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Winter had settled over the country, a fine layer of frost dusting what remained of the clover fields, catching the morning sun in such a way that the ground sparkled. This meant nothing, of course, to Helen, who couldn't see past the frustration clouding her eyes.

The gravel crunching under the Studebaker's tires was the only thing keeping her from losing it. Her leather-clad hands gripped the steering wheel so hard her knuckles ached. She couldn't recall Ma's exact words, only her vast outrage and disappointed tears. Paps had been at work, thank god, but her brother, Kensington, had been looking at her like some kind of Ripley comic feature, and that alone would have been enough to send her packing. Send her packing so fast, in fact, that she'd forgotten to pack at all. So here she was, Helen and Helen alone, in the middle of a clover field, with nothing but a fistful of quarters, a decent fur coat from Black's Department Store, and the keys to Paps's brand spanking new Studebaker sedan. By the time she pulled over at the dingy gas station/diner, the sun had reached its pitiful January peak.

Rather than just fill up and soldier on, she pushed open the door to the restaurant and fell into the first booth. If she bought a cup of coffee, she could only get, what, three gallons of gas? That might be enough to get to Grand Island, or more precisely, the local chapter of the Women's Christian Association. So Helen threw caution to the biting Nebraska wind and slid one of her quarters to the waitress.

"Coffee?"

"I'd like nothing more."

The apron-toting young lady ventured into the kitchen and reappeared with a carafe of burnt coffee and a chipped mug. Helen studied the waitress as she poured, and allowed her eyes to drift until she retreated to the kitchen.

What am I doing?

Helen shook her head, but the voice would not relent.

It's fine. Mary said it's fine, right? That this could be normal, as long as I kept it under wraps...

The rest of the world never had shared Mary's sentiment, Helen supposed. Not her friends, nor her boss, and most certainly not her parents. She had a sneaking suspicion that Kensington might be as bent as she, but it ought to be in her best interest to keep that quiet. If Ma had thrown such a fit over her already god-forsaken daughter, Helen didn't want to imagine the mountains she'd move should her precious Kensington amount to anything less than perfect. Helen might have felt sorry for him had she not been booted from the house a few hours ago.

She took a sip of her coffee, trying to focus instead on the cracks in the seat cushion across from her. The early afternoon light shone through the frosted windows and gave everything in the diner a warm, well-worn finish. By the time she had moved to studying the adjacent booth, her mug was close to empty.

As she moved to grab her coat, she heard quiet shuffling a few feet to her left. She turned to see the waitress sauntering up to her table, now lacking the frilly apron and headband. The waitress dropped into the seat across from her, meeting her eyes over the epoxy table. "You look to be having a day, lady."

"You don't look so hot yourself. Shift finished?"

"Wouldn't you know it." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Do I look that bad?"

“I was going by your missing accessories, or your professionalism’s disappearing act.”

She leaned to peer under the table. “A woman in pants? And you’re going to lecture me?
Not a chance.”

Helen looked down to discover that she was, indeed, still wearing Mary’s trousers.

*D*mn.* “Got a problem with it?”

“Naw, just makes you look like a queer.”

Helen clenched her jaw and looked out the window. “This place closing anytime soon?”

“We’re open until ten, doll. You interested in some food or somethin’?”

“I wish.” Helen reached for her coat pocket and dug out the remaining four quarters.

“You think this could get me enough gas to get to Grand Island?”

“Depends what you’re drivin’. That there truck? Naw. That lil’ four door? Sure.”

“Thank god.”

The two women sat in silence for a while, each watching as a new set of clouds rolled in
to blanket the sky.

Helen turned her eyes forward once more. “So what’s your name, *lady*?”

The waitress did not turn to face her. “Ruth. You?”

“Helen.”

“That’s my momma’s name, you know.”

“Mine too. It isn’t very special.”

“Could be worse. You could be a Dorothy and get swept up by them flying monkeys.”

Helen laughed. “Mhm. I know three Dorothys, and I hate all of them. All kinds of ditzzy.”

Ruth smiled. “Too true.” She looked over her shoulder quickly. “The lady that runs this place, her daughter’s named Dorothy. She’ll be the death of me, I swear. Never met anybody else capable of dropping that many plates.”

