

JACK FRITSCHER'S *THE GEOGRAPHY OF WOMEN*

“Snappy characters...witty dialog...page-turning prose...storytelling at its best! Fritscher’s Laydia Spain joins Rita Mae Brown’s Molly and Dorothy Allison’s Bone as one of the smartest, sassiest heroines in recent years.”

—David Van Leer, reviewer for
The New Republic, New York, and
The Times Literary Supplement, London

“The Jack Fritscher whose voice sounds so true telling spunky Laydia Spain O’Hara’s exuberant story of self-discovery is, believe it or not, the same Jack Fritscher known in men’s circles for the exuberant pleasure of his prose. That he’s just as vibrant and vital a storyteller with a women’s romantic comedy...is a testament to his remarkable way with words. This good-natured romp through a more innocent time is as rife with honesty and life as *A Confederacy of Dunces*.”

—Richard LaBonté,
A Different Light Books, San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles

“The power of Jack Fritscher’s previous books, *Some Dance to Remember*, and *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera*, derives from their intense focus on...the 1970’s and 1980’s. *The Geography of Women* charts an entirely different terrain: that of a young tomboy falling in love with a ‘cinnamon girl’ in a small Southern Illinois town in the 1950’s. *The Geography of Women* is a fine book, a delight...funny and relaxed...and told in a style that is part Mark Twain, part William Faulkner, part Rita Mae Brown, and part Dorothy Allison. My favorite sentence is, ‘My thigh-feelin made me dizzy as a cyclone about to touch down on a couple a trailer parks.’ Fritscher loves his characters’ quirks and humanity. This is a lively and surprising addition to the rich tradition of humor in Southern literature.”—Jim Marks, Publisher,

Lambda Book Report, Washington, D. C.

“This novel is Fritscher’s best work...reminiscent of great Southern writers. A truly touching story about difference and goodness, and why it’s sometimes good to be different.”

—Edward Lucie-Smith, critic and author,
Race, Sex and Gender, London

“Back then I figgered from the way they put it, the cause a female trouble was husbands,” says Laydia Spain, the narrator in *The Geography of Women*, and it’s that consistent, vernacular mix of humor and smarts that gives Jack Fritscher’s quick-footed new novel its considerable charm. I think that the many readers familiar with Fritscher’s earlier novels will be especially impressed by the way in which, rather than repeat himself, this writer extends his reach.”—
Stuart Dybek,

author, *The Coast of Chicago*

“Wonderful storytelling! The writing is as vivid as a fast-talking screenplay with music. By page three, you hear the dialog and you see the movie.”

—Armando Aguilar,

Thrust Magazine, Los Angeles

“*The Geography of Women* is Jack Fritscher’s most extraordinary adventure in diversity. The storytelling is sexy, human, funny, and beautifully written.

—Larry Townsend,

author, *Czar!*, Los Angeles

“Fritscher’s women glow with warmth. You feel their desires, needs, love, and—in the rhythm of the writing—the true beat of their hearts.”

—Mira Schwartz,

critic whose review of Fritscher’s work appears in

The San Francisco Review of Books

By the author of *Some Dance to Remember*

“Classic!” —*The New Republic*

“Mythic!” —*The Advocate*

Also by Jack Fritscher

Fiction

Some Dance to Remember
Stand by Your Man
Rainbow County
Corporal in Charge

Non-Fiction

Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera
Love and Death in Tennessee Williams
When Malory Met Arthur: Camelot
Television Today



"...the human face is a limitless terrain that just pulls you right in....the geography of women is where nature itself takes course home-ward bound, the long route or the short, the high road or the low."

— The Geography of Women

THE GEOGRAPHY OF WOMEN

A Romantic Comedy
A Novel

JACK FRITSCHER

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www.JackFritscher.com**

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For
the Irish storyteller,
my mother,
Virginia Claire Day-Fritscher,
a born *seanachie*

Epigraphs

“Once I Had a Secret Love”

—Doris Day, *Calamity Jane*,
Hollywood, 1957

“Love Me Tender”

—Elvis Presley,
Memphis, 1956

“Lady of Spain (I Adore You!)”

—Erell Reaves and
Tolchard Evans, 1931

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, keep in 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. Watchin 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 light-in 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!”

ACT 2

THE HIRED WOMAN'S TALE

Jessarose was right. The powerful thing Mizz Lulabelle won from Mister Henry was she could do what she wanted, an what she wanted, one a the things, lo an behold, it turned out was, Guess Who, aroun the house. She hired me two weeks to the very day Jessarose left, cuz she needed somebody to be her audience while Mister Henry was at work, an, more so, to clean up after her cuz her head was a dizzy bleachblond distraction inside an out.

“You got no choice but to work for me,” Mizzy Lu said.

“A&P Supermarket’ll take me back.”

“Best store in town an you got fired.”

“The manager had a misunderstandin a me,” I said.

“Laydia, you are so good at miss-explainin anythin an everythin.”

“He told me I was too creative.”

Mizz Lulabelle laughed like ice tinklin in her liquor glass. “*Creative* is a understatement. You rearranged the stock on his shelves.”

“I always been practical.”

“That why you stacked the jars a prunes next to the toilet paper? Mister Henry said you asked him why he didn’t put out his Rexall birth-control unmentionables next to the plastic pants for diapers.”

Oh, she thought she was a stitch.

“I figger for most dummies you gotta help em make two an two add up to four.”

“Then you got a big job here, cuz this house don’t add up at all.”

That easy I became a hired woman.

I moved into the Harms-Apple house, an before long it was like I always lived there with the run a the place an the only trace a Jessarose was the faint smell a Woolworth’s Blue Waltz perfume in the chest a drawers in her ol room that was mine, an then after a year that fragrance was gone like the shelf-life a souvenirs that remind you a the smells a somebody you love isn’t all that long once they’re dead or gone. Jessarose was out on the high road an I was home on the low road. I did all the housework an cookin, an Mizz Lulabelle did her Christian duty by Mister Apple an gave him twin boys with black hair.

“My hair is golden just like Vivienne Chastaine’s,” Mizz Lulabelle said the second afternoon after the twins were born. After this birthin, she was in high spirits. She’d promised Mister Henry two kids an she did it on one try so she’d never have to be expectin on him again. Nobody can congratulate you like you can yourself. “Really,” she was leanin back lookin into a hand-mirror, “truly silky an golden.”

I bit my lip. *Your drapes don't match your carpet*, I thought. Boy, was she dumb. If she was gonna play

mistress a the house, she shoulda known the hired help always know all the secrets. But I shut up.

“I’m surprised both boys have black hair,” she said.

“They must take after Mister Apple,” I said.

“Yes, they must,” she said vaguely, “Both my grandmothers, my mother’s an my daddy’s, were both red heads. Henry says that’s an amazin coincidence, especially with them both bein dead an gone so long who but me remembers little things like the color a their hair.” She looked me dead in the eye like she really was Vivienne Chastaine tryin, for good measure, to cover her tracks an not bein too good at it. “Laydia,” she said, “you sometimes act so peculiar.”

Hell’s bells, acourse I was actin peculiar. My face, my Daddy told me, was no poker face. I figgered she knew I knew about the red-hair baby, the way I knew about her bleachblond hair, but she wasn’t certain, so she was fishin to see what I knew an tryin to cover her tracks just in case. Smart game hen, she was, from readin all them pullet-surprise Kresge’s Five-an-Dime novels.

For nearly three years, till I was eighteen, I worked off an on for Mister Apple an Mizz Lulabelle, livin half-time housekeepin for my Daddy an half-time livin with the Apples an their twin baby boys, John an James, whose hair stayed black, so Mister Apple was happy bouncin them on his knees when he came home from work. One night a month, usually on the full moons, I wrote Jessa-rose the kinda letters you write but never mail. My Daddy who loved me was the mail man for the whole town an he knew everythin, an one night he put his arms aroun me an all he said was, “All you’re ever gettin, when you’re gettin any mail, even if your Daddy is the mail man, is real nice picture postcards with short messages a hap-

piness with no return address.” I looked into my Daddy’s eyes an I knew if I had any mail he could get through to me, I could trust him to deliver despite all that comes a rain an snow an dark a night. I trusted him, an he trusted me, an I figgered the Apples trusted me in their house. So I kinda grew loyal to them, if you can understand that, especially to Mizz Lulabelle cuz she was often makin reference to Jessarose who by talkin about her we kept alive like some eternal burnin flame, an also cuz Mizzy Lu was the mother a those two little boys who were so sweet till they were fourteen or so, but that’s another story.

Since I was determined to be loyal, more to the long-gone Jessarose than to Mizz Lulabelle, I never let on I knew anythin at all bout Wilmer Fox or his little bastard that Mizz Lulabelle took care a with the help a her husband bringin somethin home from his drugstore. Even back then a girl didn’t need to be Nancy Fancy Drew to make two an two add up to four. Livin with em, I kept my eyes an ears open an I caught bits an pieces that filled in everythin Jessarose had ever suspected. Acourse I never let on Jessarose told me everythin an I never told anyone; but, all the same, in a small town, everybody an his brethern an sistern knew the famous story about that red-head little miscarry, an everytime someone whispered it the story got juicier than anythin that really happened.

Mizz Lulabelle didn’t surprise me any the week Mister Apple was at a convention a druggists in St. Louis. I might make mention that their third weddin anniversary was comin up in May an he was up to three, maybe four conventions, a year, plus some professional pharmaceutical trips he had to make for what he called

“touchin shoulders an rubbin elbows.” Mizz Lulabelle had other words for it, but she refused to say anythin more n she was just another Drugstore Widow. Her Cokes and vodkas got to be more vodka than Coke, fairly regular, if you catch my drift. She wasn’t ever a sloppy drunk. Actually, she was more like a happy drunk, or so she seemed to me when she finally got aroun to askin me somethin nobody’d ever direct out asked me before.

We were in the downstairs livin room with John an James tucked in their beds upstairs. It was two weeks before Christmas an the tree was already up an decorated, an she was a third a the way into the large bowl a egg nog I had whipped up. She told me to turn off the TV she wasn’t really watchin, an herself dipped me a cup a egg nog, an asked me to play some records on the phonograph, which pleased me, cuz she suddenly seemed to care what I might want, which she hardly ever did, so anyway I played some carols, somethin nice like Bing Crosby’s *Christmas Album*, with him bah-bah-booin his way through “White Christmas” which, right after, Elvis sang on his new Christmas LP that dropped down on the stack of stereo albums. The tone-arm swung automatic over the shiny black edge of the revolvin record an the needle rode an popped right into the first groove a music an you knew in the difference between Bing and Elvis that the world belonged to everyone who was young an not afraid to dare new things that weren’t old-fashion. Mizz Lulabelle asked me to sit down an without any warnin just blurted out askin me if I ever slept with Jes-sarose.

I couldn’ta been more surprised if she’da asked Mister Henry how often he played with hisself, which, truth be known from the tiny moanin noises comin from

behind the bathroom door, was quite a bit, especially on those nights when Mizz Lulabelle lay flat on her back in their bed moanin her own noises about how she couldn't do everythin for everybody an she didn't want him to do any love-honor-an-cherish favors, much less any acrobatics, for her who wasn't gonna be any longer the human pin cushion till death she did part.

"I asked you a question," Mizzy Lu said. "Did you sleep with Jessarose?"

"No," I said. I didn't want to lie, but I'm not one to kiss an tell neither. "No, acourse not. I never slept with Jessarose." It was true as a "mental reservation" which was about the only convenient *Catechism* I learned from the Little Sisters. We never went to sleep. I didn't like feelin defensive about anythin I did, especially somethin I deep down felt proud a, so I said, "What kinda question is that?"

"The kind that women like us," she said, "ask each other."

I looked up at her. "What women like us?" I looked around the room. "You and me?"

"Please don't lie to me," she said.

"I'm not lyin."

"Did you kiss Jessarose?"

"None a your beeswax."

"Did you put your arms aroun her an hold her tight? Did you take your clothes off together?"

"Heavens to Murgatroyde, Mizz Lulabelle!"

She leaned forward. "You an Jessarose an me," she said, "are three of a kind. I know it. Don't ask me how. I just know it. Three of a kind."

"What kind is that?" I was afraid she'd say some nasty word for it, just like someone's got a nasty word

for anythin an everythin to do with any kinda wonderful private thing you can think of when all you have is a good word for it.

“Lovely women,” she said. She pulled out that dog-eared novel she was forever goin back an readin like some encyclopedical book. “Like Vivienne Chastaine,” she said.

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Whatever Jessarose was I am too,” I admitted, an it was Sport O’Hara talkin like a ventriloquist through my Laydia-Spain mouth. I felt defiant pride. I’d read that trashy ol novel about Vivienne, the best parts, a hundred times.

“An I’m like you both,” Mizz Lulabelle said. “At least some a the time. Especially now, durin the holidays, when Mister Apple is away so much. I at least want to try an feel some consolation, the kind I suspect a woman gives an gets like she can’t get from a man.” Her egg nog, double-dipped, made her talkative. “I know you’ve always liked me, Laydia, the way I sometimes catch you lookin at me.”

“I never look at you.”

“You never could lie,” she said. “You know everythin about me, don’t you?”

I knew she meant everythin about the red-hair baby.

“No,” I said.

“Don’t make me laugh,” she said. “Come here an kiss me ever so sweetly.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“What if Mister Henry finds out?”

“Who’ll tell him? I won’t tell him. Will you tell him?”

“Acourse not.” My answer felt like a untruth.

Why was it that Mizz Lulabelle an Jessarose turned both the same when they got fearful someone’d find out

anythin from me who can't tell a story straight away anyhow? For cryin out loud, if I didn't look an act like someone they could trust, why were they both always tryin to kiss me an tell me their secrets? It was one a the few times in my life I needed a mirror. I knew I looked like a tomboy, an wanted to, but did I look like the kinda girl Mizz Lulabelle's attitude was twistin me into, an what exactly did one a those kind look like?

"Acourse, I won't tell him," I said.

"Then what Mister Henry don't know won't ever hurt him none." She put her long lovely hand out toward me.

"Are you just bein brave cuz you're drunk?" I crossed my palms in my lap.

"I been drinkin, Missy, but I am never drunk."

She was awful pretty. More so now she was older. I wanted to look like her when I was draggin twenty-six an pushin twenty-seven, except for the bleachblond hair. But I shied away from mentionin her age, an decided to play true confessions another way. I told her across the room I'd always, well, not always, but sometimes, had this sinkin feelin in my thighs when I'd look at her walkin aroun in her an Mister Henry's bedroom in her lingerie smellin a Fabergé Woodhue powder, or settin propped up on pillows in her an Mister Henry's bed in her light blue bed-jacket waitin for me to bring her breakfast. She had all the movie-tone airs of a grown woman an I found her attractive, but I was suspicious a who was gonna lead our little dance cuz I always figgered she was as clueless as carefree.

"Mizz Lulabelle," I said, "You ever done this before?"

"No," she said. "Not really."

"What does *not really* mean?" I asked.

"I kissed Jessarose an she kissed me," Mizz Lula-belle said.

Oh, oh, oh!

My head grew dizzy I was for a minute so jealous.

I laughed, the way I had laughed with Jessarose, lettin off pressure, comin down an figurin if it was okay for me to do it with both a them, it had to be fair-for-fair for them to do it together.

I was never the jealous type.

Really.

"Why me? Why you wanna do this with me?"

"Cuz," she said, aroun a sip a her egg nog, "I think you're pretty."

"Me pretty?" I laughed. "That'll be the day."

"To me," she said, "you're pretty. You're pretty interestin."

What a dumb back-handed compliment!

"If a person," I said, "doesn't have a interestin body, she has to find somebody who finds her body interestin."

"Oh, Laydia. You're a stitch. You're everythin I'm not. Besides, I know everythin about you."

She held out her arms to me.

"Come here, Sport," she said, sayin my special name an surprisin the dickins outa me. "Please come to mama, do."

Need I say more than that we danced the Xmas tango to "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" an both got rug burns on our knees an elbows rollin aroun on the livin room carpet. Mizz Lulabelle compared to Jessarose left a bit to be desired, cuz she was more clumsy for all her past reputation at bouncin aroun town, an Jessarose was more tender an fresh, but then Jessarose

hadn't had to put up with Mister Henry pumpin his Christian duty on top a her for four years.

Anyway, we did it, playin a nudist-girl game I called "Round John Virgin, Mother an Child," her pretendin I was her baby girl, with nothin but the Christmas tree lights on, an I got to feel for a hour what havin a angel mama hold me mighta felt like, an Mizz Lulabelle, she liked all a it an wanted me ever once in awhile to make love to her, in other ways, playin other games, most often in the afternoons while John an James was nappin an all the shades were down an Mister Henry was fillin prescriptions an smilin at his Rexall customers an ringin up sales on his cash register.

I was just turned twenty-one that June a 1960 when my Daddy was killed. A big roofin truck full a hot tar ran outa control an smashed into him an burned him to death inside his post office car, an all the letters with him. The people that ran up to the burnin wreck couldn't help, cuz the fire was so hot an they said they could see him still movin some when the fire engine arrived, which took ten minutes, but it was too late, an I hope he was dead right away an it was just his nerves twitchin that made him look like he was movin, cuz he was too good a man to die like that. He was my Daddy. He was all I had.

