

# Trust Me

**A Tale of the Supranatural  
by NokuMarie**

**Note to Reader:** As Author could no more accurately reproduce authentic British vernacular than she could burst into “*O Mio Babbino Caro*” in Swahili while pirouetting *en pointe* in a tutu, the following is of necessity rendered in a simulacrum consisting of contemporary Standard Americanese with Southern phraseology, inflections and accents as appropriate. Get over it.

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## **Dramatis Personae**

- Dora*** A doleful damsel of twenty, resolutely idealistic with unrequited passions and unfulfilled dreams. Total fox.
- Steve*** A lugubrious lad of twenty-one, relationally dysfunctional with articulatory dysfluency and anger management issues. Major hunk.
- Ron*** A cheerful chap of twenty-three, morally ambiguous and diplomatically declined with a heart of slightly tarnished gold. Underrated hottie.
- Hazel*** A bodacious babe of seventeen, goal-oriented with keen insight and matrimonial aspirations. Primo bird.
- Bernard*** A chronologically-challenged polymath with multiple personality disorder, podiatric problems and an impossible mission. Unrated.
- Slugger*** A mature gentleman of unrecognized interior complexity and assorted phobias.
- Dorothy*** A erudite housekeeper with a twist and a tyrannical disposition. Not to be trifled with.
- Elayne*** A titled trophy wife with an outrageous attitude and Machiavellian machinations. Dora's confidante.

***And a bevy of supranaturally empowered females with an agenda.***

## **Equine/Bovine Players**

- Copper*** A proud bald-faced sorrel sabino Arabian-Thoroughbred cross with high white stockings, open to new experiences. Dora's pride and joy.
- Alex*** An unassuming pseudo-Appaloosa with no complaints. Stodgy and somewhat lacking in personality. Dear to Steve.
- Squirrel*** A remarkably unattractive generic horse with identity issues, conformational discrepancies and no apparent redeeming qualities. Bernard's pal.
- Maude*** A geriatric Jersey with extreme prejudice and homicidal tendencies. Dorothy's sidekick.
- Donkey*** An ass with no issues and no relevance to this story.

# Saturday & Sunday

August, 2010

## ***PROLOGUE: A preposterous proposition***

“We have to talk.”

I knew I was in trouble as soon as my wife, joining me in the great room and taking her chair opposite mine on the other side of the fieldstone fireplace in which aspen logs crackled and glowed, uttered those four doom-evoking words. Definitely not what you want to hear from the lips of your beloved, especially on the eve of her return home from a sojourn in another part of the world, engaging in who knows what sort of dubious activities along with fellow members of her nefarious sorority.

“We do?” Reluctantly lowering my book to my lap and peering over the frames of my reading glasses, I scanned her face for clues and mentally replayed the events of the past few weeks, searching for any transgressions I might have committed, inadvertently or otherwise. Nope, nothing worthy of either a report or a confession.

“Whatever it is I’ve done I’m sure I didn’t do it,” I murmured, just to be on the safe side.

“It’s nothing you’ve done, darling,” she said, waving a hand dismissively. “It’s something I *need* you to do.”

Right then my internal domestic tranquillity alert level jumped from code green to code blue. We rarely use endearments when addressing each other except when engaging in—or about to embark on—an argument. Judging from her demeanor (composed) and expression (bland) I was pretty sure it was something I wouldn’t want to do and resigned myself to the inevitable. Not for nothing have I been this woman’s consort these many years.

“What might that be, dear?” I queried cautiously.

My spouse is generally forthright when presenting mundane matters. But when the request is likely to be undesired on my part, she employs the lateral maneuver—distracting me with feints and thrusts until I come to regard the idea, whatever it is, as my own and therefore an agreeable one. You’d think after all this time I’d be wise to her wiles and could see it coming, and you’d be right. You’d also think I’d have accumulated enough wisdom to avoid falling into her trap, but there you’d be wrong. I know what she’s up to. I know it’s there. I fall into it anyway. I’m hopeless.

“Wouldn’t you like to go on a little vacation, honey?” she queried, apropos of nothing.

“Would it expedite this conversation if I were to say ‘no’ straight off... *honey?*” I responded out of an obligation to put up a token resistance. “Besides, I’m already on vacation.” Which was true. I had opted to take off not only the summer term, which was just finishing up at the university, but the fall term about to get underway. When you hold a senior chair, you can do that sort of thing when you just have to have a break from the student hordes.

“Oh come on... just a short one... It’ll be fun, *mi amor.*”

“No.” And I meant it. I had been looking forward to many more months of leisure in the privacy and comfort of home and meant to enjoy every blessed minute of it.

“We really need your help, *mon chéri.*” My alert level spiked to code yellow as the ‘we’ in this context clearly meant the sisterhood and not just the two of us.

I suppose I'd better explain that my helpmeet is a practicing witch... a card-carrying member in good standing and an officer of *La Société Internationale Antique et Honorable des Sorcières Blanches, P.A.* "Professional association" is what they call it these days, the term "coven" being considered old-fashioned and politically incorrect. And it's strictly gender specific... guy witches have their own union. I'm not a guy witch, by the way, but something else entirely—a one-trick pony so to speak. I'm not even all that good at it. Excepting present company—naturally—I generally don't get along with witches all that much. There's a traditional animosity between their order and mine—with mine always getting the nasty end of the shaft... or wand. Whatever.

My lady wife and I never discuss the machinations of Club Witch (my term, not hers), having from the get-go settled on a "don't ask, don't tell" policy in the interest of marital harmony. She had never asked and I had never volunteered for any activity involving the society and I certainly wasn't about to start now.

"No," I said again, rather more firmly, and ostentatiously elevated my book so that it obscured her face. After a moment or so of silence building ominously beyond the pages I was pretending to peruse, I detected a dainty snuffle. Groaning inwardly, I put the book down again and observed the trembling lips and a single glistening tear sliding down one exquisite cheek. She so seldom wept that it unnerved me every time. I was powerless, even as I felt the big guns training in my direction.

"Okay. Let's hear it," I said gloomily.

She outlined the problem and the suggested plan for resolution. Of course it was something I didn't want to do and said so. She blithely ignored my ineffectual protest and continued explaining as I listened with increasing dismay until she stopped, at which point I had ratcheted up to code orange. The apparent conclusion of any such address is my signal to repeat everything back to confirm that, yes dear, I was paying attention and, yes dear, I understand the instructions.

"Let me get this straight... you want me to travel to a strange country and convince a pair of young people I don't know from Adam's housecat that they ought to mate for life and live happily ever after? *No problem!* I'll hop right on it."

"No need for sarcasm, *bébé*," she retorted primly.

"But, *querida*, aside from the fact that it's not our business to meddle in these people's lives and choreograph their destinies, why can't you or one of your girlfriends take care of it?" I grumbled.

My devoted spouse bestowed on me a look that conveyed faintly exasperated patience such as one might apply toward a beloved but mildly retarded child. "Because, *mein schatz*, you're the one with the degree in psychology and this problem requires expertise and finesse."

"Behavioral theorist, sweetheart... and I haven't done clinicals in over twenty years, as you well know. Out of practice!"

"No matter. It's like riding a bicycle... you never forget. You're perfect for the job. It'll be a piece of cake. Think of it as a condensed power seminar in romance-commitment relativity," she added helpfully.

Well, put that way, I did seem the logical choice. Still didn't want to do it.

"No, I still don't want to do it, *ma fleur*, and there's no good reason why I should... or is there?"

Her face reflected her internal struggle between providing a convincing argument in favor of the proposed mission and her reluctance to express it. The association has rigorous rules about what information the ladies (and I use that term loosely) are allowed to disseminate to ordinary folks or even semi-ordinary ones like myself. It's like being married to an intelligence agency

operative—she could tell me, but then she'd have to kill me. As far as I know and in my personal experience, she doesn't read minds or palms or tea leaves, tell fortunes, brew disgusting potions, travel via broomstick or turn recalcitrant husbands into toads. She may be capable of doing these things but I'd really rather not know about it. What she does admit to is an ability to "see" into both the past and the future, though she's not allowed to divulge her findings to lesser beings outside the order, not even her mate. Oh... and cast spells; *that* I've seen her do.

In any case, I was determined to hold my position on this issue. What I should have been doing was paying closer attention when my internal alert leaped to code red.

"Sorry, sweetpea, but it's just not on. Out of the question. This whole proposition is completely preposterous and I'm not going to do it. Count me out. And that's my final word on the subject!"

WHEN I CAME DOWNSTAIRS IN THE MORNING she was already seated in the breakfast nook overlooking the terrace and swimming pool. Her open laptop reposed on the table in front of her, whispering "big fat clue." Bigger clue: my all-time favorite breakfast was already prepared along with coffee just the way I like it, with the morning paper folded nearby. Clue of gargantuan proportions: On the terrace near the swimming pool and clearly visible through the French doors stood what appeared to be a blue one-holer outhouse that I was pretty sure had not been there the day before. An outhouse with a flashing light on top. I didn't have to see or smell the rat to know it was there. A big hairy one. Obviously, she was about to relaunch her campaign.

"No," I said, lifting the cover over the pancakes and reaching for the butter.

She heaved a great sigh.

"Nope. No way." I poured warm maple syrup over my pancakes.

Her nostrils quivered and she drew in her breath for dramatic effect before launching her grenade...

"This is serious. This is an *emergency*. The choices these young people make will ultimately have an impact *on our own family*."

I froze in mid-pour. Now she had my undivided attention. Family is everything and she knows there's nothing I won't do to promote and protect the welfare of our children and grandchildren.

"Meaning what, exactly? Are you're saying that if I don't go something bad will happen?"

"Well, no... it's more like something good won't happen."

"Could you elaborate?"

"Let's just say that, if you don't intervene, something precious will be lost to us forever... to our family's future, that is."

"All I have to do is talk them into committing to each other?"

"Basically, yes."

"So they're not together now?"

"Not exactly."

"How not exactly?"

"You'll see when you get there."

"Sounds like your plans are already pretty far along," I commented.

"Well, yes. We were sure you'd understand and want to help out." She smiled beatifically.

I mulled this over for a minute or two before responding with what I hoped was an appropriate degree of disapproval. "I take it this 'we' I keep hearing implies involvement with Auntie Elayne?"

Elayne Passepartout is head of their neopaganist society (in my estimation a smug and pretentious lot and overful of their own abilities—my lady wife aside, of course) and, incidentally,

my wife's maternal aunt. Elayne is a very powerful witch who scares the bejesus out of me; I endeavor to stay as far out of her way as possible. She objected strenuously to our alliance on the grounds that her niece was marrying not only out of her clan but way below her station. We've maintained mutual detestation ever since. For some reason, though, her abhorrence of me personally doesn't extend to our progeny, which she dotes on, having no children of her own. *Go figure.*

"It was Elayne's idea."

"What?!" I was genuinely shocked. Elayne wouldn't recommend me for dogcatcher.

My spouse was looking distinctly uncomfortable at this juncture and eyeing me with trepidation.

"Elayne has to be involved to a certain extent and I expect you to be on your good behavior."

Knowing curiosity will overcome caution every time in my case, she turned the laptop around and slid it across to my side of the table, lapsing into professorese: "A concise situation report and biographical sketches of your two main subjects, plus three ancillary persons with whom it will be necessary to interact in order to facilitate your objective. Oh, and photographs for identification purposes."

I scrolled down and studied the photos; they definitely had a patina of age on them. The clothing and hairstyles were suspiciously familiar. The rat stench intensified.

"When, exactly, were these taken?"

"Ah... a while back." Her evasiveness wasn't lost on me.

"How much of a while back?"

"1974."

"You're kidding, right?"

I snickered until she tossed over a faded Polaroid taken at the height of my antiestablishment pseudoflowerchild period. *Oh crap.* On the day manly good looks, imposing physique and tall stature were being handed out, I was—as usual—standing in the wrong line. So, just like every other average, ordinary joe, I overcompensated by exploiting my sole redeeming feature: I had good hair. *Great* hair, as a matter of fact... no small vanity in an era where glorious flowing locks on the male of the human species were both admired and celebrated. If a yak had mated with a troll doll and they'd had a love child, it would've had hair like mine—sun-bleached with just enough unruly waves to subvert all efforts to subdue it with a pocket comb.

I allowed myself a fleeting moment of nostalgia. Back then, my rationale for letting my hair run amok was that it made me look taller and sexier (or so I thought) and it bugged the hell out of my parents and college professors. It didn't help that I routinely dressed like a refugee from a band of ragpickers.

Suddenly I understood why I was being shown this particular image.

"You're not serious!"

"As a heart attack," she deadpanned. "To gain their acceptance, you'll have to blend in."

The unwelcome realization swept over me of what else this gig was going to entail. If this "problem" didn't exist in the here and now but was in fact an anomaly in the time-space continuum that occurred (or will occur or might occur) thirty-six years ago, that meant time traveling. I really, really hate time traveling. It wreaks havoc with my innards that no amount of Dramamine can forestall.

"You know how much I hate time travel," I whimpered.

"Don't whine, dear. It's unbecoming. And it's only thirty-six years—a relatively minor temporal displacement," she responded, somewhat tetchily.

I launched a feeble counterattack. “If as you say it’s an ‘historic’ event, doesn’t that mean their story’s already written?”

“T’aint necessarily so...” my wife countered primly, “History is fluid, you know... it can go forward and backward along parallel paths. We feel that a timely intervention will circumvent unfortunate decisions and prevent an adverse effect on history.”

“You mean if they drift apart and choose different mates?”

“Exactly.”

“So you’re saying if they didn’t... don’t... get together and found a dynasty, civilization as we know it will cease to exist?”

“No... of course not. You’re being facetious. It will merely flow along another course, but humanity will be a tiny bit poorer for the absence of the family they might have generated,” she intoned unctuously.

We locked eyes and wills for a few moments more. She could, of course, *make* me go... I knew that, and she knew I knew it. But I also knew without a doubt that she would never use her superior abilities to force me against my will. The bond of absolute trust between us is just that... absolute. We couldn’t have stayed together all this time without that. I made my decision.

“I’ll do it but I’d really like to know what this has to do with *our* family.”

“All I can tell is that it involves your favorite grandson and their eldest granddaughter... if there *is* one.”

“I have no favorite grandson... *all* my grandchildren are precious,” I lied judiciously.

“You forget to whom you lie. And in any case, he’s mine as well. But if you tell anyone I said so, it’s Toadsville for you,” she warned.

“I see. Is that it?”

“That’s all you’re getting,” she said firmly. As in, not for me to question the whys.

“Can Squirrel go, too?”

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea. Every time you let him out he gets you in trouble.”

I whined. “But I might need him.”

“Oh, all right. But don’t be coming home with another tattoo.”

“Good grief, woman! It’s *not* a tat. It was just an error in judgment a long time ago... and it was just the one! Get over it. Can we get back to the subject?”

“Certainly. Questions?”

“How much time do I have?”

“One week.”

“Excuse me? One week?!” I squawked. “Are you kidding?”

“Nope. Sorry. If the fix isn’t in by the girl’s twenty-first birthday party the opportunity will be lost.”

“One week!” I moaned. “One week to achieve what they’ve failed to accomplish by themselves in three years!”

We discussed the bones of the mission with mounting annoyance on my part as a few other minor omissions on her part were gradually unveiled...

As previously mentioned, I do possess a modest ability of my own. But what she was suggesting meant venturing into territory I’d never tried before. I presented my reservations.

“Oh, *that*... I’ll take care of that,” she blithely declared. *Wonderful*.

And, I had to go *right now* as the anomaly would be happening (or did happen or might happen) in exactly eight days... that is, eight days from thirty-six years ago today. Confusing, I know, but there you have it.

I had not, at this point, inquired as to *where* I was going or *how* I was going to get there but suspected it might have something to do with that mysterious blue outhouse on my terrace. While finishing breakfast I sped-read and committed to memory the text portions. *Great. A lonesome loser, a lost soul, the class clown and and a punchdrunk old man.*

Another objection occurred: "Wait just a minute! Am I going back as *me...* or as *him?*" Pointing to the Polaroid. "Will I still know everything I know now?" *Hah! Let her explain away that one!*

But explain it she did. "No worries, *liebchen,*" she soothed. "We researched this thoroughly. You'll be both... think of it as having a bifurcated persona. You'll be enjoying all the physiology, features and faculties of the twenty-three-year-old version of you, but you'll retain all your current memories and knowledge. You probably won't even notice when you're toggling between personalities."

Next thing I knew, I was being propelled out the French doors onto the terrace and toward the 'conveyance' that was going to take me where I needed to go. She had already arranged a backpack and this she handed over to me along with a small blue feather and explicit instructions for its use. She wished me luck, kissed me goodbye and shoved me through the door.

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## **FIELD JOURNAL: SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1974 • 8:45 AM**

**Travel notes:** *The captain ("just call me Doctor") of this extraordinary vessel announced he had just taken over operations and this was his first run. The flight—if it can be called such—was short and uneventful aside from a bit of wheezing, rumbling and vibration. Took care of the changeover with unsolicited advice from Captain Doctor who claims extensive experience in this matter. Stayed mainly in the lavatory, throwing up. Disembarked just after sunrise. Barfed in some bushes and set off to scope out the terrain.*

**General observations:** *So here I am, on the backside of nowhere in Yorkshire, England. No internet, no laptop, no smartphone, no digital camera—they wouldn't work anyway as they haven't been invented yet. Have only this crappy notebook, a felt marker and a ball-point pen.*

*My area of operations centers on this "Follyfoot" farm, maintained as a refuge for retired/rescued horses, and its surrounds. There are horses grazing in a meadow adjoining a grove of trees with an inviting little hidden lake and, in the distance, a cluster of stone buildings.*

*Except for absence of open range in the immediate vicinity, the countryside here is very much like home—scenic, if mainly agricultural. Pasturage interspersed with cultivated fields and grand sweeping vistas over rolling hills. Not much forest but enough to hide in if necessary. Basic commerce conducted in Tockwith, a ville located nearby.*

**Assessments from professional POV:** *Both primaries present with attachment disorders, albeit due to entirely unrelated childhood circumstances. Having only just recently become recognized as separate discipline in field, pediatric psychology won't address attachment theory, abandonment issues and separation anxiety until something like 15 to 20 years from now so can personally do nothing to ameliorate that particular brand of damage. Only viable alternative here is lead them toward open communications re feelings toward each other.*

**About Steve Ross:** *Appalling formative years involving parental abandonment, possible physical abuse, foster care, orphanage, reformatory, homelessness. Survival mechanisms consist*

of anger, denial and regression to introverted state. Exhibits confrontational and aggressive behavior when distressed, challenged or thwarted. Inadequate communicative skills. Little formal education. (Thirty years from now, psyche science will be associating dysfunctional childhoods with criminal behavior in adults.) On the plus side: Bright and a quick study; compassionate and kind to underdogs.