“She here today?”

“No. She only works weekends, and I’m pretty sure her ma hasn’t left the office since ‘41.” She gestured vaguely to the back of the diner.

“How interesting.” Helen looked to where she pointed and glanced at the clock hanging above the counter. “Shit, it can’t be that late already!” She moved to grab her coat. “I think I ought to go. I’m in a bit of a time crunch now, I suppose.”

“You’ve been staring at nothin’ for an hour and now you’re in a rush?”

“Wasn’t paying attention, didn’t see how late it is. Flophouses are going to close soon.”

Ruth furrowed her brow and paused as Helen pulled the sleeves of her coat. “You said you’re goin’ to Grand Island, yeah?”

“Did I?” Helen stood, sliding each of the toggle buttons into place. “What’s it to you?”

Ruth stood. “It’s just... One a my girlfriends lives out that way, and she’s having a shindig for her lil’ girl’s birthday tonight. I’m not so sure my ride’s gonna show today.”

“Oh,” Helen made like she was thinking about it. “I guess I don’t see why not, as long as you pitch in some for gas.”

Ruth brightened immediately. “Sure! I got some change in my apron. Wait here a minute.” She trotted back to the kitchen.

Helen tapped her feet, noticing for the first time the muted music that played. *Christ, is that a gramophone?* Upon further listening, she recognized the melody.

*The song a robin sings,
Through endless years of spring~*

Mary had rather large hands, for a lady. Hands that had shown Helen to dance, on more than a few humid nights this summer. After hours spent in the sweltering thick of the factory, their backyard had felt nothing short of Nirvana.

By the light of two oil lamps snatched from the neighbor's barn, they would step in time with whatever beaten old record Mary saw fit. *We ought to bite the bullet and get some new tunes*, she'd say, leafing through the small box in the attic. *But that jerk won't pay more'n 75 cents*. She'd throw her arms up and pitch her voice high in a terrific imitation of Mr. Litwel. *"Godless broads working like dogs instead a lookin' to make a house! Act like your parents never showed you to be decent!"*

Ruth stepped out of the kitchen, fist closed tight around the coins. "Hey, missy, you with me?"

Helen snapped up, blinking out of her reminiscence. "Yeah, yeah, I'm here."

"Well, okay then. We just got to give the money to Mr. Davis in the garage, fill up and get packin'."

Ruth led Helen towards the side door leading into the garage. The door opened to show a very apparent threshold between diner and grimy workshop. The few lamps in the corners of the shop painted the concrete in warm tones, and highlighted the figure of a man working on some type of motorbike.

"Hey, Mr. Davis! We need some gas-o-line."

The man looked up, displaying a prominent broom mustache. “Why sure, Miss Aarons.”

Ruth turned to Helen and put her palm up to ask for the quarters, then stepped towards Mr. Davis, squinting at the handful of change. “What can we get with uh... two dollars and... thirteen cents?”

Mr. Davis looked up from the bike, and set his eyes on the coins. “Seven-an-a-half gallons. But for you, Miss Aarons? I’ll fill up any tank under 30.”

“Aww, you ain’t have to do that.”

“Nonsense. You been workin’ here longer than anyone else, it’s the least I can do,” He turned to face Helen, “Who’s your friend?”

“Mr. Davis, this is Miz Helen. She’s on her way to Grand Island, and I badgered her into givin’ me a ride,” She lowered her voice some, “I think Paul’s out drinking again.”

He crossed his arms. “I see,” he paused, “So Helen, you travellin’ with anyone else?”

Helen shook her head.

“Good. I’d guess by the look a them trousers you don’t got a fella, but I just gotta be sure, ya know?”

Ruth gasped as her hand flew to her chest. “Why, Mr. Davis, are you showin’ concern for my well being?”

Mr. Davis waved his hand. “Get outta here. An’ use the pump closest to the tree, the other one likes to misbehave.”

Helen cleared her throat. “Ah, thank you, sir.”

Ruth moved towards the door, gesturing for Helen to do the same. “Yes, thank you Mr. Davis! I’ll see you on Friday.”