Mizz Lulabelle figgered I better move in full-time, to occupy my mind an help her with the twins who was almost three. Mister Apple offered to help me sell my Daddy's house, but I said *no*, I thought I'd better just throw some sheets over the furniture an board it up till I decided what I was goin to do. My heart, achin for my Daddy gone forever, threw proportion on my heartache for Jessarose who was only gone in time an space an by her choice, no doubt travelin on the road singin in some

girl group a three singers, writin *ou-ou-baby* lyrics about girls dyin for motorcycle boys in leather jackets, deliverin tight harmonies in tighter dresses to a piano back beat a rock 'n' roll. That vision a Jessarose herself sent bitter tears down my face an just added *ou-ou-baby* fuel to the torch I was carryin. Embarrassed I was so jealous, I hid my unmailed letters in my ice box, figurin I could just add to the pile a what for a while I called her undeliverable "fan mail" every month, cuz nothin much better n bad luck looked like it was gonna happen to me, myself, an I.

So I moved in full time with the Apples, that's for sure, but I'll tell you one thing, an don't you ever forget it: I think any female who has a house to call her own an nobody else's had best hang onto it if she wants in the long run to be independent. At least so Grandma Mary Kate said, cuz she had given up her home to move in with my Daddy an mama an then got stuck with raisin me while Big Jim was out raisin cain an was no earthly good to her durin her last illness with the cancer that ate her up till she looked worse n one a those Ol Woman Apple Dolls that I think nobody with any taste, unless it's all in their mouths, should buy.

"I'm so sorry, Laydia," Mizz Lulabelle said. "At least you collected a little extra on your Daddy's insurance, it bein a accident an all an him bein a civil servant in a government job."

The insurance was a whole five thousand dollars from the roofin company, cuz who could afford to sue them even if they thought a it back then, plus there was ten thousand dollars from the government which seemed a lot those days, cuz by the time a the settlement I'd voted for my first president who was Jack Kennedy an it was

also the last time for a long time in any president's election I ever voted for anybody who won, an that's been almost my whole life, but that's another story.

Anyway I used some a the money from my treasure trove an traveled to St. Louis to try an find Jessarose, fixed on her as I was as my first an only true love, so I could carry her back to my big empty house, figgerin I'd never feel as good ever again as I felt with her, no offense to Mizz Lulabelle, but too much time had passed an Jessarose's trail was cold.

I tried right off showin a snapshot I had a her to different people at the St. Louis bus station, but bus stations are way too down an out depressin, so next I tried better-dressed people by the long beautiful fountain outside the train station. Acourse I found nothin, an a cop told me nicely, but told me, to stop botherin people. He looked at the snapshot I pushed in his face an he shook his head *no*, an added, "She might be dead."

I ran from him an from the possibility a what had never ever crossed my mind.

I ran into the first movie house I saw an dragged myself up the stairs to the balcony an cried an cried about Jessarose maybe bein lost for good or worse dead. To make matters more sorrowful, the picture shows I saw were the saddest Technicolor double bill ever: *Portrait in Black* an *Imitation of Life* both starrin Mizz Sandra Dee an Mizz Lana Turner, whose daughter had killed her gangster lover, not in the movie, but in real life, an I cried myself sick for Sandra an Lana an Jessarose an me, an even for the dead Johnny Stompanato cuz Lana loved him. Mizz Sandra Dee was just perfect cuz she was undistinguishable from a million other girls, just like me, but not like Jessarose.

I had no notion a what to do next, except take a room at the YWCA where I could swim off my steam in a hundred laps. I kinda wandered the next day, criss-crossin downtown until I finally got up the nerve an went through the revolvin door into the Famous-Barr Department Store where Jessarose had hoped to be a salesgirl, sellin piano sheet music, but no luck, not even in the Famous-Barr Lost-an-Found Department where a nice lady gave me a umbrella nobody claimed in case I needed it. Late that afternoon, I tried at some a the hotel main desks, an mostly got the cold shoulder like I was dirt by these clerks who were no more n glorified bellhops an most a them sissies at that. At this one hotel, which looked like a nice place, but you can fool me with marble an gold braid, this guy who called hissself the house detective in a forty-dollar suit from Sears an Roebuck asked me to leave when I wouldn't go upstairs with him to a room, cuz he said he was lookin for a girl too.

"Hasten, Jason! Bring the basin!" I said, the way we always used to say all the new sick stuff like that when somethin got disgustin. So, anyway, he elbowed me out the door, a real bum's rush, but I hit him with my umbrella an I got a good kick in on his shins, which shit, I tell you, he deserved.

I mean what's happened in my life so far? Nothin yet. Not really. An even with nothin happenin, nothin with him—or anybody like him—was gonna happen either.

Where I got my nerve, beats me. My Daddy knew his territory by his assigned route, but I was out searchin into the unmarked night territory where girl singers go, an where other women appear under neon, an disappear in clouds a smoke, as someone whistles, an cars turn

slowly aroun corners an new women appear for their turn, an I hope my turn never comes.

I even peeked into some cocktail lounges where they advertised GIRLS right up with BLUES an ROCK an GO GO. I asked the bartenders if they had seen her an they said, *no*, but they wished they had.

One barkeep in a tavern full of men, when I showed him my snapshot a Jessarose, said to me, “Oh, my, my! I once saw a singer in East St. Louis, or was it Kansas City? What was her name? It was stagey, you know? But a good one. Verna Costello? Virginia Castle?”

I said to him: “Was it Vivienne somethin’?”

“Coulda been,” he said. “I can see ‘Vivienne Somethin’ up in lights.”

“You know where she is?”

“Probably,” he said, “Chicago, by now. If she’s moving up in the world. Maybe New Orleans. These days, who knows? Maybe even Detroit. Throw a dart at the map.”

I raced next morning to the St. Louis Public Library an scoured through directories an phone books from cities an towns at unheard latitudes an longitudes tryin to locate one Jessarose Parchmouth or her alias Vivienne Chastaine. The libraries were no more help than the phone company, an the post master at the post office had never heard a my Daddy, an not, certainly, a any job promised to me.

After two weeks my YWCA money gave up before I did. Only people in movies hire detectives an I was so fixed an focused on findin Jessarose an only Jessarose, how was I to know that if I had stayed in St. Louis, an become a stenographer at Mizz Clitter’s School of Business, I mighta met a gazillion young girls exactly like Jessarose an me, all of em hopin an prayin an waitin for somethin wonderful to happen to em, even if we all had

to go prancin aroun in those white go-go boots that shoe stores couldn't even keep in stock.

It gives me a chill thinkin about the mysteries a what I didn't do by not startin a life out in the world a St. Louis, but then I get a certain chill thinkin about all the kinda life that did happen to me, stayin put, an that I caused to happen, when I rode back home to Canterbury on the Trailways bus, with my heart broke in two, cuz like I said, I knew outa the gate that I was one a those plain people who if anythin good is gonna happen to them they gotta make their own luck. An I don't even know if there is luck, good or bad. Sometimes I think there's only coincidence that's good when it works an bad when it don't, but you never ever let nothin get you down.

At the Apples, another year passed an John an James, turnin four, thought as much a me as they did their mama. Only I never felt like their mama or even like I wanted to be a mama, bein still so much too young. I felt exactly like my Daddy usta tell me: "Sometimes, Sport, you just act like you're lost in the Dead Letter Office." He sure hit the nail on the head. Upstairs alone in my bedroom at the Apple house, I lay awake nights, so blue, listenin to my transistor radio, hopin to hear some new record by some certain new girl singer, watchin the shadow a branches against the moon, wantin wantin wantin wantin Jessarose.

Mizz Lulabelle finally got to be a pain where a pill couldn't reach an a doctor wouldn't dare. "Laydia," she said, diggin her needle in, "you might as well be in love with Amelia Earhart."

"Sometimes, Mizz Lulabelle, I wish you were the missin woman, like some Hollywood missin woman like Mizz Janet Leigh."

“I haven’t taken a shower since I saw that show,” she said.

“You will,” I said. “So I’m keepin my wig handy an the butcher knife real sharp.”

“I always wanted to be killed by a jealous lover,” she said. “It’d be so romantic, just like...”

“...the famous Mizz Vivienne Chastaine,” I said. “I’m gonna burn that dirty ol ten-cent paperback book on you.”

“Threaten me some more, cuz I love it.”

There was just no stoppin her.

“I can be in love with Mizz Amelia Earhart if I want. You been tryin to run my life ever since I moved in to work for you. An just in case you don’t know, even the law says grown adults have the right to disappear if they want to. I know that for sure cuz I read it in my Daddy’s *True Detective* magazine.”

“But why would she want to disappear? She got to have a reason.”

Mizzy Lu coulda been a ad girl for Caterpillar bulldozers.

“Some reasons are plain private, an you don’t have to know everythin.”

The woman was more frustratin than she was mean, cuz she kept pryin at truths my pinin heart could not entertain an still be healthy.

So I tried cuttin her off from the little love games she always wanted from me, cuz I figgered out she didn’t like me, not really. She just liked to be wild an she guessed, after Wilmer Fox who left her in the lurch, the wildest thing she could do this side a drivin fast an smokin an drinkin was break all the rules with me. She thought she was really, wonderfully bleachblond bad two-

timin her two-timin husband with another woman, so I knew, more n bein loved, I was bein used to hurt Mister Henry cuz she was as mad at him as she still was at Mister Fox.

Bein with Mizzerabelle was nothin like bein with Jessarose where we was face to face an heart to heart, cuz Mizz Lulabelle was every inch a Sarah Heartburn actress. Mostly she liked to play “Hollywood” an we’d take off each other’s clothes an dress up in a unendin costume parade a getups Mizz Lulabelle dug outa some ol trunk in the attic. She’d put some fancy dress from the Famous-Barr Department Store on me an have me sashay aroun her in high heels an a garter belt while she knelt on the floor, like a empress’s seamstress, lookin up at me an then she’d take my dress off an put a hat on my head an ask me to walk toward her sorta in slow-motion an naked as a jaybird fashion-show except for the hat with the feathers an the high heels an the garter belt.

“Starrin Mizz Vivienne Chastaine,” she’d say, meanin yours truly. “Like Barbara Stanwyck is always called *Mizz Barbara Stanwyck*.”

A couple times she had me dress up in Mister Henry’s good blue wool suit an white shirt an tie an pretend I was smokin one a his curved pipes, “Mirror Sham Pipe,” she called it, an she said I made her crazy, but I told her I didn’t make her crazy, I found her that way. It musta been the tomboy in me comin through, cuz I really liked dressin up in Mister Henry’s expensive clothes. I started gettin ideas about steppin out, steppin over that line I imagined separated Junior an Misses’ sizes from Boys’ an Men’s.

The last couple times we did it, Mizz Lulabelle dressed herself in my clothes an put me in hers, fixin my

hair like hers an sprayin me with more Woodhue perfume n I could stand, an then she had the nerve to ask me, all dressed up like her, an her all dressed like me, to order her aroun the room, doin things like makin her polish my shoes which were really her shoes, an then she'd want me to make her dust with a feather duster, like she was the French maid an I was the lady a the house, an, off an on, I had to finger-play with her orioles, she called em, like they was a pair a little birds. That all hit sorta too close to home, like how much can you expect from a hired gal, an made me feel kinda uneasy, wishin I wasn't movie-actin with her, but was bein myself while she was bein herself. I never understood it back then. She kept dressin me up as every movie ever made, an when it wasn't the movies, she made me up as herself an Mister Henry, until finally, when she tried to dress me up as Wilmer Fox in a suit an a red wig she bought at the Salvation Army Thrift, I told her I couldn't play her game anymore.

"Why not?" she said.

"Cuz Mister Henry will find out what we're doin under his own roof behind his back."

"That's no reason."

"Then cuz we're doin the right thing for the wrong reason."

"What's that mean?"

"I don't know," I said. "I memorized it in *Catechism* class."

"That's no answer!"

"It's my answer. This girl stuff is okay, but your reason for doin it wouldn't play up in Peoria. I can't explain it, but even Mizz Marlene Dietrich couldn't make me dress up for you anymore."

A week later I heard loud fightin comin late from the bedroom a Mister an Missus Apple, which was unusual cuz they hardly ever fought since Mister Henry always gave in when he saw Mizz Lulabelle hoverin off in the corner an headin toward the bed like a bad weather front movin in. I couldn't hear much more n voices risin an fallin, but I heard *Laydia* enough to know it was about me, an I was really embarrassed that Mister Henry in the heat a anger had to find out not that his wife was unfaithful, which he always suspected, but that she was unfaithful, not with another man, but with me, in his own house.

Anyway, in the next days, absotively nobody said posilutely anythin, while our eyes was all dartin every which way, an our lives went on like nothin had ever happened, no infidelity an no arguments, except I was stayin outa Mister Henry's way, figgerin him to be real upset, an definitely stayin away from bein alone with Mizz Lulabelle which was easy with her out all the time drivin aroun in her new red Chevy convertible, her bleachblond hair whippin aroun her face, an me at home alone with John an James.

The autumn that year was a real late Indian Summer, right after Halloween an right before Jack Kennedy was shot. The afternoon was hot, so Mister Apple an Mizz Lulabelle had a extra 7 & 7, which is 7-Up soda an Seagram's 7 whiskey, while the two little boys who, as I said, were all a four played out in the yard. I didn't mind, cuz a the heat an all, how late the supper was. I recall what we ate exactly: my beef stew with my Grandma's dump-lins, which we sat down to eat aroun seven-thirty cuz the boys was gettin over-tired an over-hungry an cranky.

Mister Apple said Protestant grace an Mizz Lulabelle helped one a the twins eat an I helped the other.

We were about halfway through when we heard footsteps comin up the porch steps.

“Are we expectin company?” Mister Apple said. He wiped his clipped black moustache with his white linen napkin.

“Not anyone I know,” Mizz Lulabelle said. Excitement reddened her cheeks. She adored company. Ask me. I cleaned an baked for em an washed up after em, then read in *The Canterbury Herald* that Mizz Smith an Mizz Jones paid a afternoon call on Mizz Lulabelle Apple an her twins, John an James, an angel food cake was served with ice cream an lemonade. Mizzy loved publicity. Certain kinds. She wasn’t like my Grandma who read in *Cosmopolitan* that a lady’s name appears in the papers only three times: when she’s born, when she’s married, an when she dies. Mizz Lulabelle was her own best-born press agent, cuz *The Herald* never mentioned the vodka in Mizz Lulabelle’s sweatin glass in the summers or the rum in her tea in the winters, and I, acourse, with never a mention, was Mizz Invisible who was pinin for a missin woman, but, oh, yeah, she did love company cuz it gave her a chance to be grand in her family’s fine ol house with her arm through the arm a her prosperous pharmacist husband who might run for mayor.

“Who could that be?” Mister Apple said as the screen door on the porch creaked open an someone just walked onto an across the porch. You could hear their footsteps, big as you please.

“Just somebody needs a prescription filled,” I said.

Then came a knock on the inner door to the house itself, kinda polite at first, then harder. Mister Apple pushed his chair back from the table an placed his napkin next to his plate. He pulled down his vest an

walked directly toward the door. He paused, cleared his throat with that nervous tick he always had, an opened the door.

There stood Wilmer Fox in the flesh, red hair an all.

Mizz Lulabelle could see perfectly well down the hall. She placed her palm to her forehead an said, “The heat is makin me faint.”

Wilmer Fox was makin her drool.

I wanted to howl an laugh like I did with Jessarose, but I was on my own an had to behave myself. “Mizzy, get a grip on yourself,” I whispered.

“I’ll be perfectly fine,” Mizz Lulabelle said.

“Fancy this,” I said. “It’s *High Noon*. You’re finally starrin in a real movie.”

She shook her white cloth napkin at me the way you would shoo a fly.

“Hello, Fox,” Mister Apple said down the hall in the deepest voice he could command.

“Hello, Mister Apple,” Mister Fox said. He went straight to the point. “May I talk to Lulie?”

Mizz Lulabelle blanched like we was all hearin her called somethin more intimate n we were usta hearin.

“Really!” Mister Apple said. He blubbered an flustered an cleared his throat not like a man tryin to be mayor at all. “The nerve. Well! The cheek. Tch! The intrusion. Huff! Our supper. Puff! No appointment.”

“I got to talk to Lulie,” Mister Fox said. “I got to.”

Mister Apple stood his ground like this was some tricks-or-treater he’d rather trick than treat.

“Please,” Mister Fox said.

Somethin pitiful there was in his voice made Mizz Lulabelle stand straight up at the table.

The twins both stared at their mama.

It's alright," she said to everyone. She patted her hair with both hands, like she was exitin the *Titanic* with a concealed ice pick, an sailed real Princess Grace-ful down the hallway to the door takin her stand behind Mister Apple. "It's alright," she repeated near her husband's ear.

Mister an Missus Apple were actin like both a em thought Mister Fox had a loaded gun on his person an they didn't.

"It's alright, Henry," Mizz Lulabelle said to her husband. "Whyn't you go an finish supper an I'll have a word with Mister Fox to see what he wants. I won't take but a minute."

Mister Apple came back to the table where he an I both chewed away, like the world depended on our chewin, listenin to the voices risin an fallin in whispers on the porch.

Mister Henry sat through it all like somethin he had to endure.