**About Dora Maddocks:** Absentee parents—overclasssed, overprivileged, completely self-absorbed with sociopolitical status. Child regarded as excess baggage and relegated to surrogate care since infancy. Comprehensive but incomplete boarding/finishing school education. Difficulty maintaining emotional balance, being either overly withdrawn or overwrought in turn. Resistant to changes in personal environment. Communication skills inhibited by shyness. On the plus side: Also quite intelligent and has developed a modicum of self-confidence, improved coping skills and formulated goals since assuming responsibility for farm.

**The problem:** He's prevented from pressing suit romantically due to fear of rejection and belief in class incompatibility. Also, lacking role models has no clue as to forming commitment. She can't overcome cultural inhibitions about making first overture (feminist movement and women's liberation just now getting underway here). Both seriously challenged re tactile response, having limited experience with touching, handholding, hugging, kissing—much less any more involved physical intimacy. Relationship stalemated and neither one willing to risk disturbing status quo.

**Additional notes:** Very little detailed information on three ancillary subjects. Don't know to what extent or in what capacity these are involved with primaries. Will have to play by ear.

**Plans:** Effect initial encounter with primary subjects on neutral ground. Assess current psyche/emotional status of both in comparison with case study analyses. Conceal plausible *raison d'être*. Gain access to residential premises if possible.

**Goals:** First, get their attention and formulate initial impression.

**Technical issues:** SHE Who Holds The Power assured me that the age regression will hold as long as necessary. I don't know as I've never tried it before. And it's been a long time since I let Squirrel out to play. There wasn't a mirror in the onboard restroom so I don't know yet how the transition worked out, cosmetically speaking. I don't *feel* too much different yet—maybe a little less creaky—but assuming my head will be requiring a period of adjustment to reinhabiting a body it hasn't occupied in 36 years.

**Note to self:** Now that that's out of the way, where's a Starbucks when you need a caffeine boost? Oh wait... Starbucks won't get here until 1998. Bummer.

SHE Who Must Be Obeyed insisted I keep a feather on my person at all times—something to do with the spell but I know better than to ask for specifics. Some things you're better off not knowing about. Doesn't have to be this particular feather... any one will do.

How did I let myself get talked into this? Because... "Women are by and large much stronger than men. If not physically, then in every other possible way." Blatantly plagiarized from John Paul Schultz on FaceBook but ain't it the truth?

Got my towel... got my feather... good to go.

# Sunday

## ***“Life’s too short to drink cheap wine or ride an ugly horse”*** • PROVERB

“STEVE!” DORA MADDOCKS’ VOICE ECHOED DOWN THE STAIRCASE. “Steve! Would you come up here for a moment?”

Already fidgeting at the breakfast table on this Sunday morning and waiting for Slugger Jones to start dishing up, Ron Stryker gave Steve Ross an exaggerated wink. “Hoick! Her Ladyship summons her faithful footman!”

The three young people had just finished mucking out the stables when Dora had tripped over a rake Ron had carelessly left lying on the ground and gone sprawling into the dung heap. Usually they only managed a quick hand-washing before eating, but Dora had required more thorough restoration to a hygienic state and a complete change of clothing. As punishment for this health and safety violation, Slugger was now making them wait for their breakfast until the girl could join them.

“Steve?”

Steve got up, giving Ron an annoyed look, and walked to the foot of the staircase. “What is it?” he called up.

“Just come up... please!”

Ron pulled a face and Slugger raised an eyebrow as if to say ‘get on with it’. Steve went up the stairs knowing he wouldn’t hear the end of this for days. Even though he and Ron both were now living in the farmhouse and occupying bedrooms on the same floor as the two female residents, he still experienced moments of unease at being alone upstairs with either of the girls.

The original farmhouse had been a two-story rectangular structure built on a north-south axis, and at some point a matching rectangle had been added perpendicular to the southern aspect. At the top of the stairs, immediately to the right, a narrow corridor served two bedrooms at the north end of the farmhouse. Initially this had been the nursery wing. Nowadays Steve and Ron occupied this end of the second floor. To the left, a wider central hallway extended past linen and airing cupboards, a storage closet, Dora’s former bedroom—with its single window facing out over the courtyard and beyond that the stableyard—and another small bedroom that had recently been transformed into a modern bathroom. This hallway concluded with doors to the east and west bedrooms—spacious sunlit chambers with multiple windows, fireplaces, and magnificent views of the surrounding countryside. Dora and Hazel Donnelly, the other female resident, inhabited these.

Steve ventured as far Dora’s open door and cautiously peered around the frame. “Dora?”

To his relief she was fully dressed and looking out an opened window, not turning around as he stood fidgeting in the doorway. “Look,” she commanded. When he still hadn’t moved she finally turned her head. “Oh for heaven’s sake, stop acting the dolt and come in here. You can’t see from over there.”

He sidled over next to her and obediently followed her index finger to the bottom of the east pasture which lay in a declivity below the earth dam impounding the lake. It couldn’t be seen from the ground floor but was visible in its entirety from the second.

“Out there... There’s a strange horse in with ours. See it? A yellow one?”

Steve squinted, picking out from among the familiar colors and patterns one that didn’t belong... a somewhat mustardy dun. “Looks more like a pony to me.”

“Pony, horse... whatever. It certainly wasn’t there earlier when we put the others out this morning,” she said.

Taking Dora lightly by the elbow, Steve steered her away from the window toward the door. “Breakfast first, then we’ll investigate, okay?”

Back downstairs and seated at the table, Dora was totally oblivious to Ron’s and Slugger’s carryings-on and the murderous looks Steve was shooting back in return. As usual with Dora, her mind was totally focused on a New Horse. “Someone must have let it in as soon as we turned our backs...”

“Could be,” Steve mumbled through a mouthful of toast and jam.

“Let what where?” Ron asked, spearing the last sausage.

“Or it could have jumped the fence from the road...” She drummed her fingers on the tabletop.

“I doubt that, Dora. That fence is more than a pony could manage.”

“What are you two talking about?” Ron asked loudly. He hated being left out.

“No need to shout, Ron,” Dora admonished, “It’s only a strange pony that’s got in with ours. We’re going to go have a look at it.” She started to get up only to have Slugger push her back down firmly with a hand on the shoulder.

“Oh no yer not, missy,” he declared, “not until you clean yer plate. That goes for you, too.” He shook his finger at Steve, who had also half risen from his chair.

Dora gave Slugger a baleful look and proceeded to cram away her breakfast as speedily as possible. Her etiquette instructor at her old finishing school would have fainted dead away. She and Steve stood up hastily, as did Ron.

“And just where do you think yer goin’?” Slugger stood with hands on hips, giving Ron the gimlet eye. “You got feed and supplies to fetch from the village...”

A MILD BREEZE SHEPHERDED COTTON-PUFF CLOUDS ABOVE and the bright sun had almost burned off the morning dew as Steve and Dora strode together toward the east pasture. Keeping her profile in his peripheral vision, Steve reviewed the intricacies of their shared three-year history. They’d first met under adversarial conditions and their initial exchange had been argumentative, but the visceral attraction had been immediate and, he believed, mutual. Of course, he’d been perfectly free to admire and desire the lovely Miss Maddocks in his private fantasy world... but he’d entertained no illusions of striking up any sort of association with a girl not only stratospherically higher in class but the niece of his employer. They had settled into a pattern of playful friendship that continued until a personal crisis involving his long-absent mother had called him away from the farm.

Whether that was to be a temporary absence or a permanent remove, Steve had no way of knowing at the time. It wasn’t until the day he left that he became fully aware that Dora’s feelings for him were far more than platonic. Her tears and anguished pleas caught him offguard and there was no time to examine it or his own unfamiliar emotional response. He’d reacted by bidding her farewell with a forced offhandedness he certainly wasn’t experiencing.

For ten long months Steven Ross labored in an attempt to rescue his wayward mother from her dissipated lifestyle. During that time he deliberately avoided any communication with the residents of Follyfoot and concentrated on his mission. He reminded himself every day that, really, there was nothing binding him to the farm, that he didn’t love Dora Maddocks, and that he meant nothing to her. But he couldn’t stop thinking of her and her desolate face at the gate.

All his efforts to rehabilitate Kathy Ross proved futile in the end. Rejected once again, he'd admitted defeat and gone to his only other living relatives—his maternal grandmother and his mother's sister—only to find that the old lady had died, the property sold and the aunt moved away, leaving no forwarding address. Out of options and with no other place to go, he'd returned to Follyfoot, fearing what changes might have transpired and unsure of the welcome he might—or might not—receive. Surely during his absence Dora would have turned her attentions elsewhere, or there would be someone new occupying his loft and no room for him.

His fears had proven unfounded. Everything was exactly as he'd left it, other than a few new old horses replacing those who had gone on to their rewards. Everyone seemed pleased to see him. Dora had flown to him with radiant happiness but stopped short of a physical embrace. He was home... and on the surface it was as if he'd never left.

Two subtle differences gradually revealed themselves to Steve during his first week back: Firstly, Dora's ardor hadn't ebbed one whit... was, in fact, even more openly and disconcerting on display... a sigh here, a fleeting touch there, a delicate nuance of speech, a dreamy glance from under lowered lashes. He ignored it as best he could for as long as he could. It wasn't that he didn't *want* to return her affection... it was that he *couldn't*.

The second difference lay in himself: During the months away, trying and failing to establish a normal relationship with the one person who should have been closest to him, Steve's already guarded heart had acquired yet another layer of armor, tempered by disappointment. All the good that had come to him in the protective environment of Follyfoot had come undone; he would have to start over. It took him a while to figure this out and even longer to decide how he would have to respond if and when Dora made an overt move in his direction either verbally or physically.

That time had arrived on a brilliant August afternoon, when they'd pulled up to give their horses a breather beside the hidden lake in the woods. In a short but momentous conversation, Dora had offered up her devotion and Steve had not so much declined this gift as evaded it with protestations of the fragility of love. Neither party had come away satisfied but from then on had managed to observe a non-threatening distance from each other.

Though lacking formal education, in sharp contrast to Dora's background of expensive schooling, Steve was neither ignorant nor stupid. He was all too aware of the psychological barriers in his mind and understood how they had come about, and that he and she, despite disparate upbringings, shared identical intimacy issues. And so they continued to rub along together, month after month... cognizant of yet refusing to openly acknowledge the bond that existed between them. He understood that something would have to change eventually, but harbored a paralytic fear of what that would mean for them... for him.

Almost a year later, the strain of maintaining the we're-just-friends fiction had produced a second confrontation that almost severed their relationship for good and all. They'd managed to get past that, too, but the illness and subsequent death of Dora's uncle had shifted the balance of power... physically, psychologically and emotionally. Dora had always been reactive rather than proactive. With the responsibility of running the farm thrust upon her, though, she'd become too preoccupied to expend much energy in romantic aspirations and the affair that wasn't had been relegated to a back burner. If any such feelings still existed, she masked them efficiently behind a façade of reserve.

Steve, on the other hand, had always concealed his paranoia beneath a carapace of bravado. There had never been a time in his life when he'd felt entirely safe and secure in his ability to control a situation. Tough talk and an aggressive stance had always been his only weapons and shields against uncertainty. For too long he'd assumed that eventually—once he overcame his

insecurities—he would achieve a level of self-confidence that would enable him to deliver all that Dora wanted of him, and that she would still be willing to receive it. *Eventually* had not yet arrived and his emotional advantage over her had slipped away. Now, having lost assurance that Dora still held any affection for him, he was adrift in a sea of doubt and confusion. Loss of control—whether over events or other peoples’ actions or his own—was anathema to Steve, yet he couldn’t seem to help himself, prevent himself from flying into tantrums over petty grievances or making intemperate remarks. And, he knew, the tendency was worsening. He shook himself back to the present.

How might Dora react if he simply reached over and took her hand? *But if I do that, even such a small gesture of affection, then she’ll expect more... and I can’t give her more... not yet.* In any case, he thought—erroneously—the status of their relationship was probably the last thing on her mind at the moment.

DORA HAD BEEN THINKING AS WELL, AND NOT ENTIRELY ABOUT THE MYSTERIOUS PONY in the pasture. Steve was rarely absent from her thoughts and seldom out of her presence more than a few hours. At the time of their coincidental arrival at Follyfoot, she had been so unhappy, without direction or goal and yielding willy nilly to the desires and demands of her parents and other even less understanding adults. He had been defensive and bristling with angry resentment at the world and everything in it, as prickly as a hedgehog. Both had found sanctuary on the small rundown farm, and a common purpose there.

Dora reflected on how much the two of them had changed in the past three years. Basically, Steve remained the pessimist, always seeing the dark cloud behind the silver lining, but his cynicism toward the world at large had softened considerably and his periodic fits of moody withdrawal were fewer and farther between. Dora had discovered in herself a sense of optimism and gumption she’d never even known she possessed. Her self-confidence continued to expand exponentially, but in such minute increments that the ability to challenge and overcome cultural inhibitions wasn’t yet within her grasp.

Only once had the nature of their relationship been discussed openly; that is, he had talked and she had listened. Steve had enumerated all the reasons why—in his estimation—they couldn’t be more than friends. She had demurred but he had brushed her off, apparently assuming the issue had been resolved on the basis of his opinions alone. From Dora’s point of view, nothing had been resolved—not then and not now. *Why does it have to be so difficult? Why can’t we just talk and sort out our feelings? Everyone else manages to do it, arrive at compromises and understandings and get on with their lives. Are there really such beings as guardian angels or some other entities who guide our life choices and protect us from the bad ones? If so, where is mine? And where is his?*

Steve opened the pasture gate, allowing Dora to pass through and closing it behind them. The east pasture had been left fallow for many months so that the grass could replenish itself, which it had done with a vengeance. Lush, green and dotted with wildflowers, it was belly-high to the horses and all that could be seen of the donkeys and ponies were withers and rumps. The reason the animals were there now was that Steve had discovered a section of damaged fencing in the larger west pasture, which he and Ron were going to be repairing later that day. Horses being gregarious creatures by nature, the small herd grazed at the far end in a loose cluster, the newcomer among them. It was hard going for the two humans on foot and it took some minutes for them to traverse the length of the field.

The Follyfoot band looked up as their humans approached but quickly lost interest, having already exchanged morning greetings with this pair only an hour or so previous. Nothing new to investigate and too early for treats. They all dropped their heads and went about their business.

All except for the dun pony, which stood there near side on to them with its head turned in their direction, calmly watching them and occasionally swishing its whiskbroom tail. Even from a distance it could be seen to have unnaturally pale eyes. As they drew closer, they could see the animal was larger than they'd originally thought... more horse-sized than it appeared from a distance.

It was a patently unattractive creature with abysmal conformation, roughly fourteen hands—maybe fifteen at most. Somewhere between eight and nine hundred pounds, Steve judged, and of parentage so inconclusive that even its specie was doubtful. Its hindquarters appeared to have been borrowed from another, much taller horse. Its coloring was more on the order of dirty straw than dun.

Steve and Dora halted when they were about thirty feet away, leery of spooking what was quite possibly the most ill-favored equine either one of them had ever beheld in their lives.

“Best give him a moment to size us up before we get closer,” Steve whispered. For once Dora agreed and stayed put, moving forward cautiously only when Steve gave her the go-ahead.

At twenty feet away they stopped again, taking in details that were now more apparent. It still hadn't moved and seemed to be assessing them with equal interest, twitching stubby ears, one of which canted off at a bizarre angle.

Steve whistled. “That's got to be the ugliest horse I've ever seen.”

“Oh, Steve... don't be so uncharitable. It's not his fault he's so... so, uh... unappealing,” she finished lamely.

“If it wasn't a stallion I'd call it a real-life nightmare. It's so ugly it should have been put down at birth,” Steve teased.

“Oh Steve!”

Then he kicked himself in the behind, mentally, for egging her on. When it came to horses, Dora had no sense of humor whatsoever and the life of every single one was a *cause célèbre* in her book.

“Look, Steve... how nicely he's waiting for us to come to him.” Dora extracted a carrot chunk from a pocket, offering it on the flat of her palm as she stealthily crept forward. When she had got close enough, the horse delicately extended its neck and lipped the treat from her after an appreciative sniff. “Oh... he's got blue eyes... no, not blue... they're green!”

Delighted, she began stroking the horse's Roman nose, immediately noticing that the underlying skin was neither pink nor dark or even mottled but more of a light tan similar to her own forearms. Her critical eyes took in with disapproval the scruffy coat that had obviously not enjoyed the attentions of a currycomb in quite some time, and the floppy burr-entangled mane that could have done with a good combing and a trim. Steve, meanwhile, had circled completely around them and came to rest beside Dora.

“How old do you think he is, Steve?”

“Let's have a look, shall we. Easy, boy...” The horse was amenable to having its teeth inspected. “Around three, I'd say.”

Steve moved around Dora and leaned against the horse's left shoulder, angling his knee behind the leg to get the animal to shift its stance so that Steve could lift its foot. But before he could bend down to grasp the foreleg, the horse obligingly raised its own foot and... Steve squawked, jumping back in shock.

“Steve! What is it? What's wrong?” Standing to the offside, Dora hadn't seen what he had: substantial toes where a compact hoof should have been. He rubbed his face in disbelief.

“Steve? Are you alright?” Dora was regarding him with concern now.

“Nothing... it’s nothing. I’m fine. It’s just... for a second there... I thought I saw toes.”

Dora looked askance and then started chuckling. “Oh go on with you!” Then, to the horse but loud enough for Steve to hear, “I suppose you must be Bucephalus, then.”

