizz Lulabelle what?" I asked. "Tell me!"

"Walk faster," she said. "Why I ever left St. Louis an came up here, I don't know. That old cow's makin to charge toward us. We don't have cows in Forest Park in the Highlands where there's amusement rides an music playin, an actresses singin in the outdoor Muni Opera plays where cows are just chorus people in costumes. Cows just know I'm afraid a them. That's why they always come after me. If you came out here alone, Laydia, that cow would never notice you."

"Less, like Mizz Ava Gardner, I dared it like one a them toreadors," I said. "Here, Bossybossybossy!"

"Stop it." Jessarose ran on draggin me through the pasture toward the crick. "You're not afraid a anythin, are you," she said.

"Nope."

"I am," she said.

She sat down in the shade of the willows.

I felt my secret-love feelin for her the way she was dressed, long brown legs in a blue pair a cute seersucker Bermuda shorts that fit her hips an bottom an then wrinkled to a vee between her thighs. Mixin hummin an half-singin, she pulled the tails a her oxford cloth blue shirt from the waist a her shorts an started slowly unbuttonin the bottom a what was really a man's shirt, but what she did for oxford cloth no man could ever do. She took the front tails a the shirt an tied em up beneath her bust

exposin her bare brown midriff. She ran her fingers through her shortcut black hair.

I'd heard about lust from our parish priest, Father John Day, at Our Lady a Sorrows church, but it was always men's lust, like they had a corner on what sounded to me like fun, an I intended to try lust as soon as I figgered out exactly what it was, an all of a sudden, I got the chance one day, the October before, when I'd found Big Jim's nudist-camp volleyball magazines in the bottom drawer a his bureau, next to his rubber Buster Crabbe waist reduction belt, when I was puttin away his clean laundry, an I felt somethin like what I figgered just had to be what lust must be for all a the nudist girls, cuz I was lookin not at the weenies but at the women standin, sittin, runnin, an sunbathin, all lookin so clean an healthy an alive an all like they had unlocked all the secrets an knew everythin an was free to say an do what they pleased an go anywhere.

I figgered that the life of a nudist girl would be the ideal life for me.

Jessarose, sittin on a log, stopped sing-songin, an looked up at me. "Laydia, what's the matter with you? You look like you're about to die. You're in a sweat. It's not that hot today, honey. Sit down. You're makin me nervous."

"Okay," I said. "Okay. I'll sit down. Here." I dropped down next to her long graceful legs lookin up toward her face figgerin I could carry her easy up a red staircase.

"Look," she said, "I gotta talk to somebody. Next to the Apples you're the only person I know aroun here an I hardly know you. Sometimes, like right now, I'm wonderin why I hired on for the summer. I shoulda stayed down in St. Louis. I coulda had a job sellin 45-rpm records

and LP albums. Right now I could be sittin at the Famous upright piano, all fingers an smiles, playin sheet music for customers to buy. I have friends at Famous-Barr Department Store. But I gotta talk to somebody right now this minute.”

Nobody had ever before said to me they needed to talk to me. I felt wonderful.

“I’m desperate,” Jessarose said.

“Gosh,” I said. “Desperate?”

“I’m sorry, Laydia, I don’t mean *desperate* desperate. Just...I need to confide in you.” She put both her hands on my hair, one on each side a my head, an stroked them down to my cheeks, holdin my face in her hands. She looked deep into my eyes. “I know I can confide in you.”

As we always used to say: “Get out the car!” Omi-god! I near to froze right there an melted that hot late June afternoon. What’s *confidin*? Like *Confidential* magazine? Oh! I wasn’t sure about innocence an thought maybe Jessarose was innocent touchin me an I wasn’t innocent bein touched cuz I wanted to kiss her hand an pull it to my breast an feel her close an breathe her warm smells an I wondered how in hellfire anybody in this world can ever tell what somebody else wants really an truly.

I didn’t know that afternoon an I don’t know now.

