

ACT 4

THE SALESMAN'S WIFE'S LOVER'S TALE

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

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

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

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

So hoo-ha an hooray for Hollywood!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Love hurts. Not bein loved back hurts worse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I was wrong.

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

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

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

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

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

“What is it, Eustacia?”

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

“You can tell me.”

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

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

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

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

“It’s Byron,” she said.

“What about him?”

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

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

“Those sissy men who....You know.”

“You know somethin about Byron?” I asked.

“Brian told me.”

The rat!

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

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

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

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

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

“Have you asked Byron?”

“I asked him,” Eustacia said.

“What’d he say?”

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

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

That Byron always was a clever one.

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

He never went to St. Louis.

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, Stacia,” I said.

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

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

“Is Byron here yet?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

Jeez, Louise! Why did I ask?

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

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

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

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

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

“None a your beeswax,” I said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Cuz I told em to,” I said.

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

“I have not,” I said.

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

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

"Take your hands off me," I said.

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

"Twenty-five."

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

"She's only sixteen," I said.

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

"Rosemary's a innocent," I said.

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

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

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

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

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

I needed to collect myself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maybe your only chance only happens once.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why Brian?”

“He’s a snake in the grass.”

“You two are like siamese twins.”

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

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

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

“My lip is zipped.”

“Swear to God?”

“Swear to God.”

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

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

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

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

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

"Lotsa people do that," I said.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"I did it too."

"With boys?"

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

"I guessed maybe," he said.

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

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

"An what do you think?"

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

"Mannish?"

"That's what my mom says."

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

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

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

“Only Brian.”

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

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

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

“What’s that?”

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

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

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

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

“What?”

“I’m in love.”

“Who with?”

“With Brian, acourse.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“An you know how boys are,” I said.

“I don’t get it,” he said.

We both kept starin straight up at the sky.

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

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

“Me either,” I said.

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

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

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

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

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

“You look real nice, Byron,” I said.

“You look nice too, Sport.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I want a cigaret,” I said.

“I don't smoke,” he said.

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

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

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

“What?”

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

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

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

“No offense,” he said. “But no.”

“Me neither,” I said.

“An I thought we were pretty good too.”

“We were,” I said. “But pretty good’s...”

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

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

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

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

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

meet comin through the bridal wreath bushes but Wilmer Fox.

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

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

“You mean you been piddlin in my garden?”

“Shh!”

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

“She’ll hear you.”

“Who?”

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

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

“C’mere, Lulie,” Wilmer Fox said.

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

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

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

“Wait,” I said.

“Whatever for?” Mizz Lulabelle asked.

“What about Mister Henry?” I said.

“What about him?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's that mean?" I asked.

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

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

“But what about Jessarose!” I shouted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Shut up,” Mizz Lulabelle said.

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

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

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

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

“Wilmer,” Mizz Lula whined.

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

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

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

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

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

"What game?"

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

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

Wilmer broke away from Mizz Lulabelle. "Yeah."

"What?"

"The best part."

"What's that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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