

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 cleanin, 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 referrin, to his little cough-syrup problem, an the fact people said he stayed locked in his private office back a the drugstore 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 aroun 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 of 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 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 eyebrows 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 supptime 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 accommodating.” 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 outgo in 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 golden-yellow kitchen so pleased with the fresh June mornin 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 some-thin 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 Canterbury 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.