Mizz Lulabelle was cool as a cucumber. When Mister Fox asked her about a baby that died, she called him impertinent. Then she denied there ever had been a red-hair baby boy, and wherever, Mister Fox, did you get a idea like that?

An then I heard her name.

Mister Fox said it first. "Jessie."

"Jessie who?"

"Jessarose Parchmouth."

I wanted to run to the door an ask Wilmer Fox where she was an was she alright.

Then Mizz Lulabelle repeated: "Jessarose? Where'd Jessarose ever come by such a notion? Nothin a the kind ever happened," Mizz Lulabelle said.

“I hope not, Lulie,” Mister Wilmer Fox said. “It’d break my heart.”

“You believe what you have to believe, Mister Fox. Excuse me,” Mizz Lulabelle said, “but we’re eatin supper. My family an I, my husband an our two children, his an mine, are eatin supper.”

“Lulie?”

“Yes, Mister Fox?”

“I got to ask you just one question more.”

“What’s that, Mister Fox?”

“Lulie, are you happy?”

Silence landed thud on the house an nobody, not even the twins, made a noise for what seemed one a those moments that goes on forever waitin for the answer when the outcome for everybody’s future depends on what a person says. Like in court under oath.

“Mister Fox,” Mizz Lulabelle said, “I am happy. I am very, very happy.”

“That’s all I want to know, Lulie.” Mister Fox looked straight into her eyes for what I figgered he knew was the last time an then without sayin anythin he turned an was gone down the porch steps an across the sidewalk into his waitin car.

“Mister Fox must be doin okay for hisself,” Mizz Lulabelle said sittin back down at the table. “Baby blue, it was, his car. A baby blue Lincoln Continental.”

“Are you?” Mister Apple asked.

“Am I what?” She knew full well what he meant, but she knew the game of women an men when they play wives an husbands.

“Are you happy?” he repeated.

She smiled, forkin her stew. “I’m not unhappy.”

“That the best you can do?” he asked.

“I’m here, aren’t I? Here with you. I’m not with him.” She turned to me. “Wilmer wasn’t travelin alone. Someone was with him.” She cocked her trigger to hurt me.

“Who?” I hoped I didn’t know the answer.

“Someone was sittin in the front seat a his big Lincoln Continental waitin for him.” She took careful aim.

“Jessarose,” I said.

“Can’t say. Won’t say,” she said, like a pistol-pack-in mama, blowin the smoke from the barrel a her six-shooter.

I always acted so tough, but I started to cry. I scraped back my chair an ran to the window. I knew she knew I loved Jessarose. An she was so jealous she couldn’t stand it. She had known all these years, an worse, she had blabbed my little secret about Jessarose to Mister Henry, the old bag. Outside, the dark yard of the Apples’ house was empty as the long black-top drive to the highway. On the porch, one carved punkin face, cavin in from the hot candle inside it, was grinnin back like a lunatic into the window to entertain John an James.

“Stop cryin, you ninny,” Mizz Lulabelle said. “Trick or treat!”

“I imagine her out there, happy,” I said, “never lonely, even if she was ridin aroun with Wilmer Fox.”

“You fool so easy,” Lulabelle said. “Jessarose wasn’t with him. Someone was with him. It coulda been Jessarose, but it wasn’t, but I couldn’t be sure in a police lineup. All I know, it was a woman. Wilmer smelled like cheap dime-store perfume.”

“Lulabelle, why you go an hurt Laydia?” Mister Apple said.

“Because I want to. I always want to. That’s why I hired her so I could watch her cook an clean an slave over

all my chores for me, washin the diapers an bathin my babies. Makin her do woman's work so she can learn to be a proper respectable woman." She looked directly at me. "It was you, wasn't it? You an Jessarose concocted that lie about a red-head baby an then you told it all over town, disgracin my name! Embarrassin my husband! All the time livin here under our roof where we took you in a homeless, destitute orphan. I hope you know how much I hate you! How much I've always hated you an your kind!"

My kind?

My kind?

My kind?

I sat stock still. She made me so mad I wasn't cryin anymore. I knew what she meant by "my kind" an that was a attitude I figgered I'd better get used to an just ignore. But where were my kind? My real kin? An why weren't they ridin to my rescue? What made me really mad was her remarkin what she figgered I thought about doin a hard day's work, woman's work or not, aroun her house, an my foot was about ready to kick her shins under the table, but I kept my face steady an said, "Is it true?"

"Laydia!" Mister Apple said.

"Is it true?" I asked.

"What?" Mizz Lulabelle said, "Is what true?"

"That your famous miscarry was a red-hair baby boy that died in your bed because Mister Apple couldn't stand the thought a raisin Wilmer Fox's bastard?"

"Here, here, missy," Mister Apple said, "That's not true!"

"Don't lie, you ol gas bag," Mizz Lulabelle screamed at Mister Apple. Seein ol Wilmer Fox again made her mad

as a hatter, as mad with her husband an me an the twins as she ever had been with Wilmer who she couldn't get her hands on anymore while she could get her claws on us. "It's as true, Laydia," she said, "as you an that dreadful Jessarose makin what you an your kind call *love* on our porch glider."

"So what's that make you?" I asked.

Mister Apple turned about thirty shades a red. Mizzy Lu rose up like a cyclone an pulled some of my unmailed letters to Jessarose from the sideboard, throwin them like a twister disaster across the table, screamin, "I found these hid in your room!" All our cards were played. No one spoke. The twins gurgled mindless in their milk. We all five sat there like a Mexican stand-off. All we woulda needed to make the accusations complete was for Mister Apple to confess to gamblin an drinkin an sportin with loose chippies at drugstore conventions to make the robin round, but handsome ol Mister Henry wasn't man enough for anymore than swiggin turpenhydrate an codeine on the sly, an poppin the pills that fell off his counter onto his floor, which was into his pocket, an he couldn't throw no stones cuz he was the one who brought home the medicine that killed that little red-hair baby that Mister Wilmer Fox was so concerned about. If Jessarose was with Wilmer that night, sittin out in his car, I wondered what else she told him. I wondered why she hadn't at least had him ask about me. An, especially, why she sat out in the car. But, knowin Wilmer, who sported more dates n a calendar in Leap Year, it probably wasn't her at all. If it was, she'da at least come up on the porch to say *Hey*. That much I know in my heart a hearts an in my head a heads. What woman there was with Wilmer was a stand-in,

if there was a woman with Wilmer. Truth is, wherever she was, Jessarose probably didn't even know I lived with the Apples.

"It's true about the baby, red hair an all," Mizz Lulabelle blurted it all out, just a shameless bleachblond callin attention to her spank-me white-trash roots. "I lied to Wilmer cuz I want to keep him guessin. I want him to keep on hurtin never knowin for sure whether or not we, oh, yes, we, We, WE got rid a his little brat, an when I want him to hurt more, I'll write him an tell him the truth a what really happened, a what really goes on in the world."

"Lulabelle," Mister Henry pounded the table. "Shut up. You just shut up. You talk too much. I've about had enough outa you."

"Have you?" Mizz Lulabelle said. "You ain't seen nothin yet!"

John an James started in squawlin an Mizz Lulabelle picked herself up from the table, ran up the stairs, an locked herself in the bathroom with her chainlink cigarets.

"Tornado watch," Mister Henry said.

"She'll huff an puff an blow your house down, an that's all I say," I said, fluffin an wipin the chins a John an James.

Mister Henry looked at me, real matter a fact, like he seen it all, which he had. "Storm front'll be moved through by bedtime," he said, eyein me, but not like he had eyed Jessarose, even though he was blushin again. "If you love Jessarose, why you two not together?"

"Mister Henry!"

"Mizz Laydia Spain O'Hara! You are a easy book to read."

“Fine,” I said. “Okay? You want us trapped together like you an Mizzy?”

“You might be with her. Things bein equal in the world...”

“Which they ain’t.”

“...Jessarose might be here.”

“Nossir, we don’t seem geographically right. She’s out somewhere puttin in appearances singin the blues in the night in some juke joint...”

“Or some fancy hotel,” Mister Henry said an I was grateful to him for always tryin to brighten up the picture.”

“She could be a songbird appearin nightly anywhere in the world, but she seems not to be appearin here. She’s a disappearin woman goin where she needs to go, like women lookin for somethin, someone, maybe themselves, at the Lost-an-Found Window a Life, where the lucky ones, an the clever ones, find their belongins, their purses, their driver’s license, their true adventure out there in cities on shore an ships at sea.”

“Jessarose,” Mister Henry acknowledged, “is not the only person, woman or man, who has left this town an vanished,” like he was kinda explainin his own small disappearin acts.

“I got no wish nor leash to hold Jessarose. An me? I stay put here, *home*, where I belong without maybe belongin, doin my job, meanin I may be the first one a my kind they ever saw aroun here, an the sight a *me to them*, an *them to me*, well, that’s a kinda witness I give about the kinda customers, in your drugstore an out, who refuse to use vanishin cream. An I never go where I’m not invited.”

“We all walk in our own shoes,” he said.

“An if we’re lucky, the shoes fit. If they don’t, well, that’s another story.”

Finally the twins quieted down.

Mister Henry asked for his dessert.

I went through the swingin door into the kitchen an got my fresh-baked punkin pie, that I'm kinda famous for, an set the whole thing down smack in front a him an then took my own chair without so much as servin him. The house was so quiet I could hear all the clocks tickin.

Finally, without lookin up, Mister Henry said to me a real surprise.

"You're not," he said, "bein nice enough to our Mizz Lulabelle."

Get out the car! I knew right away what he meant. "What?" I said.

"You're not bein nice enough to Mizz Lulabelle."

Upstairs the toilet flushed, roarin mad like it was gonna honey-suck down the carpet an the curtains an the clothes an the whole house with all the people in it.

I hated em both.

When did I become *Exhibit A*, them both, husband an wife, talkin a blue streak behind my back?

Here I been puttin Mizzy off, tellin her Mister Henry'd get awful mad if he found out she wasn't doin her Christian duty with him cuz she was all wore out from doin the Tennessee waltz with me, an here he'd known about it all along, an worse, was blamin me for stoppin, like Mizz Lulabelle's frustrations were all my fault.

I wasn't bein nice enough to Mizz Lulabelle!

Imagine that!

Me, a ninny?

Maybe what I said earlier about husbands not bein to blame I oughta take back!

Wives're worse!

I was betrayed an embarrassed.

Mizz Lulalooselips was a regular telephone-telegraph-tell-a-woman. She had told Mister Henry about Jessarose an me, an then even about me an herself, throwin this new kinda wildness into his ever-smilin pharmacy face.

She told him about her takin me into their bed, an she was lyin like a snake to me all along, but what big difference did it make cuz, turns out—some husband—he had never minded.

So here he was tellin me, the nerve, to get back to servicin his wife to keep her happy, cuz he didn't want her on his back or, worse, even flat on hers.

“Mister Henry's ‘John Henry,’” he said, “is tired a Henryin Missus Henry, you understand?”

I understood all he wanted was a little peace an quiet mixin his booze with all the right colored pills from his own private drugstore.

I wasn't servicin nobody's cranky wife, least a all his, him bein such a worm as a man an nothin like my Daddy, Big Jim O'Hara, was. Shoot! I didn't need goggles to see the writin on that dinin room wall. I may a been a lady-in-waitin for Jessarose, cuz anticipation was so sweet, but I wasn't gonna wait on them pair a bad Apples, him or her, neither one, not anymore.

I packed up the scatter a my letters thrown by that Judas-Priest Lulie, tromped up the stairs past the closed bedroom door where the wife a the house was throwin cosmetic jars on the floor, an up to my room where, for the first time ever really, I threw myself across the bed just like Mizz Sandra Dee an cried my heart out, cuz I was carryin a torch for a wanderin gypsy woman singin *ou-ou baby* an rhythm-an-blues in night spot after night

spot, drivin from town to town, impersonatin Mizz Vivienne Chastaine, cuz some women just have to try on every hat on the shelf, an dress on the rack, before they find the one that suits em as much as fits em. An that makes em happy an who they are.

My Daddy, as I said, played championship accordian an I could hear him singin what I called “The Jessarose Song,” “Moon River,” in my head, clear as a voice from beyond the grave, remindin me there’s such a lot a world to see, even if it’s just outside your own front door. So I got up off the bed an opened the attic window where the chill night a the November air smelled the way it smells the week after Halloween, crisp an smoky from leaves burnin in piles off somewhere across the hibernatin cornfields, an in the backyards a Canterberry where kids were runnin aroun the fires an roastin marshmallows an throwin carved punkins at each other while their folks were drinkin hot cocoa an they were all together outside in the firelight laughin an movin an makin their great shadows rise up against the trees like some ancient tribe whose arrowheads I kept findin down by the crick. The powerful dark a night hit me in the face. I realized if I was ever gonna get roun the bend, with or without my huckleberry friend, to see what my world was, I’d best get up off where I was sittin in my hideaway retreat, where I’d become a Little Sister a the Pinched Face, an make my own way, cuz I knew then what I still know now, an I’ll say again, that I was born an remain, like most folks, one a those people who if anythin good is ever gonna happen to them, they’re gonna have to make their own luck.

ACT 3

THE INN-KEEPER'S TALE

Three weeks later, right before Thanksgiving, in fact, on the very Friday afternoon Mister Kennedy got shot in Dallas, I remember, just like everybody else, where I was exactly.

I was movin outa the Apples with all my clothes an the nearly six thousand dollars I saved workin for them off an on for six years, at fourteen hundred dollars a year, an nearly all the fifteen thousand dollars a my Daddy's death money. I was a rich woman. I was twenty-four-years old, an in one a my plans I was headed toward St. Louis to introduce myself again to the Post Master General to get me the challengin job my Daddy always promised the U. S. Government had waitin for me. An then, real clear as a A-Bomb flash, I knew, if life could be short even for a president, I better go an see if I could find me a good woman, somebody nice like Jessarose, but who wouldn't just up an disappear on me before I could carry her up my red staircase to a heaven a women only.

In my other plan, the one that didn't scare me twice to death, cuz I didn't have to leave Canterbury, the only town I knew where everybody knew me, I walked the mile an a half to my family's big ol boarded-up house an turned the key in the lock an raised the shades an pulled the sheets off the furniture an scrubbed an cleaned till the place felt like home again, even if it was strange with only me in it. I painted the place inside an out, faster an better n any two men, not that I was in a contest, an put up new curtains, so when the stranged Mizz Lulabelle, actin more snotty n snooty the five months since I left, finally dropped by in her red Chevy convertible the next spring afternoon, snoopin in my jonquils an real itchy to get under my skin, an hopin maybe I'd come back to run her house, or at least do her spring clean-in, I revealed, oh yeah, I did, my secret project no one in town knew anythin about. For Mizz Lulabelle an all the world to see, I held up the sign I painted myself, a sign a my decision to stay put an welcome the world to come to me, that said, in green letters outlined in red, ROOMS.

"Surely, Laydia, you're not openin somethin so common as a boardin house," Mizz Lulabelle said in a voice that sounded like a ol biddy's fan openin in a flap. "People will talk."

"People always talk," I said. "You should know."

"John an James send their love," she said.

"How's Mister Henry?"

"Why he's fine."

"Some say otherwise," I said, inferrin, but not referin, to his little cough-syrup problem, an the fact people said he stayed locked in his private office back a the drug-store for hours all by his lonesome, sometimes all night

long, never goin home. "I hope it's not true he sleeps down at the pharmacy," I said. "I care about Mister Henry, oh yeah, I do."

"I'm sure he likes you too, Laydia. When I finally throw him out, perhaps he'll be one a your first guests. Why with the right wallpaper a place like this would look perfect for couples with no luggage."

"Spoke like a expert," I said.

"Will you charge by the night or by the hour?"

I wanted to paste her right on her red lips with my fist, but why tempt fate? My Daddy an Missus Jackie Kennedy an I know fate'll come getcha soon enough anyway without you stickin a knife in your own head. So I ignored her cheap remark which probably ticked her off more anyway.

"I figger if I don't succeed," I said, "I can always go to St. Louis an try again to meet the Post Master General."

"Or beauty school," Mizzerabelle said. She smiled an turned her bleachblond head away so I could see her run her fingertip down the French seam.

In spite a her lip, I still liked Mizz Lulabelle who was one a those sharp tongues who you gotta forgive cuz they can't ever control themselves. So, as I said, I let her slide, as usual, cuz she was mostly more entertainin than she was trouble, although she had been plenty a that for me an could be plenty more without my watchin her two-timin mouth which was always smilin at people, then right away sayin behind their backs what she'd never say to their face, the way she always got in her licks on me.

Grudges are too hard to keep up. Besides likin her, I kinda sympathized with her. For all our mix-n-match

hen fights, she was my friend, me practically growin up in the old Harms-Apple place for so many years.

To say nothin a playin “Miss Vivienne Chastaine Goes to Hollywood” with her for two years.

In a way, she was touchin, an I kinda, sorta did no-kiddin love her.

She actually ran her own household from the November I left, until that April after Mister Kennedy, when she stopped by after she hired on Rosemary Donovan, daughter a Mike an Little Rosemary Donovan, who was called *Little* cuz her own mother, plain Rosemary’s grandma, was *Big Rosemary*, an even though Big Rosemary was dead an gone since 1950, no one could adjust to callin her daughter anythin but *Little Rosemary*. Thankfully, Little Rosemary’s daughter, Big Rosemary’s granddaughter, was simply called *Rosemary*, who, if she was smart, would name her daughter *Kathleen*. That’s the way the litany a names goes in small southern Illinois towns where the tallest thing next to the city water tower is the grain elevator, an then the Catholic church steeple.