The two women walked back through the diner and out the front door, the countryside greeting them with a strong gust of wind. Ruth approached the Studebaker, gazing appraisingly at the olive green hood. "She's a beauty. Where'd you come across this fine vehicle?"

Helen scoffed. "You want the real answer or the one that Mr. Davis would like?"

Ruth swept her arm toward the barren parking lot. "He ain't here, is he?"

Helen huffed. "Alright. I stole it from my folks because I needed a quick getaway."

"No effin' way. I thought you was decent!"

"Well my indecency is what got you a ride."

Ruth threw her head back and cackled. "I'm joking on you, girlie! Lord knows how much I've done wrong to wind up here. 'Sides, you ain't even justified yourself yet."

"It's a long story, and you ain't gonna like it."

"Well, doll, we got a two-and-a-half hour drive ahead of us, and there ain't much you can do to make me hate you since you passed the Mr. Davis test."

"Alright, if you insist."

"That I do. I'll get the gas if you pull the auto around."

Helen clambered into the driver's seat, fishing the key out of her pocket. She pulled in front of the gas pump, watching intently as Ruth manhandled the nozzle. *Stop, stop, stop-*

The murmur of a brook at evening tides,

That ripples through a nook where two lovers hide.

Mary carried herself rather brashly, for a lady. She could sass with the best of them, and had no qualms in flaunting her colorful vocabulary and penchant for nicknames. Her accent fell

somewhere between southern belle and boondocks cattle rancher depending on the day and present company. She'd slip into lyricisms when she talked about a dame she'd encountered at the Kroger, and sharpen her words to barbs when she talked about her "Bona Fide Piece-o-Garbage Uncle Kennedy." Helen listened to it all while she swept the floor, or painted the porch, or stared at the ceiling. Mary had wanted to share her words, to give them to those who had none. *One a' these days, toots, I'm gonna sit and write until my fingers bleed, then I'll tape 'em up and write until my eyes fall out. I'll tie those papers with my heartstrings and mail 'em somewhere the buildings scrape the sky, and those city folks won't know what to do with themselves.*

Ruth opened the passenger side door. "Ya ready to go, lady?"

Helen smiled. "I am."

"Then let's get to movin'!"

Helen steered out of the parking lot and down the road. She fiddled with the dials until the familiar melody began to play.

My heart and I agree-

Ruth looked towards Helen and turned off the radio. "None a' that. You still gotta tell me how you got here!"

Helen sighed. "I was hoping you'd forgotten that."

"I don't forget anything."

"Sure you don't."

"You're not gettin' out of this."

"Yeah, yeah. Alright. God, where do I start?"

Ruth smiled. "Take your time."

"Okay... So, eight years ago, back when all the fellas started getting deployed, I got a job at this canning factory in Wolbach after I ran from my folks. I was living in this god awful hostel, and I only ate once a day, but anything was better than home. Few months in, the boss man hired a lady just as broke as me. She and I figured out an... arrangement, I guess, and we moved into an old farmhouse some woman was renting while her husband was away. It wasn't great, but it was good enough that we stayed there after the war ended. Worked out fine because the landlady's husband never came back. Except that the boss man wanted to get rid of us because he had his guys back. He couldn't find an excuse, though, so he settled for cutting our checks." Helen took a deep breath. "You gotta promise me you won't jump out of the car for this next part, Ruth."

Ruth crossed her arms. "Doubt you could get rid a me now."

Helen scoffed. "If you say so. The lady I moved in with, Mary, she and I... We, ah, we weren't exactly..."

"Spit it out, Helen."

Tears rolled down Helen's face. "Christ, Ruth, we're queers. Dirty, filthy queers. I loved her more than anything. Some newsie down the road caught wind of it and sold it to the papers, and we lost everything. I tried to go back home, but my ma found out too and gave me the boot. I gotta find a boarding house or something, and Grand Island is my best bet."

Ruth's eyes had progressively widened and her jaw went slack. "Oh, lady... Oh no," She shook her head. "I'm so sorry."

"Not your fault I'm bent, Ruth."

"Not about that, hun. Just... You need a place to stay?"

She's everything on this earth to me.

THE END