I only know in my vision a Jessarose, which isn’t a vision, I suppose, so much as a memory, that on the bank a that dinky little no-name crick, at sixteen I dared pull her fingertips to my lips, even though she had said girls couldn’t marry girls, an when she did not stop me, cuz she knew I was in those awkward years when you’re too young to marry anybody, boy or girl, but not too young

to fool aroun an experiment. I knew that somethin in the Apple house, whether it was Mister Apple or Mizz Lula-belle or the dear little dead baby, was drainin Jessarose, an I knelt up on my knees between her thighs an lightly kissed her lips an her eyes an her nose, an when she kissed me back, my secret-love feelin opened an blossomed, an my heart sang songs ain't never been heard on any jukebox this side a my blue-moon heaven. We only kissed probably a hour, or maybe two, while we lay talkin an confidin in the cropped grass along the crick, naked as nudist girls in the sun-dapple shade, holdin an pettin each other, in no hurry to go anywhere, talkin about ev-erythin that we had ever done an were doin an ever would do, an I knew Jessarose felt better because that ol Guernsey cow came over by us an she said she wasn't anymore afraid a it, cuz she was layin there with me, an she knew if I was strong enough to throw mail sacks around, I could chase off some ol cow, an she wasn't upset anymore about Mister an Missus Apple.

“Promise me you won't tell anyone,” she said.

“About this?” My hand rested between her thighs.

“Acourse, about this.” She opened her legs to free my hand.

“Why not? I want to sing from the rooftops: ‘I kissed Jessarose Parchmouth an she kissed me back sure as I kissed her!’”

“No,” she said, “secrets are sweeter.”

“But we like each other!” I said. “I like you. Watch-in you this summer, I knew first sight, I loved you. This afternoon I found out I'm not the only person in the world. I don't have this feelin alone. You feel it too.”

“I feel the secret sometimes,” Jessarose said, an then sorta sang ever so pretty an soft to a tune I never

recognized, “A woman is a sometime thing,” till I saw the fascinatin Cinemascope picture show a *Porgy and Bess* with Mister Sammy Davis, Jr., an Mister Sidney Poitier, an Mizz Dorothy Dandridge.

What was good enough for her an Mister Sammy was good enough for me. “Then I’ll feel it sometimes too.” An I felt sorry for Mizz Dandridge who was the black Mizz Marilyn Monroe, cuz she just up an disappeared from the screen an life an everythin, an died alone an unknown.

“Good,” she said. “Just sometimes. Because mainly you have to do...”

“Your...” I slid my voice into hers.

We both said it together, “Christian duty!”

An howled an laughed like life was the funniest joke in the world.

Walkin back arm-in-arm toward the Harms’ house, that we all had to keep correctin ourselves had become the Apple house, we stopped behind the barn for one last embrace an what I thought then was the world’s sweetest kiss.

To hold an be held the first time is somethin to keep in your heart forever.

Slowly we pulled our bodies apart an smiled an said nothin an ambled on back toward the house.

I wondered did it show on our faces.

When we neared the big elm tree near the porch, I asked, “What’s gonna happen to Mizz Lulabelle? She’s gonna die less somethin happens?”

“She’s gonna die a shame,” Jessarose said. “I gotta tell someone an I knew if I let you do what you wanted with me this afternoon, cuz I wanted what you wanted,

that you would keep this secret too, cuz what we did is one way a sealin pacts between us.”

“Tell me.”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart an hope to die. Hope the cat spits in my eye.”

“That little dead baby? Mister Apple wasn’t his daddy.”

“Go on!”

“I knew the minute when I first picked it up. It came from a feelin I got lookin at that dead little boy, then lookin at the Mister an Missus.”

“Tell me!” I said.

“I thought she tried to get rid a it by herself,” Jessarose said.

“Get rid a it?”

“There’s ways. Ways that don’t even take a drugstore man to help. But since the Mister is a drugstore man, what I think now is he helped her.”

“Maybe he made her do it. My Grandma said some men do terrible things.”

“No, child. Sometimes it’s more excuse than fair when men get blamed for everythin. Mister Apple, well, it was like he was protectin her from somethin that had invaded her body, like a enemy that wasn’t supposed to be there, an he didn’t like that somethin cuz it wasn’t his an he wanted it outa her body cuz her body was supposed to be all his.”

“What you gonna do?”

“What can I do? What should I do? Sometimes doin nothin is kinder n doin somethin.”

“It’ll just be our secret,” I said. Other secrets were always bein whispered aroun our dinky little town, even

one about my Daddy an a young widow woman on his rural route, but that's another story, an I never knew to believe any a em or not, but this one I was in on from the ground floor up even if I didn't know if a word a it was really true or not.