Anyway, back at my roomin house, Mizz Lulabelle, findin me that afternoon in the front yard diggin a hole, pulled her roadster up to the curb not botherin to get out. “Laydia,” she said. There was no callin me *Sport* by her. “You been replaced in my house,” she said.

“I already heard,” I said. “Rosemary musta scored a perfect 100 on her book report a the famous Vivienne Chastaine.”

“Rosie’s just sweet sixteen.”

“An never been kissed, I bet. Not till you get your bleachblond claws on her.”

“She’s a girl who likes boys.”

“Lucky for her,” I said. “You won’t expect her to play *Creature from the Black Lagoon* starrin you.”

“I’ve outgrown that unfortunate phase,” Mizz Lulabelle said.

“Then I suppose,” I said, “Ring around the Rosie. It’s Mister Henry’s turn to play.”

“Laydia Spain, you’re such a stitch.” She peered over the door a her car. “Whatchu diggin?”

“A post hole for my ROOMS sign,” I said. “You really are the farmer’s daughter.”

“I’m sure you’ll be an absolute success,” she said, “at runnin a house.” Then she got lah-dee-dah an hoity-toity both. “We’ll see,” she said. “I’m a rich man’s daughter. I’m richer n you. Always have been. Always will be. Money to me is a way a keepin score.”

“I got my Daddy’s money just like you. An I got other money besides. Money I earned which you ain’t never done. So hang that in lights on your scoreboard!”

My Daddy, Big Jim O’Hara, always usta say he wanted to sell Mister Ford two models that’d sell real well: the *Huff* an the *Snit*. Lookin at Mizz Lulabelle fumin at the curb, I knew what he meant, cuz if ever anyone drove off in a huff an maybe a snit too, it was good ol Lulahoops squealin her wheels an layin down tread headin fast out toward the two-lane black-top road that connected to the highway, the expressway, the Interstate, headin everywhere away from home, till all a it became a Texaco map you can never fold up right again, cuz it always gets bigger n the inside a any car, an the wind just wraps it all around you, an towns you never heard a are stickin to your face, an you sorta panic an have to just shove it in a ball into the glove

compartment to get rid a it, cuz you don't want to go way to hell an back like the map wants you to.

She laughs best who laughs last, I thought, hangin out my shingle. "Fail or succeed, here comes mama!" I figgered openin a boardin house to a kinda mixed breed a permanent transients, if I had any luck, Jessarose herself, the very vision, might just walk in from her travelin singin show an sign her autograph on my guest register. I even added a grand piano to go along with my Daddy's ol upright he inherited from Grandma Mary Kate, so Jessarose could lean into the curve a that baby grand an sing "My secret love's no secret anymore" just for me.

In less than a week, I signed on two permanent roomers, leavin three more bedrooms to fill. But I wasn't in a rush. I planned to take my pick. My first roomer was one a those women who was born ol-maid lookin, even though she was no more n thirty-five an a widow who made flowers from crepe paper and luau leis that were all the fad from Kleenex. Her name was Ollie Sikes an I took her in even if she was Christian Scientist an worked Tuesday an Thursday afternoons in their Readin Room. My second was a young man, which caused some people to talk about my female morals, which was a large ha-ha, cuz they never noticed, the way I did, that Roger Kerby, who worked in the hardware department at the Gamble Store, was a bit too much a man's man, which was plenty okay by me, if you catch my meanin. The third, an, oh, did this get em, was a middle-age black man, the formerly famous Reverend Mister Jimmy Banks. He had beautiful processed hair, compliments a Dixie Peach Pomade, an before he was a reverend he played saxophone an conducted his own travelin swing band in the Forties

an on into the Fifties, when his third wife left him, an the bottom fell outa that kinda dancin in the roadhouses an clubs an joints roun about southern Illinois in East St. Louis an in St. Louis, an besides he thought he maybe kinda sorta remembered, the way men can hardly remember any girl's name, when playin substitute a couple times with little bands durin the time he was drinkin, before he stopped, somethin like a girl singer named, he thought, Victoria Cousins.

Everyone in Canterbury was shocked by the recoverin Reverend Mister Jimmy Banks, cuz, Guess Who again, was not only the first to rent across certain unspeakable lines but was also the first in town able, instead a *colored* or worse, to say *black*, like I heard Huntley an Brinkly say every night on the TV six o'clock news. The Reverend Banks was neat as a pin an quiet as could be except the times he asked me ever once in awhile if he could play his sax outside on the upstairs porch, where he sent all the pigeons flyin off in some sky ballet, but never so loud he disturbed my neighbors who told me they liked the sweet lonesome sound, especially at twilight.

By the beginnin a the summer a 1964, my house, that I named O'HARA HOUSE was already earnin me back double the little bit a my Daddy's insurance money I spent fixin the place up.

By that time too everybody in town, except the fat old Missus Sparrow an the even fatter Widow Quinn an the Apples, was callin me *Sport* which took some nifty work on my part, but I did it cuz I wanted to change my name some like I was changin my life an the clothes I was wearin an still make my Daddy happy in memory, so *Sport* it was for Big Jim's little tomboy who was all

grown up, wearin men's bib overalls, lookin kinda fetchin, if I do say so, carin very much how I looked, keepin what figure I had up, an everybody in Canterbury always agreed whoever needed a stupid name like *Laydia Spain* anyway?

When I started out with ROOMS, I knew from the Apples how to scrub an clean a dirty ol house, an when I was done, I knew more n I wanted, an all that I needed, about plumbin an electrical for a rundown ol house. I had trouble believin only men could fit pipes an wire fuse boxes. So I went to Mister Henry's drugstore to buy one a them home improvement magazines, an was sorta shocked to see he had *Playboy*, which I had heard about, splayed right out there like it was no scandal at all aroun town.

Anyway, I looked Mister Henry straight in the eye, darin him to say one single word, an laid down one copy a *Better Homes and Gardens* an one copy a that *Playboy* magazine, cuz my curious side wanted to do a little closer inspection at home alone a the ladies that was in there like no women I'd ever seen before, an that was thrillin to actually study a picture a what might make me shake with desire, instead of a real person, even though I only experimented a couple times, cuz the primped an powdered pin-up Bunnie girls in the magazine weren't truly appealin like the real nudist women I daydreamed about, but mainly cuz lookin at pictures that way is somethin I think women don't have a knack for the way horny boys an dirty ol men do.

Big Jim always wanted me to read, but he never mentioned starin at pictures till your eyes bug out. Anyway, I mail-ordered from *Better Homes* a couple a the do-it-yourself books they advertised. With those books, an

some help buyin tools from Roger Kerby down at the Gamble Store an then especially from Rosemary Donovan's daddy, Mike, who showed me what tools did what, an who kept me from drownin or electrocutin myself until, finally, one day I started in correctin him about a pipe threader an we both had us a good laugh cuz he was a good teacher an I was a good student an we were good together, like friends, mainly cuz he never tried to embarrass me by makin remarks, him bein married, happily married, to Rosemary's mother, Little Rosemary, who had the map a the Catholic part a Ireland on her face.

Needless to say, the young women near my own age, except Rosemary, an some older, except Little Rosemary, thought I was some kinda free-lovin scandal, cuz I never dated boys, except goin to the show with Roger Kerby who knew more about Hollywood n I did, an I showed no sign a gettin married or pregnant in either order, an was, even when I wasn't workin, more n more wearin not men's clothes exactly but clothes like men wore, if you can catch the kinda cute difference, an the other rumor about me havin a vocation an goin away to be a nun was poop. In no way was I joinin a order a tight-wimpled nuns like the Little Sisters, you remember, a the Pinched Face a Jesus who taught me. Say hey! What did I care if they talked about me? Who wants to be ignored? I was workin at becomin a mystery woman just like my missin Jessarose.

As I recall, back about sixth grade, I got real tired a smilin an tryin to kill those ignorant little girls with kindness like Grandma Mary Kate an the nuns said I should so I'd fit in.

I was different so I didn't really exist, not back then at school, not later at the A&P, not anywhere, except in girlie-cue whispers, an a grown-up we kept up

this silent feudin, just like we had in high school an in grade school before that, which is why I've never mentioned any a them little housewives before, cuz who's to mention when everybody's givin everybody the silent treatment never darin to say what they're all feverish thinkin?

Those girls was born housewives an baptized in Clorox.

From kindergarten on up, I acted like a tomboy outlaw. So naturally, all those silly little girls never invited me to their oh so lah-dee-dah birthday parties where they wore dresses they thought made them look like a princess. Arf! Arf! Only if Princess was a dog! Even though their parties were the last place I ever wanted to go, their Goody Two-Shoes act kinda put a chip on my shoulder, which Big Jim recognized early, an warned me someone someday would knock it off, an knock the corners off me too.

That'd be the day!

I'd like to see who an what army!

My Grandma, who carried a Catlicker cross on her shoulder, which is far worse n any carryin any chip, told me more n once that when I was about four, I walked aroun, up an down the wide sidewalk, sassin like a real smarty-pants to everybody who passed, kids an babies an grownups, "I'm rough an I'm tough an I'll beat you all up!"

Grandma Mary Kate cried, acourse. She was a real Niagara Falls about absolutely everythin. She said I, who was supposed to be her pride an joy, made her feel bad, cuz I was scarin the other kids.

An I said, "Good!"

Cuz it was true. I really was rough an tough, had to be, but as I got a little older, I tried to keep it on my inside where nobody could see it show in my eyes, cuz, to tell the truth, I was raised kinda lonely an didn't really want to scare anyone off, especially the girls, an not even the boys cuz I figgered if nothin else I could always be friends with em, like with Rosemary's dad, or like with boys who liked other boys the way I was head over heels for girls. I figgered there had to be boys like that too. It only made natural sense. That's why I rented a room to Roger Kerby who never gave his hand away. Roger told me he was a man's man, an he was, but even more so n people usually mean when they say it.

The only boys I ever played with were my twin second-cousins Brian an Byron. I never played with any girls in grade school, cuz they always laughed an called me "queer beer," which everybody called everybody else at that time anyway, an which they didn't know anymore n me what it meant except that I was different an they knew it as much as I knew it. So it's no big secret I never had much social life in kiddieland.

That's why that first vision a Jessarose Parchmouth, come up from St. Louis that summer when I was fifteen, meant the world to me, like a dream come true, an likewise in her own way Mizz Lulabelle, who had a chip on her shoulder too, except she was rich which made all the difference in her case, an then, real easy, my roomers began to mean so much to me like the Reverend Mister Jimmy Banks, who was between churches, just about like everybody who ever roomed with me was between some job or other, comin from someplace or goin someplace, sometimes not knowin which, sorta stalled, catchin their breath, all a them sleepin alone sawin wood behind their

closed bedroom doors in my big ol house, until one afternoon, when I was standin on my real grand front porch shootin the breeze with Mike Donovan, watchin his younger daughter, Mary Janice, who musta been eight or nine turn the rope on the swing in my big oak, roun an roun, an then sit in it an squeal an laugh when the swing spun aroun faster an faster an she made the last few swings like a rag doll draggin her feet in the dust ready to puke.

What I'm sayin is when you open your house to strangers, hopin to catch one special person who realizes wanderin ain't no home, anythin can happen, cuz the street comes, sure as what the cat dragged in, trackin dirt right up your front steps.

Like who should drive up an park at the curb in front a my place but someone I wouldn'ta expected in a zillion years.

"Ain't that," Mike Donovan said, "Wilmer Fox?"

"Red hair an all," I said, thinkin a Mizz Lulabelle. "In the flesh. Some might say handsome as ever."

"You know about Fox?" Mike Donovan said.

"Acourse I do. That man enters a room gossip-first."

"Okey-dokey, Sport," Mike said. "Forewarned is forearmed." He called to Mary Janice. "Come on, honey. Time to go."

"Thanks for the loan a the wrenches!" I yelled at Mike's back. Without turnin aroun, he waved his hand, that was not bein held by Mary Janice, backwards over his shoulder just as he passed Wilmer Fox come marchin up the walk with his heavy brown Samsonite suitcase.

"Bless us an save us," said Missus O'Davis," I said. "If it ain't the devil hisself." I swear I heard hell's bells ringin all aroun him.

The late afternoon was hot for mid-June, but Wilmer Fox sweat nary a bit. Cool as a cucumber, he was wearin a very chick white linen suit an sportin one a them big-deal Masonic rings a secret brotherhood. His freckled face was peelin with sunburn, an his moustache an his eye-brows an the hair on his head was red an wild as fire. He looked like someone returnin from some great adventure.

“How do you do,” he said. “I’m Wilmer Fox. I understand you have rooms to let.”

I looked over his shoulder at his car. He drove a new 1964 white Volkswagen an he was alone. I had hoped, acourse, to see Jessarose followin him up the steps, cuz folks said she was last sighted—well, maybe—with him, but he didn’t have her in tow the way Mizz Lulabelle lied he kept her parked in his baby blue Lincoln Continental the suppertime he dropped in on the Apples an made applesauce a their marriage.

“Come on in,” I said.

Mizz Lulabelle was gonna die!

“Are you the owner?” he asked.

“Don’t let these dirty jeans fool you,” I said. I was lookin an dressin sporty like Mizz Lee Remick wearin a sweat shirt in *Wild River*. “I may talk odd to some but I ain’t nobody’s maid.”

“Nice, nice!” He set his Samsonite down on the floor an cased the joint. “Nice place you have here.” He surveyed the room. “Nice wallpaper.”

“Whadda you mean by that?” I said, rememberin Mizz Lulabelle’s crack about my wallpaper, like maybe he was talkin in some smart alex code for club members only, an I didn’t know the countersign, an he was still in cahoots with her to put me in my place.

“Nothing,” he said. “The place has a pleasant feel.” He signed the guest register an laid out a crisp fifty-dollar bill which was way more n enough. “May I have, madam, the pleasure of your name?”

Lah-dee-dah!

He stared at me, but real polite, like he wasn’t really starin so much as studyin me, sizin me up to see how maybe he’d play me for a hick.

“Whyn’t you take a picture?” I said. “It’ll last longer.”

“Excuse me,” he said, smilin white teeth shinin through the glow a his red-hair moustache.

Wilmer Fox had spit-shined his salesman version a sex appeal an was easy to like, maybe too easy, easier to like n to trust. He was attractive as the serpent in Eden, so no wonder Mizz Apple fell for him first bite an wanted to eat herself outa house an home. But he was wastin his time tryin to make time with me who was a woman’s woman if ever there was one.

I brushed at my sweatshirt an finger-combed my hair that was cut short that summer into the kinda D-A Doris Day had on one a her thirty-three-an-a-third Columbia Record Club albums that I got for a penny, with eleven others, on a introductory offer, an then I found out I had to buy one long-play record a month for the rest a my life. “I ain’t no ill-repute madam, if that was your joke, but you can call me *Sport*.”

“Okay, Sport.”

I was enjoyin our sparrin, figgerin he didn’t know who I was, with me knowin plenty about him an all, or thinkin like some smart alex I did, cuz even not knowin him exactly, I knew his type.

“Does the room have a shower or a bath?”

“How about a room near the bath?”

“We share?” He said it like findin a hair in the tub was the end a the world or somethin.

“We?” I asked. “How many are you?” I heard that line from the TV late-show movies where I learned more n I ever learned in school.

He looked aroun like the charmin apple-sellin snake he was. “One,” he said.

My heart fell. I was hopin against hope that Jessarose might yet be arrivin, hopin against hope the town gossip about him an her wasn’t true as much as hopin it was, knowin I might have to deal with the rumor my heart had been denyin. All she had to do, no matter who with, was arrive back in town, even half ready an willin, an I’d be able-bodied enough to take it from there.

“Until Friday,” he said, “when Jessie, who always speaks so highly about Canterbury, will be joinin me from St. Louis. If she can get away. All kinds a obligations, you understand.”

Jessie, he called her, familiar, by one a her alias names!

I wanted to kill him.

He had married Jessarose.

An no doubt spoiled her, an so I knew I’d never see her again, at least she’d not appear again the way we were together, not the way she was. She’d be his cloven wife.

“How nice,” I said, pretendin my knees weren’t weak, hatin always hidin any a my true feelins.

Nothin burns a person worse n carryin a torch.

“Your price, I presume, includes bed and breakfast?”

I had to think business quick. None a my roomers had asked me to feed em before. All the regulars had

kitchen privileges so long as they cleaned up after themselves. But hey for hay, oh yeah, I had cooked an baked so long for Mizz Lulabelle an Mister Henry, I could whip up anythin this red-hair travelin salesman wanted, specially if he was bringin Jessarose under any circumstance under my roof at last.

“Breakfast is extra,” I said.

“I expect it should be,” he said. “Well?”

He stared at me an I was starin at how actual flamin red his hair was, an fantasizin about that dead red-head baby boy who’d be almost eight by now, an about seein Jessarose, more n I was thinkin about addin in breakfast.

“What is it?” Wilmer asked.

“What is what?” I snapped to.