“Boo who?” Steve asked, confused.

“Bucephalus was Alexander the Great’s horse. Supposedly he had toes.”

“Learned that in finishing school, did you, girl?” Steve sneered, then at her look of reproach immediately regretted having spoken. It wasn’t her fault that she had benefitted from an upperclass education while his had been rudely interrupted before completion.

“I’m sorry.”

She sighed. It had become a bad habit with them; one would deride the other, swiftly following up with a sincere apology. Five minutes later it would happen again. “Go on and check his feet, then, if you’re going to. We can’t stand out here all day. There’s work to be done, you know.”

“As you wish, your ladyship.” *Oh no, not again. Another mental head slap.* Also not Dora’s fault that circumstance had resulted in Steve’s becoming her employee instead of just a fellow stablehand. He approached the horse once more, this time gingerly toeing aside grass with his boot. He looked down to observe a perfectly normal hoof. He merely touched the animal on the knee and the foot was promptly lifted for inspection... and held there. Same with the other three. Something definitely wasn’t right here.

As Dora carried on her one-sided discourse with the horse while emptying her pockets of carrot nibbles, Steve took a few paces backward and narrowed his eyes to calculating slits as he began mentally cataloging traits and facts that weren’t adding up. The animal possessed powerfully muscled hindquarters and shoulders and sturdy legs and, other than being a victim of negligent grooming, appeared to be in good health, well-fed and showing no signs of abuse.

Steve was puzzled by what looked like a brand high up on the long arch of the neck, but lacking the normal scar tissue that hot-iron branding creates and visible only as a pattern of white hairs amongst the dun—a series of odd angles and bars that meant nothing to Steve. Aside from that and an assortment of the usual minor scars one would expect to find on any horse that spent the majority of its life in the field, there wasn’t a single blemish or gallmark attributable to harness or restraints of any kind. And it had a mouth like velvet. Was it possible, Steve wondered privately, that this animal had never been saddlebroken even though it obviously was accustomed to being handled?

“Have a look at this, will you?”

Dora stepped around to look where Steve pointed. “What is it, do you think? It’s not a tattoo... but it doesn’t look like a brand, either.”

“I have no idea... but it’s certainly an identification mark of some kind. I’ve never seen anything like it. We can’t just leave him out here, Steve... he might be valuable. Someone might come along and think we’ve stolen him.”

“Who in their right mind would steal this... nag?” Steve hooted.

“Still... we can’t risk him causing trouble... I don’t suppose you thought to bring a halter and lead?”

“I don’t suppose you thought to, either?” he shot back, adding, “Sorry. We both should have thought of that. I’ll get a halter off one of the others.”

Coming back with the borrowed halter, Steve attempted to put it on and the horse moved its head. It didn’t shy away or jerk, but repeatedly turned its ungainly head one way and the other just far enough to prevent the halter from going past its nose.

“It’s no use, Dora. He’s not having it. We’ll just have to let him go for now.”

“But we have to do *something*,” Dora insisted.

“I’ll get Slugger to ring up the constable and the feed store to see if anyone’s posted a notice or made enquiries about a missing horse.”

But as they stood there discussing their plan, the horse evidently had one of its own. Abruptly moving away from them, it trotted toward the nearest stretch of fence and without gaining momentum simply floated over the obstacle with inches to spare before vanishing into the woods beyond.

Steve and Dora just stood there with their mouths gaping open in astonishment.

“Did you see that?” Steve finally choked out.

“I’m standing right here... of course I did.”

They turned to look at each other in disbelief. After a few moments, Dora shook her head and held her palms out. “That’s that, then. But we should report it anyway.” She started walking back across the pasture, Steve at her side.

At the gate, Steve spoke again. “Look, there’s really no need for you to help with the fence, with two of us on the job. Anyway, it’s not work for a girl. Why don’t you and Copper go for a nice long ride instead?”

Dora opened her mouth to object to being dismissed from the work crew then thought better of it. She knew she could work as long and hard as either of the boys, but in all honesty she’d really prefer spending a few quiet hours on the bridle path with Copper.

“If you’re sure?”

“I’ll just go and get him for you. Stay right where you are.”

COPPER WASN’T MUCH INTERESTED IN LEAVING BEHIND the verdant pasture and his cronies contentedly grazing in it, but he yielded to Steve’s firm grip on his halter and came along peaceably enough while Dora managed the gate. Without speaking, they proceeded up the slope to the track leading to the stables, through two more gates and into the yard.

“I have a bad feeling about that animal,” Steve stated uneasily, catching up a lead fastened to a tie post and clipping it to Copper’s halter.

Dora paused and cocked her head at him, pursing her lips. “Just because he’s so unattractive? That’s unfair. Seems perfectly nice to me. Gentle, well-behaved... a little odd, perhaps. Those eyes are a bit disconcerting, aren’t they? I’ve never seen eyes that color on a horse before and...”

“Dora...” Steve interrupted, “it isn’t just the eyes, is it? There isn’t a single mark to show he’s ever worn a saddle... or bit and bridle. His feet are properly trimmed but he hasn’t been shod in months, if ever. No nail holes, no rasp marks. Do you understand what that means?”

Dora shrugged. “So what? Maybe he’s a New Forest pony that was lost during transport?”

Steve shook his head. “No, Dora. He’s too tall and anyway he would have been culled as a colt just on the basis of eye and coat color.”

“Then perhaps he’s a liberty horse escaped from a circus,” she retorted impatiently, “It doesn’t really matter how he got in our pasture. He’s not there now and someone must be looking for him, surely.”

“You’re too trusting, girl. One of these days you’ll find yourself in real trouble.”

“And you’re always so suspicious!” Another one of their ongoing disagreements. She trusted everyone and everything; he trusted no one and nothing.

“If he shows up again, we’ll just have to try harder to catch him. We can put him in Bartleby’s box until his owner is located.”

Dora stalked away in a huff, as if the whole episode had been Steve's fault. He watched her retreating backside with both amusement and frustration as she headed toward the tackroom. Bartleby had succumbed to old age only a week ago and Steve and Ron had made bets with each other as to how many days would elapse before their Dora would install a new resident, as she always managed to do.

Having come outside to empty a mop bucket, Slugger had overheard most of the exchange. He shook his head. "Ticked her off again, have you?"

Steve nodded with a grimace. "Doesn't take much these days." He went on to describe the animal, emphasizing its ugliness and its spectacular leap over the fence.

"I can't seem to do anything right lately... seems like she's always upset with me about one thing or another. Something's wrong but I don't know what. Do you?"

"Do I know, he asks!" Slugger rolled his eyes. He had a fairly good idea about what was eating Dora... but it wasn't his place to interfere and he sensed that the two young people wouldn't appreciate any advice from an old man. No, this was something they would have to sort out for themselves. Trouble was, they'd already had three years to sort out a relationship which obviously wasn't moving ahead on its present course.

The two men looked at each other and shrugged.

"Women!" Steve muttered.

"God bless 'em!" the other answered.

Slugger went back in the house and Steve headed for the lumber pile to begin selecting replacement fence boards. When Dora returned, he stopped and came to stand beside her as she saddled up, his thumbs hooked in his pockets. She gave the girth once last tug and pulled the stirrups down. Declining his offer of a leg up, she reminded Steve about making enquiries and reporting a horse running loose. Steve closed the gate behind her as she posted off and went back to assembling the materials and tools he and Ron would need for the fence job.

An hour passed before Ron returned from the village and Steve went to help him and Slugger unload the Rover. He hardly spoke and was throwing the sacks down with unnecessary force when the older man grabbed his arm. "You bust 'em and you'll have a right mess to clean up!"

"Where's that horse, then?" Ron looked eagerly around the empty yard.

Steve shrugged. "We tried to bring it in but it flew over the fence like a bird and ran off."

Ron scoffed. "Get away!"

"Well it did. Dora and I both saw it."

"What sort of horse was it?"

"No idea. A small dun stallion, practically a pony—in any case, about three years old."

"A stallion... in *our* stables? There's trouble!" Ron scratched his ear as a crafty look came over his face. "Jumper like that must be worth a mint. If nobody claims him maybe we could..."

"Forget it, mate. It's also the ugliest horse I've ever seen in my life. No self-respecting competitor would be caught dead riding him; he'd be laughed out of the ring."

"You know... we could get us a couple of decent brood mares and..."

"I said forget it. He's not ours and we're not in the breeding business, in case you've forgotten. We're in the horse rest home business and now have all these other ones to school as well. And not enough hands to cope with what we've got." Steve was now loading boards onto the cargo deck of the ancient LandRover.

"But..."

"Steve's right. We can't take on any more mouths to feed or muck out after until we get some help," Slugger cut in. "So get back to work. That fence ain't gonna fix itself. When yer done loadin', come in and get yer lunch."

Ron muttered something *sotto voce* about bossy old men but went off to retrieve the toolbox. Slugger and Steve gave each other a knowing look, aware that any time Ron Stryker got a new moneymaking scheme lodged in his mind he wouldn't be giving it up that easily.

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## **FIELD JOURNAL: SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1974 • 12:30PM**

**Atmospheric conditions:** *Continued mild but rain coming on later in the day.*

**Immediate location:** *What appears to be a bridle path looping around that little lake in the woods.*

**Initial contact:** *My subjects both seem like perfectly ordinary young people who know each other well enough to peck at each other freely, but not like boyfriend/girlfriend. No open displays of affection.*

*For all that he's quick to take in physical details, Steve seems to rely too much on first impressions and is very judgmental of appearances. IMHO, won't easily be persuaded to set aside preconceptions long enough to consider other POVs and will probably be very difficult to influence.*

*A thoughtful, sympathetic soul, this Dora-more concerned with immediate rectification of undesirable conditions or situations (people or animals) than with what she's actually seeing. Doesn't stop to consider possible side effects or consequences of interference. Basically good natured. Should be fairly easy to win over.*

**Equine profiles:** *Permanent residents are mostly geriatrics with varying degrees of disability and fascinating if sad personal histories. Two or three peers in terms of age. They are aware I'm not one of them but surprisingly tolerant.*

**Plan:** *Meet with each subject in isolated scenario. Assess ability to deal with unknown quantities and abstract theories. Gauge reactions when presented with challenges. Find common ground to open up dialogue.*

**Technical issue:** *Anatomical glitch encountered. My bad. But the look on Steve's face was worth it... ROFL! Letting Squirrel out seemed like a good idea but was very taxing physically on account of being out of practice. SHE may have had a point. I could blame his unfortunate appearance on my rusty skills... but, truth is, I never could get him quite right.*

**Note to self:** *Alrighty then... time to get down to business. But first, go for a swim. Get in the mindset. Stay cool!*

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# *“Good things happen when you meet strangers”* • YO-YO MA

HAVING BEEN ENCOURAGED TO GALLOP OFF HIS INITIAL HIGH SPIRITS, Copper was now content to proceed at a leisurely walk on a loose rein in the general direction of home. Dora turned him off the farm track and onto the path meandering just inside the periphery of what Ron jokingly referred to as FollyWood, ten acres of woodland that had been miraculously preserved from agriculturization and wartime deforestation. Roughly triangular in shape, the wood was comprised mostly of mature specimens of oak, whitethorn and ash providing a moderate canopy over a groundcover of shade-tolerant shrubs and bushes. The southern and eastern legs of the triangle marked the boundary fences with two neighboring farms. From its apex Follyfoot land extended north toward the county road. At this northernmost point the trail looped around a jewel of a tiny hidden pond before rejoining the farm track on the way back to the stable. Along the eastern leg, dense undergrowth on either side and intertwining branches above formed a tunnel through which coins of sunlight dappled the path, lending a subaqueous glow to the shadowy dimness.

With Copper more or less on autopilot, Dora’s mind churned with concerns: the ongoing work on the farmhouse and stables and what next needed attention; the ever-decreasing number of retired and rescued equine residents; the escalating number of young, fit horses being consigned to them for schooling; the dearth of badly needed stable attendants; her upcoming twenty-first birthday, upon which she would gain access to the trust fund her grandmother had established for her years ago; and always... always... what to do about Steve.

What had initially begun as girlish infatuation three years ago had solidified into as yet unrequited love for the man. She knew he cared for her... he had once even said he couldn’t imagine his days without her presence in them. On the basis of that alone, she had relented on her determination last year to send him on his way and out of her life, after she had outright told him he had to leave. He had asked her to “bear with him.” And what then? Had she expected their relationship to start moving forward, beyond mere friendship, to something more formal with more of a traditional expectation? Of course she had. But that hadn’t happened.

The past year had brought significant changes to Follyfoot, the catalyst being the not unexpected death after a lengthy illness of Dora’s uncle and mentor, Colonel Geoffrey Maddocks, leaving her sole heir to his entire estate aside from substantial bequests on behalf of Slugger, Steve, Ron and Hazel. The Colonel’s guardianship of Dora’s person had expired at her eighteenth birthday, but that of her trust funds remained in the hands of the Maddocks family’s solicitors until she turned twenty-one. The Colonel had left detailed instructions as to disbursement of funds for the continued maintenance of Follyfoot Farm and operation of Hollin Hall, should Dora choose to occupy the mansion. She had not, and the stately residence had been closed up until she reached her majority and could decide what to do with it. Other accommodations had been arranged according to the Colonel’s wishes and most of them had now been fulfilled.

Mr. Charles Burnham, the Colonel’s solicitor and personal friend, had taken Dora in hand and organized all that needed to be done. A financial manager and accountant had been recommended and retained. The farm had been incorporated as a horse training business which though barely breaking even provided each of the residents a modest but dependable stipend. Separate household and farm accounts had been established; Dora and Steve between them still made decisions regarding purchases of supplies and equipment and hiring of incidental help,

and Slugger was still in charge of household expenses, but all paperwork was now turned over to the accountant for monthly settlement.

A reliable contractor had been engaged to begin renovations to the venerable stone farmhouse, beginning with the upper story. Ron had become a permanent resident when his father had remarried and the bride, a strident and disagreeable woman, had made it quite clear that her plans for her new domain did not include having a grown stepson lurking about. Getting Steve to give up his loft over the stables had been like pulling hens' teeth. Cold in the winter, hot in the summer, damp or dusty according to the season, it had nonetheless been home to him for three years... the only real home he'd ever had. He'd only lately come around to agreeing that the space could be put to better use as a dormitory for future stablehands once it was fixed up. He, too, now lived in the house. Slugger was temporarily sleeping in Dora's old room until refurbishment of his own downstairs bedroom was completed.

At first Dora had been so overwhelmed by the rapid pace of change swirling around her that she had wanted to hide in a closet... or run to a grownup for shelter. But Uncle Geoffrey wasn't there anymore and her own parents were... well, as they had always been—unavailable and for the most part indifferent. Dora had had to grow up very quickly. Having an abundance of funds at one's disposable didn't always make one's life happier, she reflected ruefully... easier, perhaps, but not happier. Steve was less stressed, now that he was relieved of constantly worrying over where the money was coming from to run the farm... but his attitude toward their relationship had not improved one iota. If anything, he had lately become even more remote and she didn't know why.

In some respects life proceeded no differently than it had before: Stalls still had to be mucked out and animals fed, watered, trained and looked after every day. Arguments still arose between Dora and Steve and between Steve and Ron, but these were usually over procedural issues rather than fiscal. Slugger's interminable stew was still as unpalatable as ever and there were days Dora felt that if she had to look one more egg in the face she would simply scream. She had signed up for a cookery course conducted by the Tockwith Women's Association and, with gentle urging and assistance on her part, Slugger had lately been undertaking occasional forays into other meal options with generally favorable results. At first he had fiercely resisted any infiltration of 'his' kitchen and 'his' duties, but had gradually—though not altogether graciously—accepted Dora's taking over cooking chores once or twice a week... not that her productions were as yet anywhere near as good as what she hoped to achieve. As Ron put it, 'When Dora first come here, she couldn't boil water. Now she can boil water good as anybody!'

During much of his tenure in the farmhouse, Slugger had been its sole mainstay. But with renovations nearly completed, rooms which had been shut up and disused for ages were now open again. It was entirely too much for one person, especially one getting along in years and beginning to exhibit the usual infirmities that went along with that. Dora had just negotiated an arrangement for a full-time housekeeper beginning tomorrow morning. She planned to break the news to Slugger tonight after supper and anticipated a full-scale rebellion on his part... and hurt feelings.

Then there was Ron and Hazel to consider. When Hazel Donnelly had in turn come under the Colonel's guardianship shortly after her installation at Follyfoot at the age of sixteen, her inappropriate attentions to Steve had caused her and Dora to get off on the wrong foot—a situation that was quickly remedied. The wild, willful girl had done a complete turnaround in a few short months, proving to be highly intelligent and throwing herself into schoolwork with a dedicated passion which had resulted in her skipping a grade ahead. She had achieved the highest levels with distinction and obtained her school leaving certificate with honors. The

mutual attraction that had blossomed between the almost eighteen-year-old former delinquent and twenty-three-year-old Ron Stryker was verging on becoming a serious attachment, and had had a surprisingly salubrious effect on both of them. Hazel was currently off on an adventurous gap year of travel.

The remaining Big Question was: Where was Dora's own life going? Almost all her friends and acquaintances were already married or at least engaged. Soon she would be turning twenty-one years old, leaving her girlhood behind forever and officially—in her mind—entering the realm of spinsterhood... what her peers referred to as the sisterhood of the undead and unwed. Three years ago she wouldn't have minded so much. Then Steve had come into her orbit. Now, what she wanted—more than anything in the world—was a normal home with Steve as her husband in it, and children to love and cherish as neither she nor Steve had been.

Dora wasn't entirely ignorant of the facts of life. She'd dated other boys and enjoyed a few mild flirtations along the way, for the most part fending off their fumbling attentions. But that was the extent of her romantic experiences. She had overheard enough whispered conversations among classmates at school and village girls in the café to know how romance was *supposed* to work. She had fantasized endlessly about kissing Steve, the kind of jelly-kneed, spine-tingling, shooting-star kisses she had only read about in the borrowed melodramatic novels she had kept hidden from her mother under her mattress. And, too, she had imagined intimacies far beyond kisses.