I dropped roun the Apple place at least once a day, hopin to hear or see somethin, but I never did. With both Mister Apple an Jessarose waitin on her hand an foot, Mizz Lulabelle languished in bed for another two weeks missin the Veterans a Foreign Wars' fireworks on the Fourth a July. I'da thought, what a Hollywooden Vine actress she is, just a dime-store Vivienne Chastaine, milkin all our sympathies, except that Jessarose knew Mizz Lulabelle for once wasn't movie-actin. Somethin wasn't lodged quite right anymore in Mizz Lulabelle's head or her heart an she just lay in bed, cryin a kinda madness, too miserable to move.

Then one mornin, Mizz Lulabelle all a sudden took a upturn. She got outa bed on her own, was a might weak on her feet, but managed to stay on the front porch most a the mornin. Just like some sick person who had made up her mind to get well an she did. In a few days, Jessarose told me it was wonderful how happy Mister Apple was to see Mizz Lulabelle up an aroun, eatin chocolates an smokin cigarets an sippin her Coke-Cola with a little vodka. He was afraid what might happen if Jessarose left at the end a the summer, so he tried to sweet-talk Jessarose into stayin on after summer was over, but she said, "No," especially cuz a his sweet-talk an some presumptions about her, made by Mister Apple, to which she did not take kindly when she told him in the pantry to keep his hands to hisself, cuz she wasn't one a those statute a liberties kind a girls, not with him at least, not that Mis-

ter Henry was ugly, far from it, but just cuz she didn't want to.

Point-blank Jessarose asked, "Who is Wilmer Fox?"

"Wilmer Fox?" I said. "Why he ain't nobody. Not really. He's the Don Juan a travelin sales. He was doin Hoover vacuum cleaners door to door last I heard. Before that it was dress patterns for ladies' clothes. He likes any reason to knock on any lady's door. But then, unlike Mizz Lulabelle, I'm not one a his type ladies. He usta come aroun here regular. Still does, I figger, though I ain't seen him, come to think about it, since last spring. Some a his route was the same as my Daddy's. Why?" I asked. "He done somethin?"

"I don't know," Jessarose said, "but the day after your Daddy delivered a letter from Wilmer Fox addressed to 'Mizz Lulabelle Harms,' like Wilmer hadn't heard she was no longer *Mizz Harms* but was *Missus Apple*, that's when Mizz Lulabelle perked up some, asked for a bowl a my potato soup, got up an bathed an walked down to the porch."

"Why that Wilmer Fox," I said, "he's always turnin heads in the county. Some think he's good-lookin an some say ain't so. I guess you either like real red hair or you don't."

Jessarose groaned. "Promise me." She took my hand and placed it on her breast right where I could feel her heart beat. "I got another secret. Promise me again."

"Hope to die."

"That little dead baby?"

"Swear-to-God."

"He had red hair."

I sucked in my breath real hard an it all came out laughin an I tried to stop it with my hand over my mouth,

but the whole carbonation a my schoolgirl giggles made Jessarose herself start laughin, first blowin escapin air between her teeth an then rockin back an forth, the two a us, just a pair a screamers real knocked out an surprised that the world was a funnier place n we ever figured. Finally, we had to stop laughin or die from no air an Jessarose caught her breath an said sternly, "We can't laugh about it. It's a secret." An all that did was start us screamin all over again till our stomachs hurt so much we were holdin em in with our hands.

Anyway, wild horses could not a tore the secret a that dead red-head baby from me, not that day, not the whole summer long, an maybe not forever, cuz later that summer, on the Saturday evening before Labor Day, Jessarose invited me to the farm house to make me promise again to keep our secrets forever an to say *good-bye*. She was home by herself, Missus Apple bein out on Mister Apple's arm, him in a white sport coat with a pink carnation, cuz she liked that song, an her in red silk taffeta with a wrist corsage, cuttin a rug at the Labor Day dance at the Odd Fellows Hall.