“What is breakfast? I was told you’re one a those new bed-and-breakfast establishments everyone in St. Louis is saying are so comfortable up here.”

“Breakfast is anythin you want.”

“Sounds a bit vague, but accommodatin.” He winked, tryin his tomcat charm.

“Not if you know what you want,” I said, winkin my left eye back twice.

He leaned in close to me, smilin, almost nose to nose, smellin a Dentine chewin gum. “I’m giving you a gift,” he said. “I’m giving you a free introductory gift to the Wilmer Fox Thought-of-the-Month Club. I’m giving you a piece of my mind.”

“You sure you got enough to give away?”

“I like you,” he said.

An, against my better judgment, the feelin was instinct mutual, so I played him like a catfish on my line. “What’s tomorrow?” I tried divertin his constant flirtin,

which was almost as much a tick as Mister Henry's always clearin his throat, but I must admit I liked him. He made everybody like him. That wasn't just his job. It was his callin in life. He made dollar signs rise in my eyes.

"Tomorrow's Thursday," he said.

"Thursday breakfast is usually..."

"I bet you got some sweet, sweet sugar hid in your cupboard."

Some comments, considerin the source, I always chose to ignore.

"We're now startin to offer breakfast just like you picture in *Better Homes*, a which this is definitely one. *And Gardens*, a which we got one too in my big yard that comes with the room."

"Of course," he said. He picked up his suitcase. "Which is my room?"

"Number two. The one at the top a the stairs on your left."

He started toward the staircase where I about broke the bank installin a beautiful red carpet. The bright sunlight from the screen door spilled into my hall, hit the carpet, bounced, an lit him in a blaze a the rosy-red glory I figger Mizz Lulabelle remembered him in, like everybody who is memorized just kinda glows like little "Ready Kilowatt," the lightnin-bolt drawin mascot on the monthly bills for the Central Illinois Light Company.

"I know who you are," I said.

"Of course, you do," he said. "I signed your register."

"No," I said. "I really know you..."

"I doubt it."

"...an I know Mizz Lulabelle, an I know Jessarose."

He broke into a big grin, fakin, I know, that salesman fakery, pretendin like some comic-strip light bulb

come on over his red head. "Laydia Spain," he said. "I should've known. I've heard so much about you. Only you could've opened an inn with so much atmosphere."

In a shine-on-harvest-moon instant, somethin genuine in him connected to somethin needy in me, an he changed, with a clever twist a words, my roomin house into a inn talkin sweet to me in a voice that sounded ever more like easy money.

"I'm not *Laydia Spain* anymore," I said, wantin him to know, smart as he was, he was about two steps behind in three-quarter time, so's he'd know I was over him about everythin.

"Like I said before, everybody calls me *Sport* now."

"Okay, Sport!" He set his Samsonite down an walked toward me. Lord!

It was almost like Big Jim talkin, except Wilmer Fox was younger n a strappin thirty-five at most, an I liked him, so I walked him into the kitchen where the big-faced clock was almost at five exactly, an poured us both two fingers a Ol Grand Dad which he seemed to like so I poured him another. I figgered if Jessarose went an got herself a catch, her groom might as well be someone as colorful an outgoin as Wilmer Fox, an I could see why with his personality bein so different from Mister Henry Apple's that Mizz Lulabelle was ticked off she got stuck in the sticks with the cautious Mister Apple when she really wanted the wiley travelin Mister Fox whose easy charms somehow slipped through her hands.

As for me, I was up bright an early next mornin paintin in under ROOMS two new words, BED & BREAKFAST. I knew in my bones Wilmer Fox was gonna bring me money or luck or both, an if he only brought me Jessarose, even for one single kiss, I'd die a happy

woman, right on the spot, an then I went into my gold-en-yellow kitchen so pleased with the fresh June morn-in streamin in the east windows, an so satisfied with myself, I scrambled Wilmer Fox up a breakfast so fine he'd never forget it, an I had Rosemary Donovan help serve him biscuits with gravy too, this bein one a her days off from Mizz Lulabelle who I was gonna phone up aroun noon an wake her up an tell her that Mister Guess Who was back in town an signed in on my guest register!

Needless to say, Mizz Lulabelle harbored mixed emotions over the return a Wilmer Fox an to make a long phone conversation short, first she said, "Shoot!" Then she groaned, "That sonuvabitch!" Then she shouted somethin yours-truly will not repeat into the receiver an like to broke my eardrum. That was my Mizz Lulahoop, ready at a minute's notice, even after four years with hardly a word from him, to start anglin for Wilmer hook, line, an sinker, all the while tore up halfway between revenge an lust for him, which is exactly the primrose path where I wanted her, cuz with her jukin up Wilmer's time I might get to make some time with Jessarose who I hadn't seen in almost seven years, cuz if love has a shelf-life, the expiration date was nearin, even if you keep repeatin: "If it takes forever, I will wait for you.

But no Mizz Lonelyhearts back then coulda told Mizz Lulabelle or me that you can't carry a torch all your life.

Not as long as Mizzy Lu didn't have Wilmer an I didn't have Jessarose.

Some torches just don't burn out.

My head can't tell you *why* anymore n my heart.

Some torches just smolder over a long time like paint rags till, boom, spontaneous combustion! An your

house an your woman's body are just plain burnin down from passion unrequite.

I figger when someone you know comes back, especially absence makin the heart grow fonder, when you loved em all along, it makes as much sense to fall all over again in love with em back on the scene as any a those enchanted evenin musical movies where you're supposed to believe you can fall in love at first sight with a stranger new in town.

"I'll be right over," Mizz Lulabelle said. "Soon as I bathe an do my nails an hair an fix my face."

"See you roun Christmas then," I said.

Mizz Lulabelle was so crazy she coulda got a job at a mental institution as *Exhibit A* on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Wilmer sat comfortable at my breakfast table talkin to Rosemary, charmin her with blarney stories the way he couldn't resist charmin every female he met, except acourse me, who could see his charms were the usual cock-an-bull a the travelin salesman. Wilmer was still pushin Hoover vacuum cleaners, upright an canister models, along with the black rubber belts an brushes an throw-away dirt bags.

"That's the one thing to remember when you grow up and get married," he said to Rosemary. "The Hoover's the only patented upright that 'Beats As It Sweeps As It Cleans.' That's our motto. Most Hoovers last longer than most marriages. You'd be amazed how many widows I call on still have the first Hoover their husbands ever gave them."

"I'm sure," I said, "that Rosemary appreciates your words to live by and she'll tell Paul McCartney when she marries him what she wants for her weddin present."

“He’s my favorite Beatle,” Rosemary said.

“Run along now,” I said. “An take that wrench back to your daddy for me, will you?”

Rosemary’s face fell. “Crymanetly,” she said. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay, Rosie,” Wilmer said.

“So she’s *Rosie* already,” I said, tryin to remain good-natured, him gettin familiar with her so fast. Did he have to flirt an tomcat with every female in town? I called after Rosemary, “Hey, Rosie-Posey, here’s your hat. What’s your hurry? Don’t let the screen door hit you.”

Rosemary laughed. Wilmer laughed. I laughed. We all goddam laughed. Then we were alone, Wilmer an me.

“You’re somethin else, Sport,” he said, an I knew he knew what he meant, an I knew that he had a certain respect for me, cuz he knew why I didn’t cotton to his bull.

I could tell he wanted to have what he could only have thought a as a Edward R. Murrow person-to-person talk.

“Might you pour us some of that fine Ol Grand Dad whiskey?”

“I can an I will.”

“You really are a sport, Sport.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Because I like any stiff, going stag or doe, who likes what I like.”

I figgered I knew what he meant. It wasn’t no smart remark. It was like some secret code about secret love. It was just Wilmer’s way a identifyin we not only were both likin women, we had attachments to the same two women. Him bein a male, an me bein otherwise wise, we neither a us was a threat to the other, cuz we offered the objects a our affection, as we used to say, different slices

a life. That's how we became, sorta, unbespoke fast accomplices if not fast friends, cuz he needed me to use him to get us both what we wanted.

"*A votre sante*," Wilmer said, slammin the whiskey back.

I drank mine slowly in one long steady stream that ran like pleasant hot fire down my throat.

Wilmer pushed hisself back from the breakfast table an stood up straight an tall. He was built lean an hard without a trace a fat under his fair freckled skin. Remember I was still only twenty-five that summer an he was maybe thirty-five, almost the same age as Mister Henry, an Mizz Lulabelle was almost thirty-two, with John an James turnin seven, runnin aroun screamin "Great big gobs a greasy grimey gopher guts," an makin their Protestant First Communion, go figger, dressed up in special-order white suits with short pants, which, all told, made Jessarose still no more n about twenty-seven, my cinnamon girl, always comin to mind when Mizz Roberta Flack'd came on the radio singin "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" an especially "Jessie, Come Home," both on my permanent Top Ten.

I felt I'd carried my torch long an patient enough, livin on the sweetsweetsweet memories a that summer with Jessarose seven years before, an the time was come to do somethin, cuz even girls born to like girls like to save themselves for marriage just like girls born to like boys, but enough was enough an I was gonna get myself married to Jessarose or know the reason why an Wilmer be damned, an I'd help damn him in ways I couldn't think a yet to get him outa my way, cuz I knew he really wanted who he had come back for, an that was Mizz Lulabelle, even if he didn't know it, an I was intendin to make that

perfectly clear to both a them without so much as lettin anybody catch on I was noodlin them an their Hollywooden Vine destinies.

I had what my Daddy called *grit*. I was bound an determined. An why not? As I said before, I'll say it again, cuz some people, who don't get it, are the very ones who don't know they need to know, that sometimes life's big secrets sound like fortune cookies. I long ago knew, an I'll keep sayin it, cuz the magic in the power a positive thinkin is the positive repeatin, that I was one a those persons who if anythin good is ever gonna happen to them, they got to make it happen themselves, even if it is temptin fate.

The only wild card was Mister Henry.

He had to somehow be gotten outa the playin hand.

So there coulda been, an maybe shoulda been, a murder committed that woulda set Canterberry on its ear, but there wasn't. What there was instead was a very clarifyin Fourth a July party I threw at my place. Everybody who was anybody was there an so were some interestin nobodies, which took care a Mister Henry an just about everybody else, except Jessarose Parchmouth whose arrival Wilmer expected any day, any hour, any minute, an whose absence I just simply dared not question for fear a crossin my lucky stars.

ACT 4

THE SALESMAN'S WIFE'S LOVER'S TALE

Wilmer Fox, it turned out, played a mean piano. In the two weeks from his arrival on the twenty-first a June, 1964, the first day a summer, the day after my twenty-fifth birthday, right before the Fourth a July, he had fast become the playin partner a the Reverend Mister Jimmy Banks toodlin on his sax. Together they were better n almost anybody on the radio. The Reverend played a bluesy melody line on his sax an Wilmer sittin at the keyboard tickled his way underneath an around it till his left hand was kickin out a back beat an his right hand was playin the same staccato chord way up on the eighty-eight makin rock 'n' roll come outa my Grandma Mary Kate's upright Steinway that sounded like Jerry Lee Lewis hisself.

You coulda knocked me out with a feather why so many a the girls I grew up with showed up with their fiancés or husbands, carryin covered dishes an picnic

baskets full a white cloth napkins an silverware an china plates, along with brown paper bags filled with fireworks to amuse the excited kids who marched like stairsteps behind them.

Curiosity, I guess, killed the cats, an over-powered their sniffiness. The presence a Wilmer Fox at my house, charmin everybody in town, helped more than a parade, I think, to interpret me somehow so they could understand at least as far out as their headlights could see. God only knows how Wilmer Fox sold me cleaner than a Hoover vacuum. His endorsement meant those folks could tell I wasn't gonna go away. So I suppose they felt safe, an maybe newly important in bein newly informed, stayin out on my big lawn where they looked very beautiful strollin aroun in their summer dresses from Monkey Wards, standin an talkin an pointin at my new up-grade sign that said O'HARA INN on one big line an ROOMS BED & BREAKFAST on the lines below it. The music an the paper decorations a Mizz Ollie Sikes an the lemonade an the tall cool liquor kinda went to everybody's head an before long couples started dancin on the porch to the piano a Wilmer Fox an the sax a the Reverend Jimmy who'd invited at least half dozen a his former band up from St. Louis for the occasion. In my heart a hearts an my head a heads, acourse, I fantasized the Reverend Jimmy woulda had a girl singer with his band an she'd lean against the piano an sing Mizz Doris Day's "Gonna Take a Sentimental Journey," an she'd be, acourse, nobody else n Jessarose.

So hoo-ha an hooray for Hollywood!

For the first time ever, Guess Who was throwin her first real party, almost not even knowin it, till it was goin full steam, an people was speakin to me who never had

before, cuz they thought runnin the only inn in Canterbury just showed what a good head for business I had, an that's why I never had time for dates an wasn't interested in frilly clothes. They made the inn the excuse for me they needed. Wilmer had told half the husbands an half the wives, that my place, for starters, was a charmin place where they could store outa-towner in-laws who insisted on visitin. Suddenly I was a option. They congratulated me on bein a full-fledged businesswoman. Maybe Mizz Lulabelle was right. Money did seem to be a way some folks kept score. Be that as it may, I knew that this was gonna be the first time one a my parties hit the social pages a *The Canterbury Herald* listin all the folks who showed up at my place, an I'da given my eye teeth to have had my Daddy out there on the porch, playin his accordion, as long as, God forgive me, he never played his championship rendition a "Lady of Spain."

Inside the house, a crowd gathered in the kitchen, a all places, an I had to josh an jostle my way to get from my sink to the icebox an back. Naturally, with her back smack up against the Frigidaire, Mizz Lulabelle was holdin court, avoidin Wilmer who was showin off at his red hot piano an flirtin with every female who sashayed by or stopped to listen. He was ignorin Mizz Lulabelle with all a his might. Both a them playin, don'tcha know, too hard to get.

For herself, Mizzy Lu was just gabbin an laughin an shriekin too loud like someone whose brain's slightly cracked by love an whose heart is almost gone with the mind. She was lip-stickin Marlboro filter tips an drinkin Coke an vodka an rattlin her bracelets doin one a her bleachblond Vivienne Chastaine actress acts, all a which I knew so well.

Everybody told her she reminded them a Mizz Marilyn Monroe, an I said, “Dead or alive?”

Mizzy Lu said, “What difference does it make? Three days dead, Laydia, I’ll still look better n you right now.”

Acourse, everybody laughed, includin me. I figger if you’re not your own best punch line, then you’re the butt end a somebody else’s wisecrack, which is why I’m tellin you all these tales from a wayside inn about me an these jokers in the first place, cuz life ain’t no big mystery. Life’s just from first to last a big joke too few crack.

I coulda cared less what Mizz Lulabelle an Wilmer, tryin to be so cool, did to avoid each other, or what Mister Henry did to avoid em both. All I cared about was for everybody to change partners an dance. An I wondered where the hay was Jessarose Parchmouth Fox, cuz no matter what songs say about waitin for someone from here to eternity, even I, believe it or not, despite my protestin too much to the contrary, have a end to my patience. I hated feelin like that. I sounded like my Grandma Mary Kate usta sound when I stayed out too late: “Even I have a end to my patience,” she’d scream like she was some kinda saint at the breakin point. But worse, I hated feelin jealous an possessive. Jessarose would be the first one to say I had no strings on her. But worst was my feelin a longin for her.

Love hurts. Not bein loved back hurts worse.

Anyway, our impossible foursome situation was all too much to think about with seventy people swarmin all over the place an the firecrackers soundin like shots an I wondered how Missus Jackie Kennedy could handle this first Fourth a July after Dallas, cuz I know when

she started climbin outa that car with Mister Kennedy's brains on her pink suit, that she wasn't the way the news said, tryin so noble to help the secret service agent into the car. She was doin what anybody would naturally do in a car like that. She was jumpin out to save her own skin. She was a survivor. An that was okay by me if she was gun-shy, cuz if you don't save your own skin, nobody else will save it for you.

With all that mob runnin through my yard, settin on the porch, an invadin every room in my house, starin like it was Monticello or somethin, I said, thank God for Eustacia Rule who was helpin me out. She was my Daddy's cousin, cuz her mother, Caroline, was the sister a my Daddy's pop, so I don't know what that made her to me exactly, but since she was the mother a Brian an Byron, who everybody called my second cousins, she counted for a lot as one a my few remainin relatives. She was that summer about forty-five, cuz she was twenty when Brian an Byron were born, an they were the same age as me, which meant they finally stopped waggin their weenies at me some years before an we all a sudden became friends, especially Byron an me.

Eustacia's husband, Alfred, had been killed when Brian an Byron were eleven. Alfred was thirty when he died two days after he fell off the top a loaded hay wagon. *Slid off* is more like it, an slid butt first right down the long wood handle a the pitch fork. I swear to God this is true, cuz it tore through his ol Can't Bust 'Em bib overalls an run way up so far there was nothin Doctor Lawler could do, that bein back in the mid-spring a 1950, May 14, to be exact, except give him morphine for two days till he died a internal injuries to say the least. Honest,

you can look it up in *The Canterbury Herald* which is a record a the strangest things in the history a mankind.

Sometimes I think small towns have more laundry to air than large towns, or maybe in small towns you just hear about everybody's dirty laundry more, cuz everybody's somehow related or at least knows everybody else's business, which brings me to the point a talkin about good ol Eustacia Rule, or I should say, one a her twins, my second cousin Byron.