Dora realized that marriage didn't always equate to fulfillment and that sexual intimacy in itself, even if mutually desired, was no more than biological mechanics at work. She knew as much from Ron's endless boasting in earlier days of his conquests and ongoing scurrilous accounts of this or that bird—a character trait she had found most repulsive—and she was sure it was only fear of Steve's volcanic temper that in the beginning had kept Ron from making advances on her. She was thankful that Ron had mellowed considerably since then, especially now that Hazel occupied his attentions and governed his behavior even in her absence.

Steve, in comparison, was as a cloistered as a monk. In the time Dora had known him, he had never spoken of previous girlfriends and only twice had shown interest in another woman. One of those associations, she knew, had flamed up far beyond mere interest, but the girl had gone away and never come back and the subject had never come up again. Dora considered for a few moments the problem of class boundary. She herself refused to acknowledge its presence, but for Steve it represented an impenetrable barrier.

Common sense dictated that it was time to abandon this unattainable dream... way past time... and start looking elsewhere for a suitable mate. As always when she allowed herself to dwell on the love that would never be hers, her eyes brimmed with tears and spilled over.

At that moment, with all these concerns competing for brainspace in Dora's head, Copper halted so suddenly she almost went over his neck. He held his head up and whickered, still and alert with his ears pricked forward, their tips almost touching.

“What is it, boy? What's the matter?”

They had arrived at the hidden lake where the path came closest to the grassy bank. She glanced around, not finding anything amiss until she chanced to look down and spotted a pair of ragged jeans with holes in the knees and a threadbare chambray work shirt spread on an adjacent bush, with a battered backpack on the ground underneath. Wiping a hand under each eye, she slipped off Copper and stepped to the edge of the bank but there was no one to be seen.

“Hello! Who's there?” she called out. Nothing happened for several seconds, and then there was a soft sploosh as something surfaced beneath an overhanging bush on the far side of the pond. A disembodied head glided across the water towards her, leaving a chevron of ripples in

its wake, and stopping within a few feet of the bank. Dora found herself gazing down into a pleasantly smiling face with a generous mouth that tilted upwards at the corners.

“Hello yourself. I’m Bernard.” The voice was low-pitched and husky, with a buttery accent she couldn’t quite place.

DORA BLINKED SEVERAL TIMES IN CONSTERNATION. “Excuse me?”

“You must be Dora.”

“I... er... how do you know my name?”

“This is the Follyfoot farm, right?”

“Well, yes... but...”

“Then I’m in the right place.”

“The right place? I don’t understand, Mr. ...”

“Just call me Bernard. I’m from the future and I’m here to help you.”

“Help me... do what?”

“Whatever you need help with.”

“But... what are you *doing*?”

“Um... swimming?”

“Are you out of your mind?” she sputtered.

“Possibly,” he agreed.

“This is private property! You’d better come out of there right now,” she demanded.

“Glad to oblige but... if you don’t mind...?” He inclined his head toward the bush on which his clothing hung.

Dora gasped and whirled away, her face aflame. “Oh please!!! Put your clothes on!!!”

“That’s the general idea.”

She heard splashing as he clambered up onto the bank behind her and a few minutes later, “Okay. It’s safe.” He was zipping up his jeans as Dora turned around to come face to face with wide-set, startlingly translucent gooseberry-green eyes. He was exactly her height and probably near her own age.

“Do men usually run around naked where you come from?” she asked stiffly, acutely embarrassed.

“I wasn’t running... and I wasn’t expecting an audience.” As he reached for his shirt Dora surveyed his compact torso with the sort of golden brown tan that one usually saw only on holidaymakers lately returned from tropical climes. She had ample opportunity for further scrutiny as he extracted a towel from his backpack and attacked a riot of undulating hair, coarse and tawny as a lion’s mane.

Stuffing the towel back in the backpack, the stranger straightened up and favored her with a quirky grin, displaying shiny white teeth slightly out of alignment. He wasn’t at all good-looking in the usual masculine sense but oddly striking. The ludicrous thought flashed through Dora’s mind that with a good stylist and a bit of makeup he’d make a passably pretty girl, although his nose was ungirlishly wide and a little snub with a small bump at the bridge.

A small iridescent blue-green feather depended from a thin plait woven into his hair, just behind the left ear. Her thoughts were further derailed as her eyes traveled from the oversize blue shirt, sleeves rolled above the elbow, and down the disreputable jeans to bare feet protruding from beneath frayed hems. No one went shoeless in Yorkshire except when bathing or sleeping.

“Um... where are your shoes?” she asked stupidly.

He looked down as well. “Don’t have any.” Looking back up, frowning, “You’ve been crying... are you alright?”

“None of your business... it’s... a personal problem.”

“Sorry about that.”

Dora sniffed and tried to smile. “I’ll get over it.”

“Nice horse you got there.”

“Thank you. He’s an...”

“Anglo-Arab. Yeah, I can see that.”

The stranger was bending over and rummaging around in his backpack, coming up with a lidded plastic container from which he removed something small and silvery. Before Dora could complete her response, he had laid the object in the palm of his hand and presented it to Copper while resting his forehead against the horse’s. Copper’s nostrils flared as he investigated the offering... and then it was gone and the big red horse was avidly snuffing for more.

“What did you just give my horse?”

“Sardine.”

“You fed him a *fish*?” she squeaked, appalled.

“Sure. Why not? He seems to like it.”

Dora was speechless as he wiped his hand on his jeans and held it out to her.

“Let’s try this again. My name is Bernard and I’ve come about the stable job. My apologies for swimming in your lake without permission. I didn’t mean to alarm you.”

Dora took the proffered hand hesitantly—she detested the smell of fish—and sensed rather than felt the faint current that pulsed between them, followed by a rare and inexplicable surge of self-confidence. It *had* crossed her mind that there quite possibly *might* be something to be alarmed about—all alone in the woods with a strange man—but for some reason she wasn’t in the least bit worried. And she should have been outraged that he had, without her permission, fed her horse something as outlandish as a sardine—but she wasn’t.

“It’s okay about the bathing... swimming, although you want to be careful about trespassing on private property unless you know the owner allows a public right of way for riders and rambles. About the job... I... we, that is... yes, we’re looking for help... a couple of people, actually... but...” Truth was, they were desperate for help and the three people who had responded thus far to their ads posted around town on bulletin boards and in the *Tockwith Examiner* classifieds had proven completely unsuitable.

“We? Don’t you own this place?” Bernard inquired politely.

“I do, yes. Steve is sort of like... my stable manager. We usually make these decisions together.”

“Whatever. Like I said, I’m here to help. Of course, I understand if you have to consult with this Steve first.”

“I’m perfectly capable of making a hiring decision on my own, thank you,” Dora retorted sharply. “But as to *hiring* you, I don’t... we... that is, I don’t know anything about you. You’re certainly not from around here.”

“True... but what’s that got to do with anything?”

“I don’t know... I hadn’t considered... we can’t afford to pay much.”

He shrugged. “Don’t need money... just food, a place to sleep and access to a bathroom.”

Dora furrowed her brow. “I’m not sure I heard you correctly... are you... um... saying you’ll work for *nothing*?” she said carefully, not knowing how to deal with this extraordinary offer.

“Yeah... just my keep. But I’m a real easy keeper. So how about it?”

She was about to say no but with an deal like that... what came out of her mouth unbidden, although she was uncomfortably aware of the fit Steve was sure to throw, was “When can you start?”

“How about right away? Okay if I sleep in your barn?”

“Well... I suppose that would be alright. There’s a bed in the loft above the upper stables. Steve used to sleep there. It’s not much but...” Her voice trailed off uncertainly.

“Cool... Catch ya later, then.”

“We usually have dinner around six o’clock, right after we’ve brought the horses in for the night. Just come to the kitchen door—it’s the one facing the stableyard.”

“Okay... thanks. Might take a raincheck on that, though. Got a couple of things I need to do first.” Bernard looked to the west and sniffed the wind. “Storm coming on. You might want to get your stock in before sundown.”

Dora lifted her own nose but detected nothing other than the fragrance of ripened windfall apples. Odd, that... as there wasn’t an apple tree in sight.

“What makes you think there is?” she questioned, doubting the veracity of his claim. It was still balmy and sunny and there hadn’t been any such prediction on that morning’s weather report.

He grinned and tapped his nose. “I know these things. Trust me.” With that he picked up his backpack and vanished into the undergrowth, leaving Dora standing in the path with her horse.

DORA REMOUNTED AND HAD TO CLUCK TO COPPER SEVERAL TIMES TO GET HIM TO GO. He balked just a little, turning his head this way and that in disappointment, evidently hoping his new friend would suddenly reappear with more of the unusual but tasty treats. As they broke out of woods back onto the farm track, the sense of well-being Dora had experienced in Bernard’s presence trickled away but the afterimage of his lambent green eyes stayed with her in a most disturbing way.

Almost from day one Steve had been the benchmark against which all other men had been judged and found wanting. To her, Steve was the embodiment of everything she had ever found physically attractive in the opposite sex. More than that, she admired the breadth and depth of his character and the courage of his convictions. Above all, she loved his empathetic heart that reached out to comfort others but consistently denied entrance to those who would comfort him.

Irrational comparisons skipped across her mind. Steve was sable, firelight and hot chocolate. Bernard was all sun, sand and tropical seabreeze. Where on earth had *that* come from? This newcomer wasn’t drop-dead gorgeous—like Steve—but attractive enough in his own way. No, that wasn’t it... *compelling*... that was the word.

Abruptly she snapped out of her reverie as she rode by the fence-mending team, stopping to visit for a few minutes and see how they were getting on. She didn’t mention her encounter. That would only have got Steve wound up. Slugger came out of the house to greet her as she dismounted to open the first gate. He held the second one open as she led Copper through.

“Good ride? Got a nice sammich waitin’ on you. The boys has already et.”

“Well, I was having a good ride until...” She related the exchange in the woods as Slugger helped unsaddle and rub down Copper, excluding the fact that she had just extended an offer of employment to a complete stranger and agreed to give him access to their home. (And was it really employment as such if someone volunteered to work for free?) She was going to have to do a bit of thinking on the best way to defend her actions.

“I don’t much like the idea of you out there ridin’ alone with some dodgy bloke on the loose.”

“I don’t think he was dangerous, Slugs, just... different. I think maybe he was an American.”

“An American, you say? Might be he’s a tourist what got lost. Did he give a name?”

“Yes... he said his name was Bernard. And he wasn’t a tourist... he was actually on his way here to apply for the stablehand position.”

“You told him to shove off, right?”

Dora shrugged. “Actually... no... I hired him.” She hadn’t meant to blurt that out but, seeing Slugger’s dismay, added defensively, “He starts tomorrow. He’ll be having his meals with us and using the downstairs loo. Oh... and sleeping in Steve’s loft for the time being.”

Silence followed before Slugger, dumbfounded, shook his head slowly. “I hope you know what yer doin’, him bein’ a complete stranger and all. Steve ain’t gonna like it.”

Dora sat up straight with that determined look Slugger knew only too well. “Whether he likes it or not doesn’t concern me at the moment. We need help and we need it now. It’s not like we’re able to pick and choose from among *competent* applicants. As you may have noticed, there haven’t been any, so I’m going to at least give this one a try.”

The shift in her pronouncement from the plural to the singular wasn’t lost on Slugger. Neither was this sudden sprouting of assertiveness from the normally deferential Dora. *Something—or someone... this stranger in the woods?—has put a bug in her ear today.*

“What’s done is done. And you *are* the mistress of Follyfoot, after all,” he muttered unhappily.

Dora laid a hand on his arm. “We will give him a chance, won’t we? He seemed nice enough... and Copper like him.”

Appealing to him for affirmation... ah, much better. Slugger patted her hand awkwardly. “Of course we will, girl.” *I’ll have my eye on him, you can depend on that.* Inwardly, he dreaded the clash to come. Steve would feel slighted and resentful because he hadn’t been consulted. Not only that, if the newcomer was anything other than too old, homely or ill-favored to represent competition for Dora’s attention, Steve’s jealousy would get in the way of his even trying to accept her decision graciously.

“Did Steve remember to make those calls or ask you to do it? Has anyone called back?”

“Nobody knows nothin’ about no missin’ horse. Come and have your lunch now.” He looked curiously at Dora as they strolled toward the farmhouse.

“About what that lad said... about the weather turnin’... he’s right. We got rain and cold comin’ on. I can feel it in me bones and me arthrititis is actin’ up.” He gestured toward the west where a thin dark cloudbank was building beyond the undulant horizon. They entered the farmhouse and Dora went to wash up. Slugger had her sandwich and tea on the table when she got back and he sat down opposite her with a bowl of potatoes to peel, spreading newspaper on the oilcloth.

Dora stopped eating for a moment and a peculiar look came over her face. “He did say something rather odd.”

“He who?”

“Bernard. I’ve only just remembered... when he first introduced himself, he said ‘I’m from the future and I’m here to help.’ What do you supposed he meant by that?”

“No idea. Just a bit of nonsense, sounds like. Americans are a strange lot anyway,” Slugger said, not paying much attention just then. Her comment would come back to him later that evening.

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## **FIELD JOURNAL: SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1974 • 7:00PM**

**Atmospheric conditions:** *Dark and cold outside with hard rain.*

**Immediate location:** *Loft area over stables—evidently where Steve lived until fairly recently. There’s an iron bedstead with a lumpy mattress, a chest of drawers, a small table and a*

straight-back chair. A single sash window looks out over the stableyard. One overhead light fixture with an unprotected bulb, operated by a pull chain, but no other electrical outlets; the wiring looks new—a line running up the stairs and stapled to the wall.

Before I got here someone (probably the girl) brought up fresh bedding, a blanket and pillow, a basin, a pitcher of water, soap and towels and a roll of toilet paper. (There's a thunderbug under the bed—haven't seen one of those since I was a pup!) Also a kerosene lantern and matches; the power must not be too reliable. The roof overhead seems watertight; haven't noticed any leaks yet. It's a little chilly but not too bad... probably body heat from the horses below help keep temps up. It's a bit spartan but similar to my first college dorm room except smells better (like horse) instead of unwashed roommate and stinky gym socks.

Dora left me a note inviting me to dine with them but decided to pass on that since still feeling queasy. Too bad I missed supper but probably would've just thrown it up anyway. Should be over that by tomorrow. A hot shower would've been nice.

**Results:** Wasn't expecting the first encounter to take place where it did but I think the meeting with Dora went well. Her reservations aside, I believe I have at least piqued her interest. She seems uncertain of her authority even though she's owner and operator of this concern. Her relationship with Steve is somewhat of a puzzle—the way she talks, sounds more like friends who have become business partners and nothing more. Are they equals or is one subordinate to the other... and if so, could this be what's holding both of them back from taking it to the next level?

Also wasn't expecting to get my foot in the door this easily but gaining access to the premises right away was an unexpected bonus. Had another look around for orientation purposes before locating the loft and settling in.

**Plan:** Tomorrow, get myself introduced to the rest of the gang and figure out how to engineer private conversations with each.

**Technical issues:** None encountered upon retransformation—at least, none I'm aware of. Would need a mirror to know for sure and there isn't one here. Seems like all of me is back where it's supposed to be and in normal working order, though.

**General observations and questions:** Why was Steve living in the loft and not in the house, which certainly looks big enough? Is there some sort of unwritten moral code prohibiting unrelated young people from sleeping under the same roof?

I gathered from the case notes that "Sluggo", the old man who also lives here (well, ss isn't that old!), must be some sort of family factotum or farm overseer—in any case, someone the girl's guardian trusted implicitly or otherwise she wouldn't have been allowed to live here unchaperoned. Haven't yet seen him or the two other subjects—Ron and Hazel. Evidently all five of them are now living in the house (so much for the moral code idea unless it's believed that a clutch of adolescents are less likely to indulge in hanky-panky than a single pair).

I'm guessing she hasn't broken the news yet about hiring me or someone (probably Steve or Sluggo) would've already been up here to check me out. Of course, it is pretty foul

outside and could be they just don't think it's important enough to get cold and wet over. I'd sure like to be a fly on the wall when this comes up in conversation.

Took a nap earlier and woke up when someone (Ron, I'm guessing) cranked up a motorcycle and took off. Drifted back to sleep and woke up again when the horses were being brought in by Steve and Dora. I could overhear some of their conversation as they were putting horses into their stalls below but none of it was personal. The horses know I'm up here but no one else does yet.

**Observations re Dora:** The photo doesn't do her justice. I wouldn't call her classically beautiful but she's extremely attractive with a good figure, a sweet little square face with an unblemished complexion, chipmunk cheeks, small even teeth and warm hazel eyes. Wears too much eye makeup and would probably be just as pretty without it but that's the current style. Her hair is golden brown. I've always liked the feather-cut and shag hairstyles of this era. She's about my height (5 feet 5 inches) so is taller than I expected but might be shorter without the boots. Believe her accent is what they call "posh" which I think means educated. Wonder what she makes of mine? Back then (or back now), mine was still backcountry mountain boy with a faint whiff of the Metis French spoken by my Canadian/Cree/Chippewa grandmother who lived with us.

Dora seemed to have a lot on her mind this morning and wasn't exactly overflowing with good humor. Have no idea if her worries have to do with the farm or the state of her love life or some other problem. She appears to be in good health otherwise.

**Observations re Steve:** (From this morning) A very handsome youngster. Bet he's a chick magnet of the first order. He's got all the good looks I used to wish I had. Girls seem to go for tall, dark and broody. Okay... so he's not that tall. But, in comparison, I probably resemble Peter Pan's homely cousin. Not that it matters... I'm here to conjoin, not compete.

**Notes to self:** SHE neglected to mention there's a fair population of Others in this region—like that lady of the lake I was in this morning. Lucky for me she's a happy but lonely spirit and was glad of the company, otherwise I'd be one drowned rat by now. BTW, her name is Myrtice which is a variant of Myrtle which of course is an aromatic green shrub sacred to the Goddess of Love. Is this, like, a HUGE coincidence or what? She said she'd be delighted to help with the mission if I could figure out a way to get them both in the water at the same time. She almost had them once but it didn't work out. Will have to give this some thought.