The vision starts spinnin all over again here, something like a 45-rpm *Dream-Dream-Dream* remembered, me seein Jessarose standin on the Apples' screen-porch, with nothin but the long twilight a summer's endin lightin up her hair an her arms an her face. I climbed the porch stairs toward where she stood holdin the screen door open. My eyes traveled up her feet to her ankles an the long run a her legs to her knees where her skirt led me up past her sweetness an further past her waist up across her bare midriff tied up in that blue oxford cloth washed so often it shaped itself to her breasts an on up her neck to her chin an mouth an nose an eyes an

hair. I only hoped she couldn't guess how I was needin her an wantin her more n needin her. I felt kinda awkward in my shorts an top. My thigh-feelin made me dizzy as a cyclone about to touch down on a couple a trailer parks.

Jessarose smiled not like I was a kid an dumb with the hornies, but she acted natural. She smiled, but she didn't say *hello*. Instead, she said, "She won."

"Who won?"

"Mizz Lulabelle. She won. That's who."

"What'd she win?"

"She won Mister Apple."

"Dummy," I said, "She won him when she married him. Besides everyone knows it's the man who wins the woman's hand, not the other way aroun."

"Such a little ninny," Jessarose said.

"Takes one to know one."

"Silly! This whole summer you learned nothin bout bein married?"

She had me stuck.

She took my hand. "Someone wins," she said. "Someone surrenders."

"Mizz Lulabelle been arm-wrestlin with Mizz Vivienne Chastaine again?"

"I mean Mizz Lulabelle won the power in this house." She set me down on the porch glider.

"Power over what?"

"Over the chairs, over the tables, over the rooms, over the bed. Over Mister Apple."

"What's that mean exactly in English?"

"She can make him do anythin she wants."

"She can?"

"Even better. She can do anythin she wants."

“I don’t understand.” Remember I had no mama to mix with my Daddy.

“I figgered it out about the red-head baby. What happened was Mizz Lulabelle calculated herself a deal. She had somethin Mister Apple didn’t want, an then again somethin else Mr. Apple did want. She traded on that red-head baby Mister Apple knew had to be Wilmer Fox’s. That baby, had it got born, woulda made a laugh-in stock outa Mister Henry Apple.”

“He coulda left her,” I said.

“But she didn’t want him to leave. An he didn’t want to leave.”

“But if they was so mad at each other over Wilmer Fox....”

“They was mad, child, but they’s also in love.”

“Really truly?”

“As much as can be.”

“I ain’t never gonna marry no man.” I hesitated less n a lightnin bug’s flash. “Or no woman neither.”

Jessarose’s face glowed in the twilight. “Time will tell,” she said. Her breath rose an fell. “Mizz Lulabelle figgered, I betcha, if she gives a little an has her a mis-carry everybody knows about, she can save Mister Henry’s face, pretendin it’s Mister Henry’s little baby she’s losin, at the same time fixin things so she has no little squawlin brat around, her bein only twenty-two an all herself. I mean she loves Mister Henry at least as much as she loved Wilmer Fox. An besides she could get even with Wilmer for leavin her by losin his baby. By gettin rid a the baby, she could make one a em happy an one a em sad an have not so much as a diaper to change for her trouble.”

“I never heard tell a such people.”

“Besides, once she agreed to save Mister Henry’s face...”

“She saved her own face too,” I said. “Hers an Maybelline’s.”

“...that he better be mighty grateful an see things her way or, get the picture, she was takin away her money her dear dead daddy, Lord rest his soul, invested in Mister Henry’s new pharmacy, back when Mister Henry was Mizz Lulabelle’s fiancé, an her daddy thought if he could bribe Mister Henry into openin his business here, he’d settle her down some, an all the time ol Wilmer was lurkin in the background, an, one word from her, let’s see how many days Mister Henry’s drugstore stays open till her uncle Lucas over at the Canterbury bank forecloses, an besides that, on top a everything else, she could throw him outa her daddy’s house, which was her house all her life before she even heard a Mister Apple on that famous shoppin trip she took to St. Louis last summer when I met her, at Mister and Missus Chumley’s big house on Pershing Avenue, where I was waitin on the society buffet an singin some a the real old songs with a saxophone man who also played piano, which is how I got that very night this over-estimated job from Mizz Lulabelle who under-estimated me.”

My jaw just hung open till the flies flew in.