Now Big Jim usta say there were only two sure things in life: death an taxes. He also said that polite people never talk about politics or religion. With all due respect, as I have grown up, I wonder what's left you can talk about with folks an still be interestin? The one sure thing about death, besides it happenin, is that everybody connects it with religion, an sometimes politics if they want you to go off an maybe die in a war. An taxes are surely politics; but the worst topic in the world, acourse, is sex.

I mean that's so bad my Daddy or my Grandma Mary Kate woulda never thought a tellin me not to talk about sex. The thought would never have occurred to them or to Eustacia Rule, who looked so brave an pained at my Fourth a July picnic, that I knew with good ol Eustacia it was either death or taxes, probably death, but not sex.

I was wrong.

I'd slipped from the crowded kitchen into the pantry an found her standin among the canned goods an sweet onions like her heart would break with the party swimmin all aroun us hidden away from all them good-time Charlies.

"Stacia," I said. "What's the matter, darlin?"

She couldn't stop sobbin like she was havin a breakdown an I had to pull her to me an hold her an stroke her hair an say one a the world's kinder lies, "There, there. It'll be alright," cuz what else can you say to anyone, man, woman, or child, except those words when their breathin is choked with tears an their breath comes only in gasps?

Nothin makes anybody feel more helpless n when somebody cries, especially when that somebody is somebody you never figgered would break down that much, like Eustacia, who had cried fourteen years before when Mister Pieschl, the mortician, closed the lid a Alfred's casket at the Funeral Home, an then she cried again when they started lowerin Alfred into his grave an she threw herself across his casket like Mizz Susan Kohner, passin for white, threw herself across her black mother's coffin in *Imitation of Life* which I already mentioned I saw. But as soon as Mister Pieschl told Brian an Byron, who were just boys, an a couple a men to pull their mother back up outa the grave where their daddy's casket was down already nearly a foot, Eustacia Rule stood up with the help a her sons, dusted herself off, wiped her eyes, got a grip, an never cried in front a anybody again, an nobody ever made mention at all about her bein for one minute crazy-unable to part with her husband who died so awful, so young, everyone said, an so handsome just like his identical twin sons, Brian an Byron.

What could be worse n her Alfred dyin from bein impaled on the handle of a pitch fork stumped me. The music outside an the fireworks an the singin an laughter sounded muffled inside that pantry an worlds away from the pain in Eustacia Rule's heart.

“What is it, Eustacia?”

Through her wadded up white linen hanky, she sobbed, “I can’t tell anyone.”

“You can tell me.”

She raised her head from my shoulder and looked me straight in the eye. “You’re the only one I think I can tell,” she said and flew into another fit of tears.

“What is it? Nobody’s died, so it can’t be all that bad.”

“Well,” she bid for time against what she had to unload, “Well, well, well.”

“Well *what?*” I wanted to shake her, or maybe slap her the way hysterical people get slapped in the movies, but I remembered she had a permanent bridge holdin up her four upper front teeth from when Alfred had hit her once.

“It’s Byron,” she said.

“What about him?”

She blurted it out. “I’m afraid he’s like those kinda people downtown in St. Louis.”

“What kind?” I asked, knowin full well what kind, the kind that Mister Henry an Mizz Lulalips called “Your kind,” meanin my kind, which was amazin to me, cuz everytime one of these upstandin citizens took a look aroun em, there we were, our kind, scarin em just bein what we were born to be, poppin up like spooks in a fun house, their sons an daughters an nephews an nieces an uncles an aunts an even mamas an daddies an grandpas an grandmas an on an on. “What kind?” I repeated.

“Those sissy men who....You know.”

“You know somethin about Byron?” I asked.

“Brian told me.”

The rat!

“What’s Brian know?” I asked. “He can’t even add up his own football scores!”

“He says twins know everythin about each other, an he says he knows that he an Byron aren’t exactly identical anymore.”

Years later, when I was wiser to the ways a the world an analyzin my dream vision, I understood how Eustacia thought them tacky men draggin themselves up as the worst a women was, when you really thought about it, as degradin to women as blackface was to Blacks. But back then, Guess Who knew next to nothin a the secret codes a secret love. So I decided to plead Byron’s case. Frankly, I’d always liked him better than Brian. His full name was *Byron James Rule*. The *Byron* was for Lord Byron of Missolonghi, because Eustacia was a English teacher at Canterbury High School, an the *James* was for my Daddy, Big Jim, but I liked his name, *Byron James*, even more cuz it was James Dean’s first an second names reversed like in a mirror, *James Byron Dean*, which was all a coincidence, cuz none a us buried deep in south-central Illinois really even heard a James Dean before the day he was killed in that car crash an became more famous dead n he ever was alive, just like everybody hopes they will be.

“You don’t know it’s so,” I said. “Brian could be mistaken.”

“I’d die,” Eustacia Rule said. “I’d just die if my son was one a those people downtown.”

“Have you asked Byron?”

“I asked him,” Eustacia said.

“What’d he say?”

“He said he wasn’t one of those people downtown.”

“There,” I said. “That should satisfy you.”

That Byron always was a clever one.

Acourse he wasn’t one a those fruit baskets downtown in St. Louis.

He never went to St. Louis.

He was like me an Roger Kerby. He stayed home tryin to figger things out, the way people do when they know they’re different, like how bein a man’s man or a ladies’ man means somethin different dependin always who’s sayin it. Like a woman’s woman. Or like a ladies’ woman. Whyn’t you never hear that?

“Go fix your face,” I said to Eustacia. “Stop jumpin to conclusions. Even if Byron is somethin like Brian thinks he is, then you still don’t have to kill yourself, cuz it’s not your fault. It’s no one’s fault an it’s not the worst thing in the world. It’s just one a the most private, an some folks even fancy it. There’s more secret love goin aroun n anyone ever imagines.”

“You’re so wonderful, Sport, especially talkin about sin, an this is such a wonderful shebang, I don’t want to be a party-pooper an ruin it by cryin, but you’re the only one who could understand.”

I wanted to ask what she meant by that, but I guess I knew she knew I knew what was a sin an what wasn’t.

“When the twins were seven, goin on eight,” Eustacia said, “I was holdin em both in my lap, an I said, I don’t want you to ever grow up, an Byron said, ‘I don’t want to grow up. I don’t want to die.’”

“Oh, Stacia,” I said.

“Brian,” Eustacia said, “just got down off my lap an walked away.”

One a her twin boys remained, an one twin boy kinda disappeared.

“Is Byron here yet?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “He’s home finishin up a English paper for the summer course he’s takin over at MacMurray College. He’s comin over later for the fireworks display.”

A all the people I liked, or, rather loved, the two best, Byron an Jessarose, was neither of em present an accounted for, so my big house still felt empty even with all the party-goers.

“Rest assured,” Eustacia said. “Byron’s on his way.”

“That’s real good, honey,” I said. “An Brian?”

Jeez, Louise! Why did I ask?

Eustacia fell into my arms an started blubberin all over me again, this time, God help us, cuz Brian it seems was three months along the road to fatherhood without benefit of a weddin, an the mother, Kathleen Jones, was the closest thing to the town pump since Mizz Lulabelle herself was a teenager. So you didn’t need the Pink Panther to figger out that good ol Brian, in trouble hisself, decided to kick up some dust for his twin to head off some a his mother’s blame from him an the pregnant Mizz Jones.

I, Sport O’Hara, right then an there in my pantry, crossed my heart an hoped to die if I didn’t punch Brian in the face an black his eye with a beaut of a major-league shiner the St. Louis Cardinals would approve, with ol Harry Carey announcin.

Someone started bangin on the pantry door wantin sugar to whip into the cream for the strawberry shortcake. Eustacia finally stopped cryin, provin there is a intermission, if not a bottom, to every show a sad-

ness. I took her by the arm back into the kitchen to keep her busy shakin out Jello molds an bravely scoop-in potato salad.

“Whatchu two been doin?” Mizz Lulabelle asked, breakin free a her circle a admirers.

“None a your beeswax,” I said.

“I bet you been playin,” she whispered in her ol sexy voice, “Someone’s in the Kitchen with Dinah.”

“You want,” I said, “a fat lip, a knuckle sandwich, or a mouthful a bloody Chicklets?”

“Isn’t Eustacia a little old for you?” she asked.

“What’s gettin old,” I said, “is your act.”

“Act?” She touched her bleachblond beehive hairdo, runnin her fingers down her French seam. “Act? Act?” Her hands started their famous flutter aroun her breasts where finally they landed. “Act? What act?”

“Whyn’t you, Mizz Chastaine, go see about Mister Henry,” I said.

“Mister Henry,” she said, “is havin hisself a fine time with Rosie Donovan.”

“Why, since Wilmer started it, is everybody all a sudden started callin that Rosemary child, *Rosie*?”

“Why’s everybody call you *Sport*?” Mizz Lulabelle grinned.

“Cuz I told em to,” I said.

“Bingo!” Mizz Lulabelle said. “Have you asked Rosemary lately what she wants to be called?”

“I have not,” I said.

“You think you’re so free, white, an twenty-one,” Mizz Lulabelle said, “an you don’t even look beyond your nose which you should start powderin. She may be *Rosemary* when she works at your house, but she’s *Rosie* when she works at mine takin care of Mister Henry. Get the

picture?" Mizzy pinched my cheek between her thumb an forefinger, sayin: "That's as good as rouge."

"Take your hands off me," I said.

"Touchy! Touchy!" Mizz Lulabelle said. "You forget, Laydia, at twenty-six or seven or..."

"Twenty-five."

"...whatever you are, you're an old bag compared to Rosie. She's growin up."

"She's only sixteen," I said.

"How time flies when you're not dead," Mizzy Lu said.

"Rosemary's a innocent," I said.

"As I tell my borin husband when I remind him to buy me presents, cheap goods have little value."

Her face was open for a sucker punch. I made my move: "Aren't you angry she's flirtin with Mister Henry?"

"Why should I care who distracts him? I'm on a fox hunt, an before this night is over, well, you'll see. Where there's a Wilmer, there's a way."

Oh, brother! The evenin was lovely, but everythin was all mixed up. Mister Henry wanted Rosemary an didn't want Mizz Lulabelle who wanted Wilmer Fox who showed no interest in her cuz he spited her as much as he wanted her an besides he was married to the amazin invisible lady, Jessarose, who I wanted all the while Brian was waltzin on the front porch with the pregnant Kathleen Jones an Byron was off in some library probably starin at pictures a naked Greek athletes in some ol book while Eustacia Rule, feelin much better, thank you, with a sweatin pitcher a lemonade an ice cubes, was makin the rounds on the porch, refillin the Ol Fashion glasses a the Reverend Mister Jimmy Banks an his band a renown, which Sue Ellen Breed was tryin to join by singin

her very own dyin-soprano rendition a Judy Collins' "I've Looked at Love from Both Sides Now," which I know she hadn't a true clue about, an Mister Jimmy Banks was tryin to ease her off, cuz people were snickerin, when Wilmer just up an said, "Sue Ellen, honey, on this piano I can play on the white keys or I can play on the black keys, but you're singin between em in the cracks." That acourse set Mizz Lulablitz off, cacklin, an Wilmer Fox moved on up even more in the estimation a every girl in Canterbury who'd ever had to listen polite to Sue Breed committin mutiny on the high C's singin behind her adenoids.

I needed to collect myself.

I walked off from my house, alive with music an lit real pretty with some a the Chinese lanterns already turned on in the late afternoon, an I thought about all a us, an about me strollin across my yard past all those happy guests singin an laughin like there was no tomorrow. I ducked in under the white river-birch branches a the shade trees my Daddy planted years ago all the way aroun my lot line, an stood hidden, solo, still as one a the Indians who usta live here, among the tall-necked calla lilies an the fragrant lilac bushes under the trees, watchin all the people at the party, each a them thinkin, just like I was thinkin, just like everybody always thinks, that ourselves alone, an nobody else, is who the world revolves aroun, an so we'll never die, so long as we hold on to some unattainable dream, when in truth the world revolves aroun nothin but the sun, a fact we forget until someone like Mizz Lulabelle comes revolvin along, whinin an wantin everythin for herself who is the world's biggest baby, to remind us that nothin, least a all bein young an quiet an satisfied more or less, lasts forever.

Oh, oh, oh! How I wanted to prove Mizz Lula wrong.

The afternoon a that glorious Fourth was slippin slow toward a long red sunset that'd be followed by a long twilight made ever so much longer by everyone's anticipation a the fireworks display to come when the summer night was totally dark except for the stars an the Apple twins, John an James, leadin the kids runnin across the lawn with hot sparklers, an, for a moment, I wanted to hold them all so dear to my heart, an never forget any a the sounds an sights an smells a any of em, cuz they all was a vision.

People I hardly knew were dancin on my porch with people I loved, an I was hostess to a party that just happened to come spontaneously alive, cuz I think that's the way everythin is best, givin everybody their head, their time, their pace, up till acourse, all us fools we mortals be, miss our moment, an we have to take care a each other, cuz everyone who stumbles must collide.

You can plan an plan to make things happen for yourself the way I had planned to arrange everythin in my life to wait for Jessarose, but all the wishin an hopin, an all the power a positive thinkin, make hardly any difference to anybody but yourself, cuz life is mostly just a fast-rushin roulette chance like my Daddy bein in the wrong intersection at the wrong time.

Could I really make the magical act ever happen? Could I ever make the vanishin lady reappear? Could all my future be past? I wouldn'ta been the first disappointed Hallmark Card lover who has pined away over a beloved who was long gone an not even probably really interested. Guess Who actually began to doubt herself out there on the edge a the lawn standin alone shrouded in the fragrant greenery a honeysuckle an

wisteria. Take a picture, I always said to folks, it'll last longer. But what lasts longest, a picture or a vision? I was experiencin visual uncertainty in my heart a hearts an my head a heads. I was doubtin I could much longer hold my focus, cuz while absence makes the heart grow fonder, outa sight is outa mind, an Vivienne Chastaine never waited for anyone.

Jessarose, I realized, must be, like me, a different person after so much time, but, like all the advice colum-nists say, nobody changes, especially if you marry them. So if two people are separated, cuz one a them was settled an one was a traveler, maybe if those people are lucky, they change in the same way at the same speed toward the same direction, an then what happens is bigger n both a them.

Things bein simple star-crossed what they are, an double-star-crossed when you're girl-to-girl, you get philosophical. First you're born. Then you die. Just like taxes you can't do much about your beginnin or your endin. But I got to believe that you get a chance, one fair chance at least, against all the bad chances an worse breaks, in that brief season between your birth an your dyin, when the enchanted summer night smiles, just like in the movies, an lets you take your life in your hands, an use all your big plans, if you only just don't lose your nerve, or your envisionin certainty, at the last moment an stumble an collide.

My Daddy always said my angel mama, who he married on July 12, the hottest day of 1938, always told him you gotta be ready an keep your eyes on the summer sky, cuz your lucky stars' risin an convergin all depend on you to make even the smallest magic you need come true.

Maybe your only chance only happens once.

You gotta always be ready, an if you're very, very lucky, you're in the right place at the right time.

You gotta cross your fingers, envision in the picture a your vision, an you gotta keep on keepin on.

An even if the bigger picture seems outa control, you still have to believe your vision all makes sense somehow, otherwise you end up hatin everythin an everybody like my Grandma Mary Kate O'Hara.

For instance, Eustacia's confession about Byron was no Harvey Wallbanger surprise to me, cuz Byron an I had got to be friends six years before durin the summer we were both almost eighteen. I mean, I mighta been carryin a torch for Mizz Invisible Jessarose, an maybe even livin from letter to letter from her, an there weren't many a those durin those years, an they was postcards more n they was letters anyway, comin from places in New Orleans and Florida with pictures a stuff like the Cypress Gardens everglades I knew I'd never see where girls in white bathin suits stood on the shoulders a young men on water skis all the time wavin. None a those postcards havin so much as a return address, an all a em sayin the same thing in her Palmer Method ballpoint handwritin, "Havin a wonderful time! Wish you were here!" An my vision kinda slipped when I looked squinty-eye at the postcards an I started readin her message as "Havin a time! Wish you were wonderful!"

Miss Lulabelle said, "If Jessarose thought you was wonderful, she'd be here, not everywhere else, an not with Wilmer Fox." She was as glad Jessarose was gone from me as she was mad Jessarose was with the man she was all mixed up in her feelins about, lovin him an hatin him for her crazy lovin his cheatin heart.

But Jessarose herself? Ah! She was wonderful an more n just the way all missin persons are remembered as wonderful. In my heart a hearts, oh yeah, she was grown fonder, cuz that woman just simmered with somethin that no matter if it was outa sight was never outa mind.

“Look up at the moon, anytime,” she wrote, “an I’ll be seein you sure as you’ll be seein me.” An I’d stare up at the moon, with visual certainty, till the moonglow burned white into my eyes.

Her words a special friendship made me strong the way my Grandma Mary Kate always said, “Self-control strengthens character more n promises or threats, but threats do work.” So I couldn’t let myself grow bitter, cuz even then I was already developin the visions a Jessarose Parchmouth as a young girl, an they was my way a thinkin a her an touchin myself, where she had touched me, that burned me down, like a house afire, right flat to the smolderin groun.