# ***“Whatever is begun in anger ends in shame”*** • BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

THE AFTERNOON HOURS PASSED QUIETLY ENOUGH. Dora had taken sheets, blankets and pillows up to the loft. Although electricity had finally been extended to all the outbuildings, the farm was subject to occasional power outages during heavy weather and kerosene and paraffin lanterns were still kept in each building as backup. She left an unlit lantern and a book of matches on the old warped dresser, along with a note to Bernard in case he showed up late.

Dora went back to the house and upstairs to wash up and change clothes before reporting to the kitchen to fulfill her promise to Slugger to learn something new every week. This afternoon it was the daunting task of creating pastry dough that didn't look, feel or taste like a pallid lump of putty. Learning how to cook under Slugger's tutelage was somehow much more difficult than in her cookery classes; the man never measured anything. It was always a handful of this, a knob of that, a pinch of whatzit, a chunk of something else... yet *his* pastry dough always turned out light, flaky and delicious. *His* pastry dough never stuck to the rolling pin like a limpet to a piling before falling apart. She tried to conjure up a vision of herself in a frilly pinny, serving up a slice of freshly baked apple pie to a certain dark-haired individual... such a silly dream.

Scraping carrots at the other end of the table, Slugger didn't bother asking what was troubling Dora; he knew all too well. *Someone needs to take that prideful young man by the ears and shake some sense into him before someone else came along and spirits Dora right out from under his nose. And that young woman, why, she needs the courage to speak up her feelings for the man with the same determination she applies to speaking up for her horses.* They were at a sorry impasse, had been for too long. Not for the first time Slugger wished he had the eloquence to open their eyes and ears and hearts to each other.

Slugger got up to look out the window and frowned at the quickly advancing clouds. As he watched, the LandRover rolled up, disgorging Steve and Ron who immediately set about putting tools away. Ron said something to Steve, looking up at the darkening sky and headed for his motorbike. Presently he roared off, apparently with the intention of running some errand before the storm broke. Steve poked his head into the kitchen.

“Girl, there's bad weather coming. We should get the horses in.”

Noting in agreement and relief at having a good reason to abandon her futile efforts, Dora left to join him.

“Of course Ron didn't offer to stay and help us,” Steve griped as they headed toward the pasture. “Anything to avoid an extra bit of work! See anything of that stallion while you were out?”

“No.” This probably would have been a good time to disclose the news, but she hadn't yet worked up her speech. Plus, she still had to break it to Slugger that Mrs. Dorothy Doyle would be taking over housekeeping duties as of the next morning. Then she'd have two upset men on her hands. And there was no telling how Ron would react. *How many more complications could there be?* She sighed deeply.

“What?”

“Nothing, Steve. Nothing at all. Everything's fine.” *Like hell it was.*

“Have you been crying?” His genuine concern irritated her.

“Just a sneezing fit is all. Don't worry about it,” she said curtly.

Steve gave her a baffled look but made no further comment. The horses, ponies and donkeys, attuned to the weather change and already congregated by the pasture gate, required no urging to

return to the safety of the yard and their shelters. Their humans walked behind without speaking, lost in their own thoughts.

After getting the stock settled in, Dora returned to the house. Steve repaired to the tackroom to work while privately indulging in a secret pleasure: listening to a classical music station he had stumbled across by accident several months ago. Having never been exposed to this while growing up, he found himself enthralled with the beauty of orchestral music. Rather than risk derision by Ron, though, he had kept this new-found joy to himself and listened only when sure no one else was around. He had so many questions about it, but no one to ask. It never occurred to him that Dora would be the most likely source of such information, considering her education. At times like this he thought a great deal about all the things he didn't know and his ignorance settled on his shoulders like a leaden weight.

DARKNESS CAME EARLY ALONG WITH A PATTURING OF RAIN. Ron had not yet returned. The wind had started to pick up and drops pinged against the kitchen window as Dora set the table for supper and Slugger rang the bell outside the kitchen door to summon Steve. As they ate, Slugger casually remarked on Dora's encounter with the stranger whom she thought might be an American hiker, but had no intention of bringing up the one detail that was hers to tell in her own good time, particularly after receiving a smart kick to the shin. Predictably, Steve grew agitated, banging a fist on the table. "He has a nerve, trespassing and frightening Dora. He'd best not come around here or I'll..."

"It wasn't like that, Steve. He was very nice."

"Ain't nothin' you can do about him tonight anyway," Slugger added.

"I hope he's alright," Dora said softly, almost to herself.

"Why should you care?" Steve snarled, annoyed.

"What if he's out there without any food or shelter?"

"Oh for pity's sake, Dora. You're being absurd. He's probably back where he came from, tucked up in some bed-and-breakfast somewhere." To Slugger, Steve said, "Next thing you know she'll start collecting all manner of vagabonds and we'll be having to install cots in the hay barn."

Dora held her tongue. Steve was conveniently overlooking the fact of his having arrived in pretty much the same fashion—jobless, homeless, with all his worldly goods in a duffle—and spending his first night at Follyfoot sleeping covertly in the hayloft.

Dora and Steve volunteered to do the washing up, leaving Slugger to relax in his rocker by the stove. Dora's new hire hadn't shown up yet but she couldn't put off much longer having to explain his presence when he did. Mentally she rehearsed her pitch, intending to deliver it as soon as they were done with the dishes. And after that, telling Slugger about the housekeeper. Steve, handing over dishes from the table to Dora, suddenly stiffened as he looked out the kitchen window.

"What?"

"I thought I saw something."

Dora couldn't see anything other than rivulets of rain on the glass. "I don't see anything."

"I'm just going to go have a look out the door."

From her position in the scullery with her hands immersed in dishwater, Dora could barely hear the opening and subsequent closing of the mudroom door. When Steve didn't return after a few minutes, she dried her hands and peeked around the door to the kitchen. Her mouth fell open.

Already in his mac, Steve had retrieved the Colonel's vintage side-by-side Purdey from its place of honor above the mantel in the parlor and was grimly loading shells into its double

barrels. To Dora's knowledge, the shotgun hadn't been used in years, not since her uncle had given up hunting long before her arrival.

"Steve! What are you doing?!"

"There's someone in the loft. You stay here," he ordered, shoving the box of shells in a pocket and yanking open the door to admit a blast of wind and water.

"Steve... wait!" But it was too late. He had disappeared into the darkness.

IN THE LOFT, SEATED ON THE EDGE OF THE BED, Bernard was scribbling in his journal when he heard the scrape of the stable door. A damp draft swirled up from below and hay dust danced in the light of the single bare bulb hanging above. Unused to being disturbed at this hour, the ground-floor residents snuffled and whickered querulously in their boxes. Bernard calmly flipped the notebook closed, tucking it away in the backpack on the floor near his bare feet. Whoever had come in, it wasn't the girl, and he was pretty sure the visitor wasn't there in peace.

Steve pulled the door closed behind him and paused to let his eyes adjust to the darkness, shotgun at the ready. "You up there—whoever you are—come down here right now... and keep your hands where I can see them!" he bellowed.

After a few seconds a reply floated down. "Don't think so."

"Don't make me come up there. I've got a gun and I know how to use it." Truth was, he didn't. Steve had never handled a weapon in his life although he'd seen hunting rifles and shotguns loaded and fired many times in his former employment when he'd been called upon to accompany shooting parties.

"No need for violence. I'm unarmed."

"Either you come down or I'm coming up."

"Put the gun down first."

"I'm warning you..." Steve started inching up the stairs toward the intruder.

Meanwhile, back in the farmhouse, Dora was frantic. Slugger had drifted off into a comfortable doze and now Dora loomed over him, babbling incoherently and shaking him hard enough to rattle his teeth. He made out the words "gun" and "kill" and quickly came awake.

"Slow down, slow down! What are you on about? Where's Steve?"

"Hurry! We've got to stop him!"

"Stop who?"

"Steve... he's got Uncle's shotgun... Bernard... loft... oh please hurry!"

Slugger shot out of his rocker and into action, Dora hot on his heels. Scrambling into their foul-weather gear in the mudroom, they kept stumbling into each other in the confined space. Snatching up torches kept on a shelf, they hastened over slippery cobbles to the upper stable.

Just as Slugger wrenched open the stable door a bolt of lightning burst overhead followed by a tremendous thunderclap. Steve had almost attained the top step and just caught a glimpse of his quarry when the walls reverberated and the lone light bulb flickered. He jerked and his fingers involuntarily tightened first on one trigger and then the other. In the enclosed space the boom of the shotgun was almost as overpowering as the thunder. The first volley took out the single overhead light bulb and the second blasted through the window next to the bed. Wind and rain blew in. Extracting the box of shells with a shaking hand, Steve managed to drop it. It split open when it hit the floor and shells skittered everywhere, cascading down the steps. Unable to reload in the dark anyway, he dropped the shotgun and launched himself in the general direction of his prey.

Below, alarmed horses were squealing and neighing, rearing and kicking at the walls of their boxes. Dora screamed and dropped her torch, causing Slugger to drop his as well when he

reached to catch her about the waist, fearing she was about to faint. He couldn't pick it up while holding her up at the same time and it took him a few minutes of fumbling before he could locate the switch near the door for the downstairs light.

Although Dora hadn't fainted, she was howling with both hands pressed to her face. In addition to that and the cacophony of terrified horses, the atmosphere resonated with thumps, crashes, yelps, grunts and curses raging up in the loft. Oddly enough, the only identifiable voice was Steve's. Whoever he was attempting to massacre wasn't vocalizing. Assuming that the birdshot—which was the only ammunition in the house—hadn't met its intended mark, Slugger briefly considered going upstairs himself and attempting to stop the fight.

He was still debating when the combatants reached the top of the staircase and met up with the first of the roller bearings—in the form of the cylindrical shells—littering the steps. They shot down the first flight like greased pigs in a chute, bouncing off the wall at the landing. Still grappling, they rolled over onto the next flight... and all the way down in a tangle of flailing arms and legs and landing in a heap on the stable floor, momentarily stunned and gasping for breath. Steve recovered first, one hand clenching the other's throat and the other drawn back in a fist. The victim was too busy using both hands to pry Steve's fingers off his throat to fight back.

Dora yelled. "Steve... no! Stop! Stop right now! Leave him alone!"

Steve's arm was brought up short by a powerful hand snatching the back of his mac and yanking him backward out of strike range. Slugger could react swiftly when need be. Steve was younger and fitter but the older man had the advantage of height, mass and an iron grip.

"That's enough, boys," he commanded.

Steve yelled back. "This tramp was trespassing..." His arms flapped uselessly as Slugger was holding him up by the scruff of his neck so that he dangled like a marionette.

"He's not a tramp... he's our new stablehand. His name is Bernard," Dora shouted defiantly. There, it was out. "I hired him... today. I told him he could sleep in the loft."

"You did *what?*" Steve's face reflected disbelief and then anger. "Without consulting me, Dora?"

"It was a spur-of-the-moment decision... and you weren't there." And she burst into tears again. Slugger dug into a pocket with a free hand and handed over a large handkerchief. He'd long ago learned to keep a supply on hand.

"I see... and when were you planning on telling me?" Steve snapped.

"Tonight... after supper. I was just going to when..." Dora blew her nose and waved her hand toward Bernard. "And anyway, since when do I need your permission to make decisions about *my* farm?" The instant the words were out of her mouth she wished she could take them back.

"Yeah... right. You're the boss. I keep forgetting... I just work here."

The hot exchange immediately escalated to a full-on shouting match. Now that Steve's fury was focused directly on Dora, Slugger judged it was safe to turn him loose. His attention shifted to the newcomer, who had got up off the floor and was dusting himself off with no more concern than if he'd been indulging in a friendly arm wrestle.

As had Dora that morning, Slugger at first thought he was seeing a weedy, slightly-built teenager—certainly not an individual capable of besting Steve in a fight. At second glance, however, he realized Dora's new hire had to be somewhere in his early twenties. In Slugger's experience, anyone foolish enough to challenge Steve usually came out much the worse for wear. This time Steve was the one looking as if he'd been put through the meat grinder. Other than purple contusions encircling his throat and a few cuts and abrasions on his face and forearms, this Bernard didn't appear to have incurred any injuries at all. Somehow he'd even managed to avoid treading on any broken glass with his bare feet.

Sidling over to stand beside him, Slugger found himself looking down into a serenely youthful countenance... with flat grey eyes that displayed no expression and were anything but young. “Yer must be the famous Bernie. I’m Slugger.”

“It’s Bernard, sir,” the other corrected, “Nice to meet you, Mr. Slugger.”

“Erm... just Slugger will do. Yer okay, son?”

In the two seconds it took to complete a handshake, Slugger was startled by the buzz of energy that seemed to leap from Bernard’s cool but steady hand to his own.

“No harm done. Can’t say the same for your friend, though... I’m afraid he did most of that to himself. I tried to stay out of his way best I could.”

Slugger was about to ask how he’d managed that—without light the loft was pitch black—when his nose was assailed by the aroma of sweet hay, newly mown and left to dry in the sun in windrows, which in turn invoked a pleasant childhood memory of helping his father with the autumn haying. But how could that be when the only hay on the premises was dry and delivered in the form of bales?

“Are they always like that?” Bernard asked, inclining his head toward the arguing couple.

“Oh no,” Slugger responded. “Worse, usually.”

“I’ve sure got my work cut out for me,” Bernard sighed.

“Eh?”

“I said, are you sure they’re not already married?”

Slugger was tired and chilled and it was getting late. He was put out over this ridiculous disturbance in his peaceful evening routine and having been made a party to yet another pointless argument between Steve and Dora. A decidedly odd feeling of determination quickly gelled into a steely resolve to wind it up... and to take Steve to task for his recklessness.

Unlike most upset people, Slugger’s diction actually improved in direct proportion to the degree of his anger. He had a temper just like everyone else, but he so rarely let it out that most everyone forgot he had one. When the Colonel had still been alive, Slugger had been obsequiousness itself... just as his ‘betters’ had always expected. But in the past year he had by attrition become the elder of the family, the role model, the father figure, the arbiter of disagreements, the voice of reason and occasionally the lawgiver. This was one of those occasions.

He turned to Bernard. “Are yer things upstairs?”

Bernard nodded.

“Go up and get ‘em. And bring that shotgun down with you.”

Bernard climbed the stairs and directly came back down with his backpack and the shotgun, which he handed to Slugger.

Dora was still crying, frightened of the turbulence surrounding Steve, rolling off him in black waves. Prior to her coming to Follyfoot, she’d had little exposure to violent behavior and had been frightened and appalled the first time she had witnessed one of Steve’s explosive outbursts, justifiable though it had been. It was a facet of his personality she chose to pretend did not exist although she could hardly ignore it at present.

“Oi!” Slugger said loudly, pointing his finger at Dora, immediately getting her and Steve’s attention. “You,” he commanded. “Go back to the house and get out of them wet things straightaway.” Next he pointed at Bernard. “Take this one with you and show him to the downstairs lav. And find him some dry clothes.”

Dora sniffled and gulped, unused to being addressed in such a peremptory manner, especially by Slugger of all people. “But...”

“What about me?” Steve forced out from between gritted teeth, shooting a glowering look at Bernard.

“You and me will be havin’ a word, we will. And we’ve got to check none of the horses have hurt themselves, no thanks to you!”

Steve vibrated with with suppressed fury but at length dipped his head in what passed for acknowledgement. Dora was still standing there with her mouth and eyes wide open, turning and bolting out the door only when Slugger barked, “Get a move on, girl! You too.” The finger now pointed at Bernard. “Go with her. Git.” Bernard got.

DASHING FROM THE STABLE TO THE FARMHOUSE Dora slipped on a wet mossy cobble and Bernard quickly reached out to steady her. He was still holding her hand when she closed the door to the mudroom behind them and for several moments they stood almost nose to nose. Dora resisted the urge to recoil from this intimacy and from the tingling sensation that wound around her wrist and traveled up her arm. Although her mac had afforded Dora some protection, both of them were drenched and shivering.

She extricated her hand and shrugged out of her mac and wellies while Bernard stood off to the side with his backpack slung over one shoulder. The spell—or whatever it was—was broken. She wondered why she suddenly felt so clear-headed and purposeful when just a few minutes ago she was in such a panic. Crying jags usually left her feeling fuzzy and depleted.

Bernard was speaking quietly. “No worries, *bébé*. Slugger’s doing what he needs to do and your Steve’ll be a better man for it. Sometimes a guy just needs a little attitude adjustment to get him back on track. Trust me.”

All practicality now, Dora assessed the sodden mess of her new hire and handed him an old towel to wipe off his filthy feet. His matted hair was speckled with straw and minute shards of glass. A few raw-looking scrapes on his arms had already clotted. A small but deep cut under his left eye had run down his cheek and made a pink stain on his wet shirt collar, but it too had already begun coagulating. Other features she hadn’t noticed earlier were more prominent in the harsh fluorescent lighting of the vestibule: Thick sandy arched eyebrows and a faint sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of the nose. A marginal gap between the two upper incisors with a tiny chip at the inside corner of one. Large round eyes with long dark lashes and barely discernible epicanthic folds betraying an ambiguous ethnicity. What claimed her attention, however, was the *color* of his eyes: no longer the vivid green she distinctly recalled from their encounter that morning but pewter gray.

“You’re staring,” Bernard said lightly.

“Oh... sorry... it’s just that... I could’ve sworn your eyes are green...”

“They are.” He shrugged dismissively. “Except when they’re not.”

*Curiouser and curiouser*, Dora thought, then directed him to the lavatory down the hall. “There’s clean towels in the cupboard. Toss the clothes you have on outside the door and I’ll put them in the laundry. I’ll find you something else to wear and leave it on the outside doorknob.” His backpack appeared small and light and she judged there wasn’t much in it. He thanked her and took it with him to the lav.

Dora put the kettle on to boil and ran upstairs to skin out of her own wet clothes. She could hear the shower running when she came back down.

Adjacent to the scullery was a storage room crammed with odds and ends of household detritus, things not currently needed but which Slugger was loathe to dispose of in case they might be—someday. Here also accumulated the discarded, outgrown, lost and forgotten belongings of former occupants, visitors and guests. This part of the closet Slugger kept organized and the

clothing in good order. Steve had made liberal use of it when he had arrived with hardly more than the clothes on his back. Ron had frequently foraged in there when he needed a change of clothes on his occasional unplanned overnight stays before he started living at the farm.