Jessarose flew up an disappeared into the house, doin a whispery pantomime a “Bye-Bye, Love” by the Everly Brothers, like she was actin comical on *Ed Sullivan*, an fixin a pitcher a red Kool-Aid an a tray a Oreos, which she brought out to the porch. I didn’t want the refreshments. As she sat down beside me, I put my fingertips real gentle on the side a her beautiful neck where

I could feel her lifeblood coursing through her juggernaut vein. She looked at me, her face blank as a plate, till I moved my hand round to the back of her neck and she just sorta surrendered and melted down into my arms.

I figured I was doing okay getting that far cuz, you may remember, I thought I had, sorta all by myself, invented this stuff that summer. Actually, I dreamed it up the winter before and never had a chance till those dog-days to try it out on someone when along came Jessarose, the girl of my dreams, which was lucky, considering me not seeing that many outa-town girls to begin with. I thought the girl stuff might be unmapped territory to explore until we actually did it, but everything came so smooth and easy, that I thought then maybe it just came natural and easy with a woman as beautiful in her gentle heart as Jessarose.

Here the vision gets a little blurry around the edges, cuz what I remember I can't remember with my mind so much as my body and my heart and what it was like to take her in my arms and make love to her mouth with her hands starting to peel me down to what I really am under all the parade and stupid clothes till we were both like those beautiful girls and women romping in the nudist volleyball magazines.

Giggling and panting and hugging and tugging, we finally got each other stripped skinnydip so our bodies could lay full length in the big porch glider touching each other on a soft Indian blanket ol Missus Harms had brought from Astoria Mounds that was full of Indian bones for tourists to see for a nickel. We were doing things I only thought about, and then suddenly we'd do something I never thought about, and I'd be thrilled right from my thighs, hot against hers, to my nipples, hot-blooming and pressing

against her breasts which were a bit bigger with luscious brown circles. Somethin happened that evenin, to both a us. To me it felt like my body was explodin into a thousand stars when she touched me, an when I touched her, her body arched up like a bow an the sound she made was like a cote a doves all cooin at the same time.

It was a lovely evenin, Kool-Aid an all, an we stayed ever so late on the porch, singin all the old songs, an some a the new, till aroun midnight I had to say *hello* an *good-bye* to Mister Henry an Mizz Lulabelle comin racin home in their Plymouth Belvedere from dancin with the Odd Fellows. They paid no particular heed when Jessarose said she'd walk me halfway home, to where the end a the long Harms' PRIVATE ROAD NO TRESPASSING met the two-lane black top, which was almost back to town, an so she did, her an me both walkin slower than usual, wantin to kiss some more, but knowin we couldn't, not out here, not out so near the gravel shoulder a the dangerous two-lane NO PASSING curve a the road where cars with big fins cut sharp by us sweepin their headlights over us like speedin beacons through the Dutch Elm trees.

"This is halfway," I said.

Jessarose laughed. "Halfway?"

We dropped back from the shoulder a the highway, right where it kinda hairpin curves, where once Mizz Lulabelle drove off the road an wrecked her red convertible an nearly killed herself an Wilmer Fox, an we kissed in the shadow a the giant elms with the headlights flashin through the trees way above our heads like the world tryin to flush us out but it couldn't.

My thighs didn't ache so much as my heart.

"I love you," I said.

“I know you do,” she said.

“I can’t bear to say *good-bye*.”

“Not *good-bye*,” Jessarose said. “Till we meet again.”

That was as good as *good-bye*.

Then she said: “Laydia Spain, I adore you!” An she made me laugh, she was always makin me laugh, makin fun a me, so I’d keep on smilin, standin alone there in the night hearin her foot steps disappear into thin air.

I never saw her the next day.

She packed up her bags at Mister and Missus Apple’s an climbed on the Trailways bus with a one-way ticket to St. Louis an just disappeared. Sometimes I think if there is a hell, it must be a bus station roarin an chokin an people tryin to kiss one last good-bye in the blue exhaust an all bein pulled apart by that ol devil driver who keeps people apart by callin “All Aboard” till you can only look at each other through the glass with maybe the palm a your hand pressed against the cold flat window until you can’t see each other anymore.

I was glad I didn’t have to go through somethin like that.

In my heart a hearts an my head a heads, I could hear the echo a Jessarose herself singin about packin up all her care an woe, cuz “here I go, singin low, bye-bye, black bird. No one here can love and understand me, black bird, bye-bye!”