Don’t get me wrong. I had plenty a self-control, but I wasn’t no Little Sister a the Pinched Face sittin at home alone as I told you. Mizz Lulabelle, the local Bitter Queen, made fun a me not cattin aroun. She said she was very modern an that the only women waitin for sex was the married ones waitin at home. Waitin may a been my pure ideal, but it didn’t mean I couldn’t an didn’t live my life day by day however I wanted. I tried all the worse things kids try when they monkey-fy adults. I swore an I smoked an I drank an I drove fast. So when Byron asked me out, not on a date at all, just out like friends, we went for a drive in his truck, which proved it wasn’t a date cuz girls wouldn’t date in anythin less n a car in 1958. We tooled through the Steak an Shake which is somethin I’d always

wanted to do with a boy at least once, an then we drove out to park at Rainbow Lake, but not where all the kids go to mess aroun an stuff, cuz we wanted to talk.

That night seems a long way before the world-famous Fourth a July party, 1964, an we both climbed into the back-bed a his truck an stretched out on his sleepin bag from when he was a Boy Scout. I remember likin the outdoors pattern a the mallard ducks an huntin dogs that repeated on the bag's inside which he opened up double wide so we could lay on it with our necks restin on a couple a ol blankets, lookin up at the stars an the moon an out at the reflection in the water a the lights from the amusement pavilion across the lake where couples were dancin. Kinda romantic. We opened a couple a bottles a beer. Schlitz or Pabst or Blatz, which one a them I don't remember, cuz all I can recall is Byron laughin like a loon an offerin me a "Schlabst" which was a very local joke. We could even hear the music, an, acourse, one a the songs they played was a swing "Lady of Spain" which was still popular with dance bands that weren't rock bands.

"As long as someone plays that song," I said, "my Daddy'll never be dead."

"My daddy never had a favorite song," Byron said.

"You're mad at him for dyin on you, ain't you?"

"Acourse, I'm not mad. I just wonder why stuff happens. Why he let it happen."

"I was mad at my Daddy for dyin on me. For awhile," I said, "an maybe I usta be mad at my mama, but I figgered, hatin an blamin my parents, I was wastin my emotions an my life, cuz even if they killed themselves, which they didn't, they wasn't anymore aroun to hear me bitch at em."

“I wish my mom was dead too,” Byron said. “For her sake, cuz some things she’d never understand.”

“Shut your shameful mouth, Byron James.” I put my left hand on his right. He placed his left hand on my left, an I topped him with my right, sorta like stack-in your hands before a ball game begins. “Eustacia, for her sake, is the salt a the earth,” I said. “She understands everythin. She was the best high-school teacher I ever had.”

“What I mean is, I wish Brian was dead.”

“Why Brian?”

“He’s a snake in the grass.”

“You two are like siamese twins.”

“We’re more connected n that. If you catch my meanin.”

“Oh.” The moon was beginnin to rise in more ways n one over Rainbow Lake an me. I started to get the picture. This was another one a those sex conversations nobody was ever supposed to have. I had never had one with a boy before an wasn’t sure if I was gonna like it.

“Me an Brian, we, you know, when we were kids. I mean we’re eighteen now. Swear to God,” he said.

“My lip is zipped.”

“Swear to God?”

“Swear to God.”

He spoke the first three words very fast. “We did things.” He swigged his beer. He slowed down a bit. “We do things.”

“With girls. Together?” I saw immense possibilities. The twins an one or two girls. How excitin! I’d only done it one person at a time once. “With how many girls?” I asked.

“No girls,” he said. “With each other.”

Get out the car! On the outside I was cool as a sphinx. On the inside I was twirlin like hot rayon panties in a dryer at a trailer-park laundromat. I prayed for my Daddy to give me just this once a poker face.

I think he heard my prayer. My face didn't move a muscle. I know, cuz Byron kept starin hard at me in the moonlight, an his hands felt clammy sandwiched between my hot palms, but I held on to him, cuz he was a kindred soul an I was likin him even more n before. I figgered if girls could do it together, so could boys, but I'd never known one till now, an here I was sorta related to one, like I figger everyone is whether they know it or not.

"Lotsa people do that," I said.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"I did it too."

"With boys?"

"With girls. Well, with a girl. One girl. Well, a couple girls. Two girls."

"I guessed maybe," he said.

"I figger everyone in town knows about me," I said.
"One girl. Once. Two girls. Big hairy deal."

"No they don't. They can't figure you out. They don't even come close. I don't think they even know the word for you. Some a em think you're just different, like a beatnik maybe. The rest just think you're weird or maybe a artist or a actress."

"An what do you think?"

"I think you got style dressin sorta mannish like you do."

"Mannish?"

"That's what my mom says."

"Lah-dee-dah!" Get out my Callin-All-Girls decoder ring.

“But I figured if it might be true, you could help me.”

“Whatever you’re doin is okay,” I said. Then I asked, “Who knows you done it?”

“Only Brian.”

“And, acourse,” I was fishin for more juicy details, “the other boys you two did it with.”

“No. Only Brian. I only did it with Brian.”

I mumbled somethin with a question mark about, uh, incest which was one a the several sins of the famous Mizz Vivienne Chastaine.

“What’s that?”

“Insects! Gol-darn insects! Skeeters big as bombers!”

“Now Brian’s all worried about us doin it,” Byron said. “He claims it was one thing us bein young kids an brothers, especially bein twins an all, an lookin exactly like each other, but now, cuz we’re no longer boys, we’re men, an Brian says it’s time we gotta stop what we been doin with each other an start havin girl friends.”

“Maybe that’s right for Brian,” I said.

“But it’s not right for me,” Byron said. “It’s not. It’s worse.”

“What?”

“I’m in love.”

“Who with?”

“With Brian, acourse.”

Acourse, the same way I looked for my twin an mirror image in other girls, the way I started out with Jessarose an Mizz Lulabelle, thinkin they was me, until I got the rude awakenin they were not me. They were who they were an only me was me, an that was better. I hoped Byron was on to that about hisself bein true to hisself an not tryin to be Brian, which must be kinda confusin

to identical twins, provin life deals out more n one kinda secret love.

“You ever done it with a girl?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “An you really done it with a girl?”

“Does the cow jump over the moon?” I said.

“Then you know how girls are,” he said.

“An you know how boys are,” I said.

“I don’t get it,” he said.

We both kept starin straight up at the sky.

“I think we should do it together,” I said. “Just flat try it once to see what all the shoutin’s about. If we don’t like it, we never have to do it again, an we can just go ahead an lead our normal lives.”

“I don’t know.” Byron raised up to his elbow.

“Me either,” I said.

“Except for havin kids, I don’t even know why other people take so much to it,” he said.

“Me either,” I said, “but maybe it’s some kinda Midway Main Attraction we’re missin like some Ferris Wheel an that’s why we oughta try it.”

For a week we flirted with a definite *maybe*. Then finally, bouyed up with a couple shots a courage courtesy a Ol Grand Dad, we drove way out the two-lane black top past the Apples’ place an checked into the local No-Tell Motel, figgerin if we were spotted under all the red an green neon outlinin the roof, it couldn’t but help our reputations, cuz we’d be caught doin the one thing everybody hoped we’d do so we would save ourselves from bein different from them, an give em all a big relief, even if they all screamed we shouldn’t do it cuz we weren’t married. As it turned out nobody but the night clerk saw us, an she coulda cared less, cuz we musta looked, when I

think back an laugh, self-conscious like two teenage refugees from the Norman Rockwell drive-in picture show.

Anyway, we tried to help each other outa our clothes, but we kept gigglin an bein ticklish which I read later is a sign a sexual fear, even though I had plenty a experience with Mizz Lulabelle, an Byron had plenty a his own with Brian. But this was a whole new ball game. Finally, we stood naked on opposin sides a the bed, shiverin like swimmers on the opposite sides of a pool a freezin water, each one sorta waitin for the other to jump in first, so I broke the ice.

“You look real nice, Byron,” I said.

“You look nice too, Sport.”

“Call me my real name tonight, will you, please?”

“Okay,” he said. He motioned toward the bed. “Whyn’t you come here an make yourself comfortable, Laydia Spain,” he said. “If you please.”

I remember the sound a the neon wrapped aroun the outline a the motel roof buzzin like flies, an the way the bed was, an how he kissed me an I kissed him back, both a us shy at first, then bolder when we saw the earth didn’t open up an swallow us for experimentin where angels only dare, an I remember the good clean smell a his body, cuz he was my cousin an my friend, an the sweet smell a me on him, an his face, eyes tight closed, kissin me with lips soft an tender as a girl’s, kissin me all over, an me all over him, touchin each other like lovers, imitatin matinee excitement which excited him more n me, an finally I let him slide in to home plate, slow cuz it was a shock, havin for the first time another person inside my person, us connectin to each other, me wishin he’d open his eyes an look at me, an we moved, locked together like slow dancers, rollin over an back, until I knew, him

sweatin, doin his football pushups faster, he was ready, an I worked grippin him, real natural it come to me, gently, an felt him moanin an wished I was moanin too, but I wasn't, an it wasn't for the lack a him tryin, but such feelin wasn't in me, not with him, an I wouldn't be so dishonest as to fake it, even to make him feel like he was a good lover, which he was, way good enough, an for which I gave him, thanks to Brian, more credit than I gave me, cuz it's harder for a man if his heart's not in it.

We kissed one last time an he pulled himself out an rolled over on his back next to me. The air in the room felt cool on the sweat wettin the length a our bodies an our faces. We were real quiet, the way you are after a lot a exercise, cuz we worked at it nonstop for almost twenty minutes.

“I want a cigaret,” I said.

“I don't smoke,” he said.

“I think we're supposed to,” I said, “after doin it.”

He laughed an closed his eyes. His poke, layin on his stomach, was still droolin clear into his navel outa the eye a his nature-boy skin wrapped like rose petals around the head. I was, I have to admit, in awe. I mean, I understand now even more n I did that night that you can see the whole evolution a the world all the way from civilization backwards to prehistoric times in that sleeve a skin which, if you squint, matches pretty much a lady's tight rosebud. I mean really. Don't ask.

“Hey, Laydia,” he said, his eyes still closed an a half smile on his lips.

“What?”

“I'll tell you who I was thinkin about if you tell me who you were thinkin about.”

We both bust out laughin, havin a good hoo-ha at the absurdity a it all.

In his truck, I asked him, "You ever gonna do that again?"

"No offense," he said. "But no."

"Me neither," I said.

"An I thought we were pretty good too."

"We were," I said. "But pretty good's..."

We both said, "...not good enough!" An nearly wrecked the car laughin ourselves silly like the party-goers whoopin it up at what I had just decided, standin alone in my calla lilies, was gonna be my First Annual Fourth a July party.

Next to Jessarose, my best laughs were always with Byron, who was gonna get a piece a my mind if he wasn't in time for the fireworks.

I could see across my yard under the golden light on the porch that Wilmer Fox, havin finally let Sue Ellen Breed sing one a her never-popular medleys a show tunes, had surrendered the piano to Claudeen Thomas who slowed the pace a the party nicely down from swing an rock 'n' roll more to waltz time, perfect for a summer's twilight that hung like a canopy over Canterbury.

Across town at the VFW the boys had started off the evenin's patriotic cavalcade a high-flyin aerial displays, while at the O'HARA INN, more modest cherry bombs kept everybody jumpin, an the kids holdin sparklers was runnin bright rings a fire around the fountains a red an orange sparks that kept everybody oohin an aahin. Colors was mergin with each other! What a sight! My Daddy woulda been proud!

I tucked my western shirt into my jeans an circled around the lawn toward the house when who should I

meet comin through the bridal wreath bushes but Wilmer Fox.

“You like to scare me to death,” I said. “What you doin in my bushes?”

“Shh!” he said, “the little boys’ room was busy, so I took my business out here.”

“You mean you been piddlin in my garden?”

“Shh!”

“Don’t you ever, Wilmer Fox, shhush me!”

“She’ll hear you.”

“Who?”

Right on cue, big as life, partin the bushes, snortin like a elephant come to bag her Great White Hunter, an brushin her hands at her hair an clothes, out stepped Mizz Lulabelle.

“Whyn’t you,” I said to her, “just hold a flashlight pointin up under your chins an scare us all to death?”

“C’mere, Lulie,” Wilmer Fox said.

“Wilmer, you got no shame,” I said. “Her a married woman an you a married man.”

“What’s good for the goose is good for the gander,” he said.

“Come on, Wilmer,” Mizz Lulabelle said. “She’s so borin an I’m dyin for a smoke an a Coke.”

“Wait,” I said.

“Whatever for?” Mizz Lulabelle asked.

“What about Mister Henry?” I said.

“What about him?”

“He’s your husband. He’s the father a your children.”

“He’s a jerk. Look at him. Over there moonin all over Rosie in the swing, an her makin time with him as fast

as she can. She's gonna win the title as the next town pump."

"An you," I said, "can give her your tiara."

"Come on, Wilmer." She grabbed his arm in a real greedy dohseedoh hold.

"But what about your children," I said. "What about John an James."

"You can have em," she said. "You practically raised the little bastards anyway. You're so good at bein a housewife, you'd make somebody a good husband!" She laughed up an down the scale bein very pleased with herself havin not a worry in the world with Wilmer Fox at last in a vise grip on her arm, happy as if they were all future an no past.

I wanted to ask her if she had told Wilmer the truth about the dead red-head baby, but I thought better a it.

She who ruins somebody else's happiness ruins her own.

Besides, with those two two-timers teamed up, well, the poker hand, with the joker, was playin itself out, an they was foldin their cards, while I was askin to draw just one more."

"See you, Sport!" Wilmer Fox said an started off with Mizz Lulabelle.

"Wait," I said. "I got questions. What about Jessa-rose in all this? Ain't she your wife? Ain't she supposed to be here by now? Ain't she gonna be angry at you takin up with Mizz Lulabelle?"

"No, no, and no," he answered.

"What's that mean?" I asked.

"Can't you understand plain English?" Mizz Lulabelle asked. "Come on, Wilmer. I need a Coke with some voddy voddy vodka." She pulled him out from under the

shade a the bushes, their bodies castin moon shadows on the grass.

“But what about Jessarose!” I shouted.

Wilmer turned. “We been divorced for almost a month.”

“But is she comin?” I said, not much relieved. “All along you been tellin me to be expectin your Missus.”

“This is the only Missus that counts,” he said, pointin grandly at Mizz Lulabelle who had the deed to her farm clutched tight between her teeth like a dog offerin up a big bone to its new master. “At least she’s the Missus I came back for.”

“A guy chases a girl,” Mizz Lulabelle said, “until she catches him!”

“I’m a goner, Lulie,” Mister Fox said. “Just as soon as you divorce that rotten Apple you just married outa spite in the first place.”

“Oh, Wilmer!” Mizz Ludicrous said. “You’re so *romantique!*”

Hasten, Jason! Bring the basin! “You better get him to put it in writin,” I said. “He’s a vacuum cleaner salesman.”

“Shut up,” Mizz Lulabelle said.

“Wait one big fat minute,” I said. “You mean, all this time I been waitin for somebody who never was invited to come?”

“I didn’t say Jessie wasn’t invited,” Wilmer said. “I never said she wasn’t comin.”

Mizz Lulabelle jumped right in. “An you never said she was.”

“Yes, ma’m, he said she was comin,” I said.

“Wilmer,” Mizz Lula whined.

Wilmer looked me square in the eye. “Ambiguities, my dear, are what make a successful salesman. Look how

in this unambiguous town I've made ambiguities work for ambiguous you."

What a pair! You could almost believe they were meant for each other since the dawn a monkey business.

"Tell me," I said, "how you could seduce, divorce, an abandon a woman like Jessarose for a woman like Mizz Lulabelle."

"Hey, Sport," Wilmer said. "Be a sport, huh? Play the game."

"What game?"

"Wise up for once in a blue moon! The game that's goin on, runnin circles around you. Did your Daddy nickname you *Sport* for nothing?"

"Am I missin somethin?" I asked. "Like one a your damn big ambiguities?"

Wilmer broke away from Mizz Lulabelle. "Yeah."

"What?"

"The best part."

"What's that?"

"Sport, never ask a red-headed Irishman a question like that on a perfect summer's night that's yours as much as ours or anybody's for the taking."

I was confounded. He was up to his tricks. He was makin me dizzy. I never ask questions I don't want answers to.

"Jessie divorced me," Wilmer said. "I didn't divorce her. The papers aren't final yet. Compliments of wet ink, and being civilized, we're traveling together real amicable for the sheer harmony of convenience, and reasons of our own, to get back where we started from, which wasn't each other. Get the picture?"

I tried hard to read his eyes in the summer twilight. I was wisin up. Things started unrollin real fast like

paper towels when the paper-towel holder loses its grip, an the whole roll flies off the wall, an you realize you been yankin on things too hard when you should go easy. “Jessarose’s got somethin else in mind?”

“Jessie finally got what she wanted from me. She got all I could give her.”

“Now,” Mizzy Know-It-All said, evokin mystery in somethin she knew nothin about, “what little secret could that be, an can’t we just file it in the Who Cares Department?”

“Jessarose is comin home, is she?” I asked.