Dora hurriedly selected jeans, teeshirts, jumper, socks, windcheater, a pair of trainers and a pair of well-worn boots she judged would fit. No pre-owned underwear, though; one had to draw the line somewhere. She located a pair of pajama bottoms but not the matching top. She stacked all on a kitchen chair except the pajamas and one of the tee shirts, which she hung on the outside doorknob of the lav. Then she retrieved the discarded clothing from the floor and deposited it in the laundry bin along with her own.

Waiting for Bernard to finish, the kettle to boil and other two men to come in from the stable, Dora sat with elbows on the table and fingers steepled under her chin, sorting through the puzzle pieces of this extraordinary day and finding that none seemed to fit. The smell of apples was pungent in the kitchen though the fruit bowl on the table was empty.

Yes... she was still angry with Steve, but not nearly so much as she ought to be—he had really pushed the envelope this evening. And Slugger... stepping so completely out of character that he was almost unrecognizable from the agreeable old man she had come to depend on. That alone beggared belief. But what bothered her most of all was that someone she had only just met and knew absolutely nothing about could, with just the gentle touch of his hand and his fluid voice, make her feel so calm, so collected, so... competent. Dora would be the first to admit she was prone to fits of depression as well as giddiness, but this many mood swings in a single day couldn't be healthy. She wondered if she was coming down with something.

SLUGGER AND STEVE FACED EACH OTHER, the older man's eyes blazing with an intensity Steve had never seen before. He knew he was in for a virtual thrashing if not a physical one. Slugger was not by nature confrontational; he didn't shout or employ harsh language and he certainly wasn't in the habit of visiting physical abuse on anyone... not since his boxing days, anyway.

"I ain't yer daddy nor your uncle, but I'm gonna talk to you as if I was."

"I was only..."

"Shut up. Yer behavior this evening was inexcusable. You've been told time and time again—by me, by Dora, by the Colonel, by everyone—violence ain't a solution to a problem. What were you thinkin'? You ain't got the first notion how to use a gun. You could have killed or crippled someone!"

"I wasn't really going to shoot him... I was just gonna scare him."

"First off... you don't never point a gun at a man unless you intend to kill him. And that would only be to defend yerself or someone else or if you're in the middle of a war, which you ain't."

"I thought he was a prowler..."

"That's what we have police for. Nor can you go around beatin' up on folks just because they crossed you or gave you a funny look. When you act like this, yer no better than a common thug. Is that what you want Dora to think of you? Is that what you think of yerself?"

"No sir." Steve dropped his eyes, abashed.

"Even without the shotgun you could have seriously injured that boy... you're bigger and stronger than him. And where would that get you? Right back in prison, the last place you want to be. And you'd lose every last bit of respect Dora has for you. Oh yes, she respects you all right... not for who or what you were, but for who you are now and what you could be if you put your mind to it."

Steve opened his mouth to protest but Slugger plowed on, having got his wind up.

“So what if you had hard beginnin’s? You ain’t the first and you damn sure ain’t the only one nor the last one. All ye’ve done the past three years is feel sorry for yerself. Time to grow up, Steve.”

“I’m not a child,” Steve managed to interject peevishly.

“Then stop behavin’ like one. Get on with yer life and do somethin’ with it.”

“Like what?” Steve asked bitterly. “I don’t *know* anything else. Doesn’t anyone care how I feel?”

“We all care about you, can’t you get it through that thick noggin of yers, boy? We’re family... in everythin’ but name. When one of us hurts, we all hurt. We look out for each other. But when you pull a stunt like you did tonight, you put not only yourself but every one of us in danger.” Slugger paused to catch his breath and Steve finally looked up.

“You’re right. I know you’re right,” Steve said humbly. “But I don’t know where to start.”

There was more than just Steve’s intrinsic inferiority complex at work here, Slugger knew... there was also territorial instincts and burgeoning jealousy.

“You think I’m stupid, don’t you?”

“No, son. Hardheaded and bloody-minded, certainly... but not stupid. No one thinks that of you, but you have to remember... actions bring consequences. Think before you fly off the handle.”

“Yes sir,” Steve said miserably.

“We’d best see to these horses now.”

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## **FIELD JOURNAL: SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1974 • 8:00PM**

**Immediate location:** *Bathroom in farmhouse.*

**Interim notes:** *There went one of my nine lives! So much for a dignified introduction to Steve. Getting shot at, beaten up and choked definitely wasn’t part of the mission plan. It could’ve been worse, though. Being able to see in the dark is all that saved me from getting my head blown off or bashed in while that idiot was blindly bouncing off the walls trying to find me. If Slugger hadn’t turned on the downstairs lights when he did, Steve wouldn’t have been able to pinpoint my location and throw me down the staircase. Right now I’m still kinda numb from the adrenaline rush but I reckon I’ll be feeling every one of those risers come morning.*

*I do remember reading that Steve has a rep for hotheadedness... if this hostility is his way toward all strangers, that would account for the lack of prospective hires—folks are just plain scared of him. There’s no reason for him to have taken against me personally unless he’s either unreasonably jealous of any man Dora meets or over-protective of his territory. Now—before even thinking about trying to make friends or attempting to get into his head—I’ll have to focus on gaining his acceptance. And before that, will have to wait until he gets over being mad with the girl over the hiring issue. Question: Why was he so angry at her? Did she usurp some perceived (on his part) authority?*

*Dora is highly excitable and doesn’t cope well with unpleasantness. On the other hand, once she’s over her initial hysteria she quickly responds to necessary practicalities. For a*

city girl born and raised, she's not overly squeamish about blood and mess. Amazing how easily young people can adapt to conditions in a new and unfamiliar environment.

Seems this Slugger is a major player here. On the surface, just some old geezer who's a couple fries short of a Happy Meal.... but under duress demonstrates that he's fully capable of exerting leadership and control. What's his authority and function? The young ones seem to mind him well enough... once he has their attention. Where does he fall in pecking order? Best watch my step around him. DO NOT underestimate. Prospective ally?

Apparently loud arguments between my two subjects. are commonplace. Do the others fight as fiercely among themselves? Foresee much work ahead.

Steve's a little too old for Slugger to be taking to the woodshed, but I imagine he's getting told off seven ways from sundown. And he jolly well needs it—firearms should never be handled by people who don't know anything about them. Duh.

On a personal note, had my first opportunity to look in a mirror since this morning. Turned out just like the Polaroid, so I'm okay with that—for the time being. I'm not altogether comfortable with being two different personalities in the same body, though. Throw in yet a third personality AND a different body and it gets truly disorienting. Now I understand how a patient with disassociative identity disorder (in this era still known as multiple personality disorder) really feels! Can only trust SHE was correct in that young me and old me will be able to operate simultaneously with no disconnects in thought processes and behavior. Still don't understand how this is going to work. Oh well... it hasn't even been 24 hours yet. Maybe everything will be clearer by tomorrow.

**Observation re farmhouse/outbuildings:** In a word: old—as in of historical value. Everything constructed of stone. Must be some renovation going on—I smell new paint and woodwork. When you first go in the door there's a sort of cloakroom for boots, outdoor gear etc. Entering the kitchen was like flashing back in time to Grandma's (oh wait... I'm already in a time warp!)—complete with oil lamps, linoleum on the floor, oilcloth on the table, pots of geraniums on the windowsill and a big cast-iron woodburning stove. For some strange reason there's a piano in there, too. Fixtures like the kitchen sink and appliances must be in another room. No modernization going on in here yet!

Fortunately, the bathroom's all new and updated with a great walk-in shower which I'd better hop into right quick before she gets the wrong idea about why I'm taking so long.

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## *“Superstition brings the gods into even the smallest matters”* • Titus Livius

TEA WAS STEEPING NICELY IN THE POT by the time Bernard returned to the kitchen wearing the pajama bottoms and a tee shirt, both several sizes too large; fortunately, the pants secured at the waist with a drawstring rather than elastic. He dropped the backpack in a corner and pulled a chair away from the table.

Dora had switched off the overhead light in favor of several incandescent faux oil lamps that gave off a muted golden glow. She poured tea for them both, placing the cream pitcher and sugar bowl within easy reach. Leaning away from the table, Bernard was ineffectually trying to work out with his fingers some snarls in his damp hair. Before she realized what she was doing, Dora had picked up a mane-and-tail comb that someone—probably Ron—had left on the sideboard.

“Let me help you with that.” Without waiting for a response, she walked around behind him and grasped a skein of hair. It was then she saw a disquietingly familiar pattern of cicatrices on the back of his neck, just to the left of the cervical vertebrae. It took a few seconds to make the connection to what she’d seen that morning. She was about to comment on the similarity when a stroke of intuition advised her to save the observation for a more useful point in conversation.

Bernard’s hair wasn’t all that long—barely shoulder-length—but impossibly thick and coarse. He sat perfectly still even when she inadvertently yanked at a few of the more fearful knots.

“There,” Dora proclaimed, moving to the other side of the table and plonking herself down. “It isn’t any neater but at least it’s tangle free.” She took a sip from her mug and made a face; her tea had gone tepid. She drank it anyway. “Your hair is as thick as Steve’s... but it doesn’t seem to want to lay down.”

Bernard reached up and pulled down a hank, inspecting it with crossed eyes. then pushed it back out of the way. “Oh... well, you know... I just washed it and I can’t do a thing with it.” Dora suppressed a giggle. He emptied his mug, not commenting on the fact that it was now cold.

“Thanks for the help. It would’ve taken me forever. And it’s always a pleasure when a pretty girl does it for you. Do you do that for Steve?”

“Not likely,” she said, picturing in her mind Steve’s glossy sable brown mane and how it curled so enticingly at the ends when wet and in need of a trim, which it presently was. But an entertaining thought presented itself and she tucked it away for future reference as she refilled their mugs.

Bernard cupped his hands around the steaming mug, his eyes glowing above the rim with a feline green-gold luminescence. Dora studied him with a frown, not realizing she was doing so.

“You’re staring again,” Bernard said.

“Sorry. Your... erm... eyes... I’ve never met anyone before whose eyes changed color.”

“Genetic anomaly... runs in the family.” As if that explained everything.

“You’re a long way from home,” Dora ventured, more a statement than a question and patently an invitation to Bernard to volunteer information.

“Yes.

“You’re an American, right?”

“Yes.”

“How old did you say you were?”

“I didn’t.”

This circular interrogatory was getting her nowhere. Dora took another tack.

“However did you get those scars on the back of your neck? They’re quite... unusual.”

Bernard’s composure seemed to flicker. “You don’t want to know,” he said firmly.

“Oh... but I do... you make it sound so mysterious.” Dora was intrigued and for a few moments their eyes deadlocked. Bernard gave in first.

“Nothing mysterious about it. It’s just a freeze brand. State, birth year and identification number.”

Dora was horrified. Americans *branded* their children like livestock? Unthinkable. Unspeakable. Scandalous. And what on earth was a freeze brand? She’d never heard of such a thing.

“That must have been painful,” she said, for want of better words to articulate her outrage.

“It happened a long time ago. I don’t even remember it.” Clearly he didn’t want to talk about that, either.

Another moment of silence, then Dora asked rather abruptly, “About what you said... about being from the future. What did you mean by that? Why are you really here?”

Bernard lowered his eyes to the oilcloth, his right forefinger describing lazy circles on the slick surface. “Everybody has to be somewhere. But like I said, I’m here to help.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m sure you don’t,” he said softly, adding, “But you will. Am I being vetted?”

“I suppose so. I should have asked these questions before offering you the job. Any responsible employer would have done.”

“Yes, you should have. Consider it a learning experience. So, do I still have it?”

“Have what?”

“The job.”

“Yes. If you still want it. I’m so sorry about... what happened. If I’d told Steve earlier as I should have, this wouldn’t have happened. It’s my fault.”

“I’m sure he’s a nice enough guy when he’s not busy trying to kill someone. He might even like me once he gets to know me.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily count on that. Steve is... well, he’s had a hard life and he doesn’t make friends easily.”

“Roger that. But I’ll do my best. I’m a nice guy too when I’m not busy trying to stay alive.”

Dora was looking around irritably. “Where is that *smell* coming from?”

“Wasn’t me. My momma taught me not to do that in front of ladies.”

“What? Oh, never mind. Must be my imagination working overtime. It’s been a long day.”

A GUST OF WIND BLEW INTO THE KITCHEN AS the mudroom door admitted Slugger and Steve. They stripped out of their macs and wellies and padded into the kitchen on stockinged feet. Steve’s mien was as sullen as Slugger’s was determined.

Dora fought to contain a gasp of dismay at the extent of Steve’s damages—she’d been too angry to notice them in the stable—and she forced herself to remain seated. His right eye was swollen almost shut, a ragged cut on the left jawbone still dribbled blood, knuckles on both hands were scraped and raw... and these were only the injuries she could *see*. For a moment she blamed Bernard for having been the architect of Steve’s hurts, although she was perfectly well aware that Steve had brought this state of affairs upon himself.

“Steve has something to say to the both of yer,” Slugger announced.

Steve's eyes went first to Dora. "I'm sorry." It was a poor excuse for an apology and he knew it. When she didn't answer immediately—and with a glare from Slugger, he added in a more sincere tone, "The way I acted and the things I said... I was out of line and I was foolish. It won't happen again, Dora."

At length she gave the tiniest nod of acceptance.

The second apology was even harder to deliver, but somehow Steve managed it even though his expression said that he'd rather be disemboweling Bernard with his bare fingers. Bernard accepted graciously and stood up to offer his hand. Steve hesitated before returning the handshake. Dora, watching closely to gauge his reaction, was gratified to see the same kind of mystified recognition she herself had experienced. So it *was* Bernard, after all. She wasn't just imagining it. Something about him induced calmness amidst agitation.

Slugger dispatched Steve to the lavatory then excused himself to go change out of his own wet clothing. When he returned to the kitchen to join Dora and Bernard at the table, she already had his favorite mug ready and waiting. Dora allowed as how Slugger probably had some questions of his own and gave him the floor. Bernard appeared not to mind.

Dora was surprised by Slugger's first query. "While you was out walkin', you happen to see a stray horse out in them woods?"

"A horse?"

"Maybe a large pony. Ugly yellow brute with green eyes."

"I might have," Bernard admitted evasively.

"Wouldn't happen to know anything about it, would you?" Slugger pressed.

Apparently fascinated with something in his tea mug, Bernard mumbled something.

"Sorry... what's that you said? The brute's yours?"

Bernard looked up. "Sort of... that is, I'm responsible for his being here."

"This a secret for some reason?"

"I'd rather the authorities didn't know about him... or me, for that matter."

"Are you in some kinda trouble? On the dodge. We don't need that kinda aggro here, son."

Bernard went on the defensive. "The law isn't after me as far as I know. It's just that I don't have a passport... or a visa or a work permit."

"And no import papers for the beast, either, I suppose. I'd like to know how you managed that."

"Wasn't easy."

All else was forgotten as Dora zeroed in on the subject of Bernard's horse... especially his lack thereof.

"But he's yours? He belongs to you?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Then why isn't he with you?" Dora asked.

"He sort of comes and goes... he'll be there when I want him."

"I've never heard of such a thing."

"He's not an ordinary horse."

"What is he, anyway? I've never seen a horse quite that... different," Dora persisted. What she meant was hideously ugly.

"Oh... uh... avatar. He's an avatar," Bernard admitted reluctantly.

"Never heard of that breed," Slugger said.

"Well, it's not exactly a breed... more like a state of being. Rarely seen."

"What does it mean, then... avatar?" Dora asked. "It must mean something."

“It’s a little difficult to explain... in Sanksrit, in the Hindi belief system, an avatar is a supernatural being sent into the world to restore order amid chaos. In some Eastern religions it means ‘reincarnation’. Commonly used, though, it’s a two-dimensional picture used to represent something on a comp... uh, in other words, it’s a virtual image of something instead of the real thing.”

In the silent interlude that followed, Bernard could see the other two had no idea what he was talking about.

Dora stood up first. “I don’t know about you two but I’m done in. Slugger, can you get Bernard sorted out? He’ll have to sleep in Hazel’s room as there isn’t any other place with the window out in the loft, and Ron might be back tonight. And would you check to see if something’s rolled under the stove... like an apple? I keep smelling apples and I know we don’t have any.” With a ‘Goodnight, Slugger. Goodnight, Bernard,’ she vanished down the hall and up the stairs.

“Apples!” Slugger humphed, knowing good and well there were no errant apples under the stove... or anything else for that matter as he carefully swept underneath every day. Besides, all he could smell at present was green hay... as strong as if an entire bale was secreted beneath the kitchen table.

A few minutes later Steve eased into the kitchen wearing Slugger’s ancient terry bathrobe. “Any tea left? Has Dora already gone up?” While not exactly being cordial to Bernard, it was evident he was making an effort not to be actively unpleasant.

“Yes and yes,” Slugger answered, returning from the scullery with the first aid kit from which he extracted aspirin, plasters and a tin of Germolene. Years of administering palliative care to injured horses and their hapless, equally accident-prone attendants had provided Slugger a sure hand with fingers that instinctively searched out strained muscles and aching joints, knowing where to apply pressure and how to avoid tender spots. It was Slugger who maintained the first aid supplies and dealt with minor injuries of both horses and humans.

Bernard declined any medical attention, claiming no need, so Slugger’s repair efforts went to Steve. Miraculously there were no broken noses or bones, no debilitating strains or sprains. Still, they’d both be sore as hell in the morning, Slugger ruminated as he shook out analgesic tablets into his palm. Steve took two and chased them with tea. Bernard, however, waved them off.

“I’m good.”

“It’s just ordinary aspirin... nonprescription... everyone uses it for aches and pains.”

“Sorry... can’t do drugs of any kind,” Bernard explained. “Allergies.”

“Suit yerself. Time for both of yer to go to bed yer own selves.”

