

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 Jessarose 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 happiness 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 Jessarose.

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 tom-boy, 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 Lulabelle 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 hisself 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 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 Jesarose 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 dumplins, 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-packin 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 line-up. 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 cit-ies 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 accordion 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 Canterbury where kids were runnin around 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.