Wilmer winked at me. “She’s just a home-coming stone that wants to stop rolling and gather some moss.” He clucked his cheek twice an said, “Love, Mizz Laydia Spain, conquers all.”

“Mister Fox,” Mizz Lulubelle said, “you are so right.”

Then Wilmer walked arm-in-arm with Mizz Lulubelle back to the porch, kinda sweet, kinda perfect in the moonlight, two people findin each other so two other people ain’t tortured bein married to em.

I had a house which was a inn which could be a real nice home. I had always lived at the heart a fidelity, an time made me steadfast, cuz when you make a house a home, your life—whatever it is—comes through the door. When I was a high-school girl, an Jessarose disappeared, I right away understood the story a why Penny Lope, the wife a Ulysses, unraveled her knittin every night, cuz the other part a Jessarose’s farewell song, “Bye-Bye Blackbird,” was “Make my bed and light the light. I’ll arrive late tonight,” so I kept my true-hope heart burnin like a beacon.

Standin in my lilies, I watched Wilmer light Mizzy’s cigaret an fetch her drink. She puffed an sipped an sipped

an puffed an had googly eyes only for Wilmer an never once looked over at Mister Henry standin in his bermuda shorts between the outstretched legs a Rosie Donovan sittin in yellow short-shorts in the swing hangin from the high oak tree. Mister Henry never looked at Mizz Lulabelle an Mister Fox flirtin on the porch, an John an James, the Apples' twins, carryin sparklers ran circles so bright in the night they hurt your eyes. I squeezed my forefinger an thumb across my eyelids, an looked again, cuz I was amazed in the actual twilight to be actually experiencin the actual visual uncertainty where soft colors that merge into each other without sharp boundaries seem to fade into white, which is even more scientific than the Pregnancy Veil, an explains just about everythin about a vision.

Claudeen Thomas at the piano began to play "Red Sails in the Sunset" an couples rose up all over the porch an from blankets spread on the lawn to slow dance in the grass. Mizz Lulabelle an Mister Fox waltzed near Claudeen on the porch where I spied that ol tattle-tale Brian come from inside my house with his arm aroun the pregnant Kathleen Jones, an then, surprise a surprises, Byron followed his twin brother, Brian, out on the porch, an even better, he was not alone, standin as he was clearly in the company of a tall young man whose blond hair was styled into one a those new Beatles cuts. Things were tightenin down. Just like Noah's ark. People were dancin two by two. But I was alone out on the lawn. A stranger in my own house. So what else was new?

A kinda shudder, sorta the kind my Grandma Mary Kate said you only get when someone walks across your grave, but not exactly, ran down my back. I stepped out

from under the trees into the light a the silvery moon Wilmer thought was so blue, like maybe he knew how Jessarose so often wrote me sometimes real sad little postcards tellin me to look at the moon, "So I'll be seeing you," which by the lucky stumble-an-collide a chance was the name a the next song everybody aroun the piano on my porch was singin.

The evenin stars hung accurate where they should be. The colors a the twilight merged, an my knees went weak, like I was some sissy about to faint, cuz Wilmer was right about everythin, an awful nice, even for a man followin his willie aroun.

The summer's night was a perfect summer's night, the smell a it in my nose, the feel a it on my skin, the sight an sounds a it, overwhelmin me, half sad, I was alone, half glad, I was alone too, an I walked, all full a expectations, but expectin nothin sure, farther out on the flat lawn toward the house. I owned the garden, the lawn, the big corner lot, the porch, the parlor, the stove, the beds, the high roof top, all a it accumulated by grit stronger n chasin aroun, which was my choice an my way, cuz ridin with my Daddy makin special deliveries on his mail route, an rentin to permanent transients, I figgered there wasn't much percentage just wanderin an chasin across the map a the whole wide world, cuz the geography a women is where nature itself takes course homeward bound, the long route or the short, the high road or the low. If someone takes the effort to make someone a good home, that wanderin prodigal just has to be drawn back like Adam or Eve to Eden itself.

Through the perfect twilight, someone shot a rocket skywards that burst into a red-an-gold shower, an then a roman candle cut across the moon like a sly red smile,

real pleased with itself. The little orchestra on the porch swung as if on cue into “Moonglow,” an the shorthairs stood up on my neck an my arms cuz I knew this was it, what my Daddy had said, somethin he probably learned from my angel mama when they first fell in love, that whatever important was gonna happen to me some summer was happenin that summer night, an then the whole aerial bombardment lit up the sky, an people ran from the porch to stand cheerin in the bright white light over the yard, an then, like they was a sea, a miracle red sea, a red-white-an-blue sea, they parted, an led by Wilmer Fox, like he was the wiley host of a surprise party that was a surprise party planned for me, they started clappin an applaudin, recognizin that love was love, an I saw, no logic questions asked, no explanations needed, Desire herself, the vision a all visions, the mysterious woman a all mysteries, standin in the doorway a my kitchen, open in the screen with her lovely arms, an walkin across the porch, an down the steps, an across the lawn, through the applaudin aisle a people, towards me at last, lit by explosions so beautiful in the night sky, walkin toward me, offerin up her own true self an heart, finally found, comin home, for all the world lookin even better n Mizz Kim Novak clappin her hands so sexy walkin across the dance floor in *Picnic*, longin for my arms to carry her up the red staircase, lady a ladies, came Jessarose.

ACT 5

THE STORYTELLER'S OLDWIFE'S POSTSCRIPT TALE

In my vision, now, all these years later, I'm smarter, so I should leave us all there above where we are, where in my memory we have everythin we want, or what we think we want.

But who can foretell anythin?

That summer night was too perfect to be anymore than it was, cuz, acourse, it was the start a me an Jessa-rose, but that's another story, a long one, thank you, an a private one, thank you even more, about pride an passion, an about makin real life, which is never the same as a honeymoon, work out so everybody stays comfortably happy, cuz there's no need for surrender in love me tender.

Anyway, who'da guessed that right aroun the very next Thanksgivin, on the very first anniversary a the assassination a Mister Kennedy, making November 22 ever more so double sad, Mizz Lulabelle would be killed

speedin outa her farm's gravel lane onto the icy curve a that two-lane black top; an who'da thought she'd be pregnant with another one a Wilmer's babies an kill it an Wilmer too in the same accident, with her head layin dead on the horn blowin one long last ear-splittin honk till the State Trooper took her gently by her bleachblond hair an laid her broken neck back on the seat.

Mister Henry ended up marryin Rosie. He needed help raisin John an James, so Rosie's mom, Little Rosemary, pitched in like she was their real grandma, freein up Rosie who took a big likin to workin in Mister Henry's Rexall drugstore, makin em both a lot a money, makin sure Mister Henry stopped eatin up the merchandise, cuz Rosie, who musta got it from her dad, made sure they were modern legal business partners as much as husband an wife, even if she never wanted any kids a her own to send to law school an medical school like they did John an James, except that James, halfway through bein a doctor dropped out an switched to the same pharmacy college in St. Louis where his daddy had gone an came back to be partners with Mister Henry and Rosie, who both thought it was kinda cute, an a whole lot convenient, especially Rovin Rosie, since Mister Henry was gettin older a whole lot faster n her who was less n half his age when he married her, cuz James looked a awful lot like a young Mister Henry an took after him, an after Rosie for awhile, in more ways n one, an it was him who became mayor, not his daddy.

Brian volunteered like a damn fool for the Army an got sent in 1967 to Vietnam an never made it home to Kathleen an Little Brian who moved in to live with Eustacia who framed the front page a *The Canterbury Herald* with Brian's picture smilin like a hero which maybe

he was, but who could tell lookin at his grave that Kathleen kept so manicured that people felt sorry for her.

As for Byron, his born sophistication was his escape, an he went to Chicago an graduated from the Loyola University School a Medicine, movin aroun quite a gypsy bit like doctors do, samplin the world a cities I'd never see, which made him wise by the time he landed in San Francisco, an always he kept in touch an once he wrote me an Jessarose a real wisdom letter, cuz he saw life an death everyday, that if ever anybody tried to kill our kind, or wipe out our kind somehow, it'd never work, cuz we keep comin back, croppin up everywhere. He said to me that if one day the last one a our kind should ever lay dyin in a hospital, the last thing that last one a us would hear would be the cries down the hall a the next one a us bein born, cuz there is no end to us.

I like that kinda optimism in a person.

Jessarose, by the way, that smilin summer night a the famous Fourth a July party, wasn't walkin exactly alone, happy as she was, carryin her own little secret surprise party, which in the end, made our reunion union even better right on through the years, an, in a special way kept all these people, so dead or gone, alive, particularly Mister Wilmer Fox, cuz the very next spring after Mizz Lulabelle drove em all off the two-lane black top straight into the bone orchard, Jessarose gave a real easy birth to a red-head baby we both loved so outright plain an clear we named her *Claire*, which was a real name, not some sheet-music joke like *Laydia Spain*, an thankfully nobody ever thought anythin bad about "*Clair de Lune*," cuz she was so bright an lively, an we both, with no bother from anybody, includin the PTA, melted smooth as ice cream on a perfect summer night into her two angel

mamas who were as proud a her the day a her graduation as a architect, somethin she got from me teachin her all the practicalities a keepin up a ol house, as we were the night her husband called long-distance from Chicago to congratulate Jessarose an me as the twin-grandmas a Claire's newborn baby they named *James*, after Big Jim, my dear sweet Daddy.

Things bein the way they are, even when things are happy enough, a person's just gotta keep on keepin on without imposin too much on the kindness a anybody. My Grandma Mary Kate was so full a woe an miseries an grief she drove everyone off in a thousand directions, an all thousand was away from her. Love may be eternal, but people only got so much time to listen to the blues, which is, acourse, a wisdom I got from Jessarose, and precisely the reason she gave up wandrin like a gypsy, travelin on the road, appearin nightly on stages lit so bright an smokey she couldn't tell one town from another, singin "Cry Me a River" like Mizz Julie London, an so she came back to where true love was burnin steady an keepin house.

One of those Little Sisters I usta call a the Pinched Face a Jesus, but don't anymore cuz they're just women findin their own way in the world, was celebratin a little recreation-room party for her fiftieth anniversary as a nun. She was livin in a wheelchair in the St. Joseph Home for Senior Catholics, an she remembered me from sittin in her class, cuz her mind was growin ever sharper about the past, an she was somehow the second-cousin twice-removed from my Grandma Mary Kate which made me the only blood kin she had left. I looked into that Little Sister's face, cuz the human face is a limitless terrain that just pulls you right in, an I saw the kinda happiness that

comes from peace. An that Little Sister, who took Jessarose's hand in her own, just kinda blessin everythin she touched, handed me a delicate envelope like she was deliverin a letter from my long-dead daddy, Big Jim, who was the postman. Inside the envelope was her Golden Anniversary card, an she asked me to read it to all the retired folks, so I stood up, looked at Jessarose, who was still holdin that Little Sister's hand, and I read to all those old people, just sittin aroun the piano under the crepe paper streamers, happy to be alive, words a wisdom I think they wanted to hand on to me, cuz my turn followed theirs.

“Lord, you know better n I know myself that I am growin older, an will someday be old. Keep me from the fatal habit a thinkin I must say somethin on every subject an on every occasion.” Jessarose smiled her knowin smile. “Release me from cravin to straighten out everybody's affairs. Make me thoughtful but not moody, helpful but not bossy.” An my voice just sorta floated outa me, a tad adlib, an I could hear myself sayin, readin, an more n readin really, more like understandin what a person needs to come to grips with. “With my vast store a wisdom, it seems sometimes a pity not to use it all, but you know, Lordy do you know, that I want a few friends at the end. Keep my mind free from the recital a endless details by givin me wings to get to the point. And, oh yeah, seal my lips on my aches an pains which are increasin, so I don't end up rehearsin my woes over an over, an give me the grace to endure the tales a others' pains with patience.” I looked into all their faces, some of em that I'd known my whole life long like so many stories. “I dare not ask for improved memory, but for a growin humility, an a lessenin a cocksureness when my memory seems to

clash with the memories a others.” Jessarose took my hand in hers. “Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be mistaken. An keep me reasonably sweet. Hey, for hay, I always say, I do not want to be a saint. Some a them would be so hard to live with, an I grew up knowin a wiseacre young person an a sour old person are both one a the crownin glories a the devil. Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places, an talents in unexpected people, an forgiveness for those who have passed on, an love for those aroun me. An give me, oh Lord, the grace to tell them so.”

That sweet little ol Sister kissed my cheek, an she kissed the cheek a Jessarose, an all those ol people smiled an nodded their heads, amen, an some a them clapped their fragile ol hands, an the piano player started playin a cha-cha version a “Tea for Two” an them that could danced.

Hey for hay! The only thing I can say about bein alive is, thank God, I’m not somebody else.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

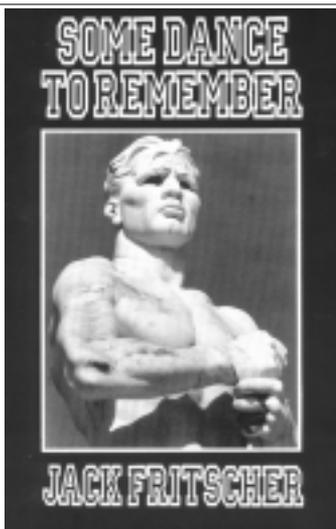
Jack Fritscher was born in southern Illinois, in Jacksonville, raised in central Illinois in Peoria, graduated from Loyola University in Chicago, and served as a tenured associate professor at Western Michigan University where he taught American literature, creative writing, and film history. As faculty advisor in the 1960s, he helped pioneer and establish women's studies in literature and cinema disciplines. He also taught at Loyola University and at Kalamazoo College, and frequently traveled as guest-lecturer in several university series that included Bella Abzug and Adelle Davis. Recently, he has appeared with Camille Paglia on a Channel 4 London television documentary special on gender, and has been extensively quoted in her published essays. His stories, poems, and articles have appeared in more than 25 national and international magazines and journals. He has written public-service documents specifically exploring women's issues in association with ABC-Television affiliate-programming, Channel 7, San Francisco. He also wrote the first *Senior-Citizen and Physically-Challenged Guide* for the San Francisco Municipal Railway. He is the author of three collections of short stories, three books of nonfiction, two plays, one screenplay, and two novels—including the best-selling and critically acclaimed nov-

el, *Some Dance to Remember*. He has been awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant (NEH), and a State of Michigan grant to the arts. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and is descended, through his mother, Virginia Day Fritscher, from women whose ethnic Irish birth names are Mary Pearl Lawler, Mary Lynch, Honora Anastasia McDonough, and through his father, George Fritscher, from women whose ethnic Austrian birth names are Amelia Haberman, Theresa Hruby, and Victoria Etzler.

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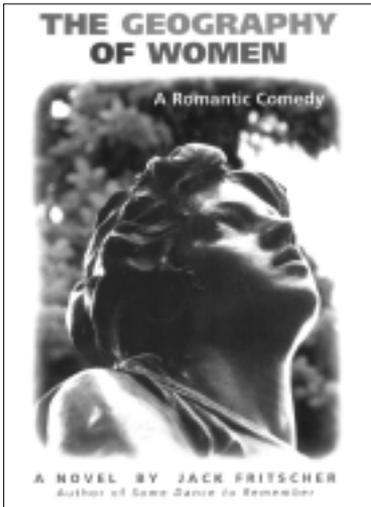
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Telling her story at the end of the 20th century, Laydia Spain O'Hara, untangles the past of 14 characters' lives tied together in a small southern-Illinois town from the mid-1950s of Elvis through the mid-1960s post-JFK. Her comic tale of faces unmasking—and conflicts resolving—is a human journey about coming of age and inventing one's self, despite all gossip, while keeping the torch of true love burning. In a triangle with her two best friends, Jessarose and Miss Lulabelle, Laydia Spain outwits convention, opens her own boarding house, and discovers a solidarity in new ideas of family, home, and the human heart that mirror the vast social changes sweeping American culture during the mid-century.

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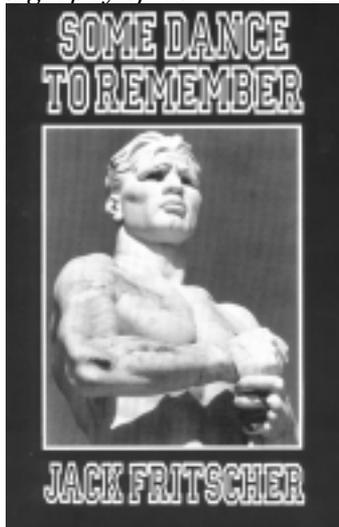
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About *The Geography of Women*

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In the tradition of spunky small-town girls whose vernacular descends from Huck Finn, Laydia Spain dares to take on her own father, Big Jim O'Hara, the postman and accordion champ who named her Laydia Spain; Mister Henry Apple, the prescription-eating pharmacist who marries the bleach-blond Mizz Lulabelle; and Mister Wilmer Fox, the red-headed traveling salesman whose revolving returns to the little town of Canterberry always upset everyone's plans to live happily ever after.

Ultimately, the dark-skinned cinnamon girl, Jessarose, who takes off on the road to fame and fortune as a roadhouse blues singer, defines the direction of love, because, while “the human face is a limitless terrain that just pulls you right in....the geography of women is where nature itself takes course homeward bound, the long route or the short, the high road or the low.”