Before ascending the stairs Steve paused and looked around inquisitively, “Did you bake biscuits today, Slugs? I could swear I smell cinnamon.” He shook his head and trudged upwards. Slugger gestured to Bernard. “Come on, then. I’ll show where you’ll be sleepin’.” With Slugger leading the way, Bernard clumped up the stairs clutching his backpack and the spare clothes Dora had rounded up for him.

SLUGGER RETURNED TO THE KITCHEN TO POLISH OFF THE LAST OF THE TEA. It was true that old people required less sleep than young ones; he was always the first one up and usually the last to retire. He was in the habit, once his charges were tucked up in bed and the house was quiet, of sitting alone in the kitchen to organize his thoughts and observations at the end of each day. This one had certainly provided him with much to think over. *I’m just an addlepatated old man and gettin’ more muddled by the minute.* Glancing up at the ormolu clock on the mantel, he saw that it was nearing midnight.

First was the matter of the unexplained horse and how it had arrived in their pasture in the first place. Slugger wasn't overly fond of horses in general; they represented too many boring boyhood hours behind the plow on his family farm. He could manage them and ride if pressed; he just didn't enjoy it. His eye automatically took in points and markings, good and bad, so that he could almost always recognize a horse whenever he saw it again. He wished he'd got a chance to see this remarkable animal himself.

Next, Dora's encounter on the bridle path... ever since her arrival at the farm, she had been in the habit of riding out on her own, whether or not a hacking partner was available. At first Slugger had suffered agonies of worry that something might happen to her out there alone and that the blame would fall on him. Gradually he had come to accept that the girl was accustomed to solitary pursuits and was a competent enough horsewoman to be granted that freedom. And the few times a mishap had occurred, Steve had been on hand to effect a rescue. Today wasn't the first time she'd been accosted by a man unknown to her while riding alone. Well, not accosted, exactly... but Slugger didn't wish to dwell on the what-ifs.

Then, the enigmatic youngster whose unnaturally colored eyes appeared grey in the barn but had transmuted to green by the time Slugger returned to the kitchen... oh yes, he'd certainly noticed *that*, but had kept it to himself. Who was he, really? Where had he come from and why was he here? He recalled Dora's comment about Bernard's claim that he was 'from the future.' And in conversation that newcomer was elusive as a cat with kittens, definitely hiding something. Slugger meant to find out what.

Slugger was not unaware of the effect Bernard seemed to have on those who came in contact with him—today's uncharacteristic exhibition of toughmindedness on Dora's part, for instance. His own urge to take charge. Steve's transition from resentment to tolerance directly he had shaken hands with his former adversary. Last but not least, Slugger pondered on the lingering aroma of fresh cut hay... not unwelcome, but certainly out of place in his kitchen. He couldn't immediately grasp the significance of all this, but his gut insisted that there was a connection. Neither religious nor especially superstitious but country-born nonetheless, Slugger owned a countryman's innate timorous respect for the supranatural, things for which no reasonable excuse could be provided. A frisson of apprehension rippled down his spine.

Had they made a terrible mistake welcoming this shady individual into their midst? For all they knew he could be an escaped lunatic or axe murderer. Slugger dredged up from memory something about keeping your friends close and your enemies closer. He wasn't sure what this meant, exactly, but decided to interpret it as meaning it would be advisable to keep this unknown quantity close at hand, where he could be watched and any signs of trouble-making nipped in the bud, rather than cast him out into the rainy darkness where he might get up to who knew what sort of mischief.

Slugger attempted to put aside those unnerving thoughts and focus on something else... his annoyance at Ron's failure to return home or even bothering to telephone that he was spending the night elsewhere. He wasn't worried that the boy might have come to grief on his motorbike in the dark—someone would have called by now. He was more concerned that in the absence of Hazel's proprietary oversight Ron might be falling back into his former profligate ways and carousing with his no-good mates.

Slugger got up to bank the fire and looked in on his own bedroom, converted from his late wife's old sewing room, recently updated and reeking of not quite dry paint. Hopefully tomorrow he could move back in. He had been a much younger man when he and Elizabeth—known to all as Tiny—had come to Follyfoot after his boxing career had ended. They'd had ten good years here before the illness took her. They'd had no children but had served as houseparents

to a succession of young stablehands with no homes of their own to claim. Before Dora's and Steve's arrival, though, there had been an interval of several years when there had been no young voices to liven up the place and Slugger had rattled about all alone in the big old stone farmhouse. It was cheerful, having the four young people here now—his surrogate children, and he determined to renew his efforts to find a way to bring Dora and Steve together. The sooner the better.

Having lived in this old house twenty-two years, Slugger was familiar with every creaking floorboard and knew where to step to avoid them. At the top of the stairs he paused and listened: nothing but faint snores emanating from behind closed doors. Satisfied, he entered his own temporary bedchamber, undressed and fell into a fitful slumber.

Down the hall, snuggled under the covers but unable to fall asleep right away, Dora heard Slugger's surreptitious footfalls and the snick of his door closing. She envisioned an alternate scenario to the ending of the contretemps in the stable in which she rushed to draw her battered champion into her arms, uttering words of comfort and succor with her face pressed to his shoulder and his breath warm against her cheek before he kissed her. Well, it *could* have happened that way... if only she hadn't thrown that bloody stupid fit and then screeched at him like a fishwife.

Or maybe she should just kiss him first... tomorrow—first opportunity—to underscore her unconditional forgiveness. Catch him unawares. But no, social conditioning wouldn't allow that. Good girls do not make first advances. It just isn't done. Period. Good girls exemplify their good breeding by chastely waiting for their suitors to approach them. Then and only then can they graciously—and with an appropriate display of maidenly reserve—allow themselves to be kissed. That's just the way it is. Her prince—if not Steve then whoever he turned out to be—would have to come to her, not the other way around. Dora's last conscious thought was, "If only I knew *how* to kiss..."

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## **FIELD JOURNAL: SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1974 • 11:55PM**

**Immediate location:** *I've been relegated to a young girl's bedroom. Who is Hazel and where is she? Must be a bit of a tomboy. The room's not too frilly but definitely a teenage girl's lair. Posters of rock stars on the walls. Stuffed animals. Comfortable bed with a firm mattress. I know I can't stay here but it's sure nicer than the loft.*

*Where did Ron go and why hasn't he come home?*

**Plan:** *Seek opportunity for making peace with Steve and possibly a one-on-one away from the others ASAP. Find out where he visualizes his relationship with Dora going, what he sees as his future and what his plans/goals are, if any. Same for the girl whenever I can get her alone.*

**Observations re Ron:** *Spied on Ron and Steve as they were doing fence maintenance.*

*They seemed to be getting the job done although Steve's the more efficient of the two and not very patient (yelled and threw things a couple of times when Ron wasn't moving fast enough). Was watching through the loft window when they came in to unload the truck. Steve seemed irritated when Ron took off instead of helping get the livestock in. "Incauciant" is the description that comes to mind here. My initial appraisal: bad boy wannabe. And he's a redhead. Redheads always mean trouble. Watch out for this one.*

**Observations re Slugger:** *Would sure like to know more of his history. Where did he come from and how did he end up here, unofficially in loco parentis? I don't believe the kids are aware of how observant he really is. He also seems unhappy about something that either is or is not going on between my two primaries. I can tell he's nervous about me being IN the house but couldn't come up with an alternate solution. I'll try to be an especially considerate and unobtrusive house guest.*

*Is Ron the only carefree individual on this farm?*

**Technical issues:** *Somewhat more than expected but not insurmountable. Will have to do a self-inventory in mirror and try to figure out what was bothering Dora. And here I thought I was doing a fairly decent job of maintaining an ordinary appearance! SHE said I would "blend in" but something still isn't quite right and I'm not sure what that something is. Not the hair, I think... mine isn't that much longer than Steve's... there's just more of it. Surely there was no shortage of hippies passing through in the late 60s so it's not like they've never seen long hair on a man before. (And if they think that was bad, just wait another five or six years when the music scene gets into hair bands!)*

*There are some things I can't do anything about... that damned scar for instance (and hell yes, it hurt!). And the changing eye color thing. Color-altering cosmetic contact lenses could disguise that but they haven't been invented yet. The olfactory problem is somewhat embarrassing... but at least they're not unpleasant odors. It's not easy being an Other in a Normal world.*

*My inability to metabolize pharmaceuticals has always been problematic. I feel like death warmed over. Hope this doesn't interfere with my physical performance tomorrow. It's necessary that I make a convincing stablehand in order to preserve my cover.*

*Transforming myself into the twenty-something version of me wasn't as difficult as I anticipated. Kinda cool, actually. I wonder if I could make myself look like anyone other than me... not that I would especially want to. Wonder if there'll be any long-term effects. Just a thought.*

**For the record:** *Is all of England swarming with Others or just this corner of it? I can sense that Others have even lived here in this house in the not-too-distant past. Too nebulous to identify with any degree of certainty. Perhaps one or more of the residents has a skeleton in his/her family closet? It's possible he/she isn't even aware of the connection, especially if it was introduced several generations back. Wouldn't be a bit surprised to discover a troll or two in the root cellar or a couple of house elves in the attic.*

**Note to self:** *Definitely not as fit as I used to be! Too many years behind desks and lecterns.*

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# Monday

***“The supernatural is the natural not yet understood”*** • ELBERT HUBBARD

SLUGGER’S BODY CLOCK ROLLED HIM OUT OF BED AT FIVE-THIRTY as it always had, just before sunrise. The storm had abated during the night and the crepuscular light of dawn promised a clear if slightly chilly day. He shuffled down the staircase in his nightshirt and slippers to stir the coals in the kitchen stove and get the fire going before returning to his room to get dressed. Before Steve and Ron had moved into the house, Dora was usually the second one up, grabbing a mug of tea for herself and fixing another one for Steve and taking it out to him, sometimes up to the loft; it had become their morning ritual before beginning stable chores. Slugger would begin assembling breakfast ingredients and have a second pot brewing before Ron showed up around seven... or later. Nowadays all of them—including Hazel when she was home—set their alarms for six o’clock. But this morning there was no clatter of feet on the stairs and no chirpy ‘Good morning, Slugs.’ The house was still as Slugger pattered about as quietly as possible. Wouldn’t hurt to let them sleep in for a change. And just for once, they’d have breakfast before chores. The animals could wait an extra half hour.

He had just put the kettle on and was down on his knees poking short lengths of wood into the firebox when a vehicle rolled into the drive. He got up to peer out the window and found himself staring directly into the placid face of a broad Jersey cow contained in a small stake-sided trailer behind a familiar green Hillman Husky.

Forgetting he was wasn’t dressed yet, he went to answer the sharp rap at the door.

“Missus Doyle... Dottie... what are you doing here? Ain’t our day for milk ‘n eggs, is it?”

“And a fine good morning to you, too, Edward. No, it isn’t egg day but I brought you some anyway. Came early so’s to have time to look around and see what’s needed before starting.” Five-foot nothing of cheerfully robust health, sparkling china blue eyes and a mop of redgold curls, Dorothy Doyle didn’t wait to be invited in but sailed past him into the kitchen, depositing on the table her substantial carryall and a rush basket filled with eggs nestled in straw.

“Starting?” Slugger was confused. “Er... starting what?”

“Why, keeping house for your lot, of course. Didn’t Dora tell you?”

“No... Dora never said...”

“Likely forgot. Girl’s got entirely too much on her mind and too big a burden on her shoulders. And here you are still lollygagging around in your nightclothes with the tea not even made yet. Go get yourself dressed, old man, and roust those young ‘uns while you’re at it. I’ll start breakfast. Children are always ravenous at that age.” The Widow Doyle, owner of a fine contralto voice, a broad talkative streak and four strapping sons, was accustomed to dispensing instructions with an authority that brooked no nonsense. She marched into the scullery as Slugger fearfully backed out of the kitchen and gallumphed up the stairs. *Dress first, ask questions later!*

Slugger was back in record time with Dora right behind, in her nightdress and dressing gown and wringing her hands.

“Oh Slugger I’m so sorry I forgot to tell you I meant to truly I did but in all the excitement I just forgot surely you know no one can replace you but it’s just become too much for you alone and I don’t time have to help anymore and the boys are so useless and you’ll have more time relax oh Slugger please don’t be angry with me I only meant things for the best...” The words came out in such a rushed jumble that Dora had to stop and catch her breath while Slugger patted her arm in a conciliatory manner.

“Shush, girl. I ain’t upset at all... in fact, I think it’s a fine idea. Tell the truth, I was wonderin’ how we was gonna manage. It’s been gettin’ harder and harder for me to keep up. I only wish you’d told me earlier so’s I could’ve cleaned up a little before Missus Doyle got here.”

The new housekeeper whipped a large floral apron out of her carryall and rolled up her sleeves. “Missus Doyle is it? I’m not having that! It’s always been Dottie and I’m not about to answer to anything else!”

“Er... Dottie... but if you’re here, who’s gonna look after the dairy?”

“Jeremy and Sarah have come home and will be taking over the family business.” Dottie went on to explain that her eldest son and his wife had decided the city wasn’t where they wanted to rear their six-month-old son. As none of the other three boys were interested in the farm, the arrangement was that Jem and Sarah and little Ian would live in the farmhouse with Dottie. Eventually a mother-in-law cottage would be constructed elsewhere on the property, at which time Dottie would hand over the principal residence to the younger woman. “Which suits me just fine,” Dottie assured, “I’ll still have a place for Queen Maude. I’ll have my grandbaby right there. And after I’m gone Jem can make his own arrangements with his brothers about their shares in the farm.”

“Does this mean no more butter and eggs?” Slugger asked dolefully.

Dottie laughed. “Don’t worry, old man. I’ve been teaching that Sarah and she’s a dab hand at turning out butter as good as mine. And I’ll be keeping my chooks. Hand me that skillet, dear, would you?”

Dora suddenly realized that Dottie was intending to start breakfast. “Oh... er... I wasn’t expecting you to cook as well!”

“Pish! It won’t take all day to keep the house in order once I get it organized. And I’m sure you won’t mind a change from that evil concoction Edward calls stew.” Dottie surveyed the antedeluvian Victorian cookstove and made a face. “Haven’t dealt with one of these wretched things in yonks but I suppose it will just have to do.”

Slugger bristled. “No one cleans Black Beauty but me!” he huffed. The antique stove was his pride and joy, which he lovingly blackened and polished to a high sheen every week without fail and had cooked on almost every single day for over two decades.

Dottie rolled her eyes.

“What’s going on? I heard voices...” The poster child for Elastoplast hobbled in.

“Missus Doyle has come to keep house for us,” Slugger offered.

“Oh? Great! Hi there, Miz Doyle.”

“Steven.” Dottie stood with her arms akimbo, tsking with disapproval. “Been scrapping again I see. Don’t think you’re coming to table looking like you were just thrown out a pub door! Tuck that shirt in and go comb your hair.”

Startled into obedience, Steve started backing out of the kitchen. “Could I have some tea first?” he inquired plaintively.

“No. You’ll get some when you’re presentable.”

“Yes m’am.” Steve withdrew and Dottie trained her sights on Dora.

“And you get yourself right back upstairs and put some proper clothes on. Young ladies don’t parade around in their nightclothes when there’s men about!”

“Yes m’am,” Dora replied meekly and departed.

“Edward, there’re more bags on the backseat; you can bring those in and put them on the counter in the scullery. But before you do that, please get Queen Maude down from the trailer. You can just turn her loose—she won’t go anywhere.”

“Yes, Dottie.” Slugger forebore asking why the widow had brought her favorite cow along in the first place and did as told. As soon as he staggered in with the last load he was directed to remove cleaning supplies from one of the bags and place them in whatever location he kept such items. And when the two young people reappeared, suitably attired by Dottie’s standards, she immediately assigned them to bringing crockery and silverware and items from the fridge to the table while she extracted jars of home-canned pickles and jams and fruits from the other carrier. “Steve, put these on the table.” Next came two loaves of freshly baked bread which she handed to Dora. “You can be slicing this.” Lastly, a large succulent-looking cured ham appeared. “And Edward, I’ll be needing some of this for the pan.”

Steve, never at his happiest in the morning, whispered to Dora, “Looks like we’ve both been demoted from stablehand to dogsbody.”

“Stablehand!” Dora squeaked, fingers flying to her face. “We’ve forgotten Bernard!” She flew up the stairs, descending a few minutes later with a puzzled look.

“His things are there but he’s not. Where could he be?”

“Not far enough,” Steve muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing... maybe he’s gone for a walk or something.”

The rumble of a motorcycle racing down the drive heralded Ron’s arrival. A few minutes later the kitchen door blasted open.

“Ooooh, just in time for breakfast! Any tea?” The exuberant redhead plopped himself down in his usual chair. “Mucking already done? Splendid!”

“You wish.” Slugger, trundling in from the scullery with a skillet full of ham slices to put on the stove, addressed him sourly. “Had a nice evenin’, did we? You could’ve called, you know, so’s we wouldn’t worry.”

“Sorry... got caught up in a private party. Stayed over at me dad’s, not that the stepcow was glad to have me. So, what’s all this?” Ron’s attention went to all the unusual items on the table and then fell on Steve’s battered face.

“Cor! Looks like I missed a better party here! What happened to you, mate?”

“None of your business,” Steve retorted.

“And please quiet down before you give us all a headache!” Dora added.

“Ooooooh. Got up on the wrong side of the bed, did we? And top of the morning to you as well, Your Ladyship... *Owwwwwwww!!!*”

Dottie had marched up behind him and given his earlobe a vicious twist, pointing to muddy footprints leading from the door to the table. “Look at the mess you’ve made, Ronald Stryker! You’ll be cleaning that up, you will!”

“Missus Doyle... what are you doin’ here...?” Ron gasped, rubbing his throbbing ear.

Slugger opened his mouth to explain about the other sudden addition to the household, then thought better of it. These were Dora’s doings; best let her do the explaining. In the meanwhile, Dottie had steamed back into the scullery to crack eggs into a bowl.

“Mrs. Doyle will be keeping house for us, starting today,” Dora said, adding ominously, “And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll mind her!”

“Wonderful. Just what I need, another old biddy bossing me around!”

“I heard that!” Dottie bawled from the other room, “And if you want to make old bones I’ll not be hearing it again!”

Steve snickered and Slugger snorted.

Ron reached for a bread slice and started slathering on butter and jam. “By the way, there’s some idjit out swimming in the lake. Whoever he is he’s gonna freeze his... er, that is... it’s awfully cold.”

Dora dropped the knife she was holding and Steve scowled, starting to get up. “Damned fool! I’ll go get him.”

But Dora was already in the mudroom, pulling on her wellies and windcheater. “I won’t be a minute.”

“Suppose it would be too much to ask just what the hell is going on around here,” Ron grumbled.

AS DORA APPROACHED THE LAKE she could see Bernard returning from the far side with a steady stroke.

“Are you crazy?” she called out when he was close enough to hail.

“You keep asking me that,” he answered, treading water.

“Hurry up,” she scolded, “We’re waiting breakfast.”

“Give me a minute?”

“Oh help! Not again!” She turned her back to him and waited until he gave her the all clear. When she turned around again the first thing she checked were his eyes—a sparkling emerald green.

“Where are the boots I gave you?”

“Forgot ‘em. Sorry,” he apologized, not looking the least bit sorry.

“You’ve lost your feather,” she pointed out.

“No matter. I’ll find another one.”

“Why do you wear that ridiculous thing, anyway?”

“Same reason you paint your eyes. Makes me look pretty. You, though... you don’t need any ornaments.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.”

“It won’t? Well, you can’t blame a guy for trying. Oh look... there’s one now. How convenient.” He bent over to pick up a brown feather with silver spots.

Dora turned again and stalked up the slope toward the farmhouse, Bernard easily keeping pace in his bare feet. They rounded the corner of the stone wall to find their path impeded by a large brown cow which took one look at Bernard and let out with an antagonistic moo before charging. Dora jumped to one side and in the blink of an eye Bernard was atop the stone wall. The cow thundered to a halt and paced below, twitching her tail furiously and brandishing her sharply tipped recurved horns.

“You didn’t say you had a *cow*,” he called down accusingly.

Dora stood in mute bafflement for a moment before breaking out laughing. She walked over to the cow and took her firmly by the halter.

“For heaven’s sake, it’s only a cow. What are you afraid of?”

“I *hate* cows,” Bernard shuddered.

“Queen Maude is the nicest cow in the world, aren’t you, Maudie?” She stroked the cow’s nose and scratched her behind the ear.

“I don’t care. Put it away. Please!”

Dora had to lead the cow away into the stableyard and close the gate before Bernard consented to come down from the wall and follow her to the kitchen door.

“Queen Maude isn’t ours... she belongs to Mrs. Doyle.”

“Mrs. Doyle?”

“Our new housekeeper. She just started this morning. And before you ask... yes, she takes Queen Maude with her everywhere she goes. She’s a little eccentric that way but very nice.”

In the mudroom Bernard wiped off his feet with the same towel he’d used the night before while Dora removed her wellies. As they stepped into the kitchen, Steve and Ron looked up from their seats. Slugger and Dottie were standing by the stove, the latter with an expression of shock. Dora started to make introductions before realizing Bernard had come to a dead stop at her side... and no... it wasn’t her imagination working overtime... his face was expressionless and his eyes had gone flat gray.

“Now what’s the matter?” she whispered.

“You didn’t say you had a *witch*, either,” Bernard whispered back.

Dora was about to demand what he meant... even as she felt the current sparking between her companion and the housekeeper... and fell silent.

Dottie narrowed her eyes, her lips tightening to a thin grim line as she backed out of the kitchen into the scullery. “Edward, a word in private if you please.” They exited through the scullery door to the kitchen garden, closing it with a bang.

OUTSIDE AND OUT OF EARSHOT, DOTTIE ROUNDED ON SLUGGER. “What is that creature doing under your roof!” she hissed. “Have you taken complete leave of your senses?”

“What creature?” Slugger was flummoxed. Never before had he seen Dorothy Doyle in such a state. “You mean Bernard?”

“Yes, of course that one!” she spat. “There’s been none of its kind in this district in years. We thought we’d driven them all back to Scotland... where they belong!”

“Eh? You mean... Americans?”

“Not that, you idiot!”

“Or them hippies, because...”

“No, not that either..!” she cut him off impatiently.

“Then I don’t know...”

Dottie made a visible effort to collect herself. “Do you really not understand what you’ve got here?”

Slugger was beginning to wonder if Dottie was a little unhinged. Or perhaps it was either the Curse or the Change? Granted, his expertise in those areas was limited but he’d always heard that women were apt to become irrational while under the influence of one or the other. But then another thought struck him.

Dorothy Doyle’s husband had passed away at the same time as Slugger’s wife, leaving his young widow with a tidy little farm, a modest herd of sleek Jersey cows and four stairstep boys. The mother had never known a sick day in her life and the children had never missed a day of school due to illness. The cows were prolific in both the healthy calves each unfailingly produced every spring as well as the untold gallons of creamy milk rich in butterfat content. The widow had maintained herself and her children by selling milk and butter from her cows

and eggs from her flock of white Leghorns. Slugger had been one of the Widow Doyle's regular weekly customers from the beginning. They had helped each other get through the difficult mourning periods after the demise of their respective spouses and maintained a mutual fond regard for each other.

Over the years Slugger had heard recurrent rumors that Mrs. Doyle's success was due more to sinister arts than competence, but he had always discounted these as products of jealous and less sought-after competitors in the dairy and egg market. He suddenly realized that in all the years he'd known her, and watched her sons grow from boys to men, the woman herself had not aged a whisk. Now he wondered if the rumors had some basis in fact.

There was of course no way he could directly ask her any such question. On the other hand, he would be perfectly within his rights to ask her what she meant about Bernard.

"Good heavens, man... do you not know a shapeshifter when you see one?" Dottie demanded.

He considered her question for a moment and then chuckled. "Good 'un! You had me goin' for a minute, there!"

Dottie shook her head vigorously. "Laugh all you want, Edward Jones. This is a grave matter. That kind never show up unless they're up to something."

Dora timidly poked her head out the door. "Um... I've started the eggs. We're ready to eat anytime you are. It's a bit crowded though..."

"You and the boys go ahead so you can get started on your chores. We'll have ours later and do the washing up as well." Dottie waved her back inside and took Slugger's arm.

"Come. Let's you and me take a turn around the house til they're done and I'll explain a few things to you..."

As they paced, Slugger's air of amused disbelief gradually faded, replaced with apprehension and fear. Part of him desperately wanted to regard Dottie's words as pure fabrication. She was just having him on, that was all. He wasn't an educated man but he'd been around the track a time or two. He reminded himself that he really didn't believe—didn't *want* to believe—in ghosties and ghoulies and long-legged beasties or things that went bump in the night—no matter what fanciful tales and horror stories his aged granny had fed him as a child. There were no such things as supernatural beings... although the housekeeper would have him believe otherwise. They stopped at the southwest corner of the farmhouse and sat at a stone bench amidst overgrown shrubbery where they had a view of the drive between the farmhouse and the stableyard but could not themselves be easily seen.

"Any questions so far?" Dottie asked, still holding to Slugger's arm.

Slugger felt an overpowering urge to run for the hills. His orderly, uncomplicated world had just become a nonsensical place riddled with unknown phantasms and unseen dangers, wherein the new housekeeper was an undercover witch and the new stablehand some other kind of inhuman critter. He couldn't bring himself to meet her eyes but neither could he disavow her presence. Certainly he would have to take every precaution to avoid causing offense, however innocently, by word or deed. A strong sense of self-preservation suggested that acquiescence would be the prudent response. No sense stirring the pot until he had a clearer sense of what was in it.

"Edward," Dottie was addressing him gently. "Perhaps you could explain how he came to be here?"

That was easy enough... straightforward and factual. He began with Dora's ride yesterday and concluded with her having to retrieve her new hire from his early morning swim.

"He seems a nice enough lad, Dottie... are you sure...?"

“Absolutely,” she said firmly. “No doubt about it... except for one or two odd details... you say she discovered him *in* the lake in the woods?”

“That’s what she said.”

Dottie closed her eyes. “Saints and goddesses preserve us!”

Slugger fully expected that next she’d be flinging her apron over her head and commence to keening. Instead, she cocked her head to one side and appeared perplexed. “You do recall *what that lake is*, don’t you?”

“Blimey!” Slugger exclaimed. “I’d completely forgotten!”

Folklore had it that the pristine spring-fed pool nestled in the copse of trees was a clootie well... a holy place where a hundred years ago believers left offerings in hopes of having their desires fulfilled, their wishes granted, and their infirmities healed by the resident spirit. As the years had gone by, however, public access to the lake had become increasingly restricted as subsequent landowners replaced low drystone walls with stout wire fencing that discouraged trespassers. Too, younger generations were less inclined to hew to the old ways and eventually the existence of the well was known to only a few.

The Colonel had made it known, when he in turn acquired the property he christened ‘Follyfoot Farm’, that he had no wish to reignite any interest in the site. And rightly so, Slugger thought; they didn’t want all manner of outsiders trampling around, gawking and leaving their bits and bobs everywhere. He had dutifully kept the secret of the clootie well hidden over the decades, even from his young charges, but wasn’t surprised that Dottie knew of it.

Slugger came back to the present when he realized the woman was speaking.

“I can’t imagine why he was left unharmed. Water spirits aren’t known to tolerate them, you know.”

“Water spirits?” Slugger gulped.

“Which indicates something’s amiss. This is a most irregular situation.”

*You can say that again*, Slugger thought.

“But then again, that Myrtice always was a bit of a tart when it comes to younger men.”

“Myrtice?”

“The spirit of the well, Edward, pay attention!”

“I’m trying!” *Believe me, I’m trying hard as I can!*

“Did anything else out of the ordinary happen yesterday?” Dottie inquired. “Any odd sightings perhaps?”

Slugger thought hard for a few minutes. “There was that strange horse Steve and Dora found in the pasture yesterday morning... not one of ours and not one we know from around here. They said they ain’t never seen anythin’ like it before it ran off. That boy claims it’s his.”

“Ah! So it’s a horse, is it?” Dottie cried triumphantly. “Well there you have it! A baldfaced admission! Of all the cheek... not even trying to deny it!”

“What should we do about him, then?” he inquired plaintively.

“Nothing at present. Best leave this matter to the professionals. My associates and I will take up this matter at our regular board meeting tonight and we’ll get to the bottom of it, never fear!” Dottie assured him briskly

“You mean... there’s more of you? Like... a *coven*?!” Slugger squawked, aghast.

“Of course there’re others!” Dottie scoffed. “I’ll have you know we’re a respectable organization just like the sewing circle, the book club, the ladies’ hospital auxiliary...”

“I get the picture.”

“We have monthly meetings with parliamentary rules, elected officers and everything... Why, there’s Mrs. Kennedy, Mrs. Holmes, Lady Butler, Mrs....”

“Please... no more names. I don’t want to know!” Slugger appealed. He’d never again be able to look upon the postmistress or the butcher’s wife in exactly the same way.

“And Edward... we don’t use the word ‘*coven*’ anymore. It’s considered rude and prejudicial nowadays.”

“Sorry! Sorry!”

MEANWHILE, BACK IN THE KITCHEN... Ron studied the new arrival with intense curiosity and deduced right away what must have occurred. Judging by the ripe bruises and plethora of plasters decorating Steve, he concluded that Steve must have been either met his match or had been bested in that exchange—probably why he didn’t want to discuss it. Steve had never lost a fistfight that Ron knew of and he figured the other’s pride had been severely tested. It must have been one hell of a scuffle and Ron regretted having missed it. Moreover, there had to be a juicy story behind why it had come about. *Still... a shrimp like that... must be a total loony to have taken on Steve! And why does the kitchen smell like coconuts?*

Ron himself wasn’t one of Mrs. Doyle’s favorite people; he knew that, but he’d never caused her to react the way she just had. Although he wasn’t necessarily the sharpest knife in the drawer—which he also knew—Ron had an advantage over Steve in that he was sensitive to potentially explosive situations which Steve was usually too busy brooding to spot. He possessed a congenital ability to create mischief and a concomitant compulsion to do so. He simply couldn’t help himself. Something about the newcomer had set Steve off and wasn’t sitting right with Mrs. Doyle. Ron meant to find out what that something might be and the most rewarding way of exploiting it.

Dora could plainly see what bubbled behind Ron’s sly expression and steeled herself to counteract the insensitive questions and biting comments sure to fly from his totally tactless mouth. Even after Dottie and Slugger had withdrawn, Bernard remained poised for flight until Dora herded him into the room and indicated the empty chair next to Ron. Puzzling over Bernard’s and Dottie’s extraordinary reactions to each other, she determined to keep the introductions simple—the less said, the better... at least until she found out what was going on.

“Ron, this is Bernard. He’ll be helping out temporarily until we can interview some more applicants.” *If we have more applicants!* “Bernard, meet Ron Stryker. He also lives and works here.” The two shook hands.

Even though Steve had apologized the night before for his behavior, Dora was still ticked off and a little apprehensive that he might be tempted to renew hostilities now that he couldn’t very well ignore Bernard’s presence directly across the table from him. But whatever Steve might have been feeling or thinking, he was keeping his face carefully neutral. Ron, too, seemed to have abandoned his usual penchant for rude inquisitioning and ascerbic remarks and was conducting himself with unusual restraint. He and Steve exchanged mild commentary mostly concerning work to be done that day. Bernard said nothing at all.

Dora was torn between attending to the ham and bacon crisping nicely on the stove and trying to identify the unusual but quite distinct aura of peace and polite restraint that had descended upon the room. Pouring the bowl of beaten eggs into the second frying pan, she noticed Dottie had added grated sharp cheddar cheese, minced onion and a dash of parsley to the mix. She would never have thought of doing that.

Steve and Ron discussed football scores quietly and Bernard listened without participating while Dora finished cooking and went to see about Slugger and Dottie. Steve was about get two

extra chairs from the disused dining room when Dora returned and informed him there wouldn't be any need. Hearing that the housekeeper wouldn't be returning to the kitchen during the meal, Bernard relaxed his watchfulness. Dora slid the scrambled eggs from the pan to the serving bowl, then retrieved the second skillet to portion out the ham. Bernard looked at at the fried meat in dismay and back up at Dora in mute appeal. A light bulb came on.

"Oh," she said softly. "Oh... are you're... um... a vegetarian?"

He nodded his head affirmatively. "No problem. I'm fine with toast and jelly and eggs."

Ron looked at Bernard as if he were an alien just landed from another planet. He knew there were people who didn't eat meat, some who wouldn't even eat eggs, but he had never met one.

"There's some corn flakes in the pantry," Dora said. "Will that do you? Or I could fix some oatmeal."

"Cereal would be great, thanks."

Dora got a spoon and soup bowl from the sideboard then went to the pantry and returned with a packet of corn flakes and a box of raisins. Steve and Ron were already digging in as she seated herself and poured another mug of tea. Conversation resumed about the weather, the price of feed, yesterday's fence mending.

With breakfast out of the way and the table cleared, Steve and Ron trooped outside to begin morning chores while Dora detained Bernard with a demand he put on some footwear. He protested but she insisted, frowning when he returned from upstairs with trainers. "Not the best choice for riding—they can slip through the irons too easily. Boots with heels would be safer."

Bernard didn't bother to rebut that she herself wasn't wearing boots. "Oh! I'm gonna get to ride?" he asked brightly.

"If I decide I need help with the boarders, yes. *After* mucking out! You *do* ride, I suppose?"

"Yes, Dora. *I do* ride."

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## **FIELD JOURNAL: MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 1974 • 8:00 AM**

**Atmospheric conditions:** *Mostly sunny, not as chilly*

**Immediate location:** *Downstairs bathroom.*

**Plants:** *Looks like I'm to be teamed up with Dora first. Today I hope to find out: Her satisfaction with current circumstances and life in general. What she would change if she could. Her views of the future as an individual, as a possible couple. Her complaints about Steve, if any. No man is exempt from complaints—just ask any woman!*

*Oh boy! I get to ride. Maybe. Almost my very favorite thing as I do love horses. (Well... yeah... that would make sense, wouldn't it?) Mucking out, on the other hand, is definitely not one of my favorite things and it's been years since I've had to do it. I suppose I'll manage.*

**Goal:** *I'd like to get Dora to consider areas/possibilities re self-improvement... or perhaps I mean self-promotion. Maybe she hasn't expressed herself clearly enough to Steve. Have to remember that in this place and time women are much more hesitant about revealing their emotions to men—before they're married to them, anyway! Afterwards it's no holds barred.*

**Overall mood assessment:** *Steve = grouchy and touchy. Dora = frazzled but coping. Ron = puzzled and conniving. Slugger = confused and nervous. The housekeeper = surprised and pugracious. Me = startled and defensive. This could be a very interesting day.*

**Technical issues:** Discreetly resorted to a little bit of cheating at the breakfast table in the interest of preserving group equanimity.

**Observations:** SHE could've warned me about a Witch in the household—how could SHE not have known? Unless this one was assigned as a spy or a monitor—either way, I'm not pleased about it. And why couldn't this one have a standard cat like everybody else? What's with the daemon cow already?

How am I supposed to work with a Witch giving me the stinkeye? It's like trying to make love to your wife with your mother-in-law in the room. Not only that, she's probably not only going to get in my way but likely will do something unpleasant to me at the first opportunity. They think they're so superior...

AND... I was right about the Otherness in the house... if that Ron doesn't have an imp or two in his family's woodpile, then I'm a monkey's uncle. Or it could be leprechaun, considering the red hair. Whatever... another potential source of trouble.

**Note to self:** woot! The water in the big lake is cold enough to compromise one's manhood but naturally I wasn't going admit that to the girl. Also, a very nasty little kelpie lives there. Only out of professional courtesy and a regard for our racial similarity did she consent to leave me unmolested. (In future, will swim in small lake only.)

Also, I feel like I've been run over by a garbage truck. My only consolation is that Steve probably feels a lot worse. Ha ha.

This is not the most comfortable venue for journaling but no other private place is available until bedtime. Suspect I'll be requiring quite a few bathroom interludes.

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# ***“The impossible has a kind of integrity which the merely improbable lacks”*** • DOUGLAS ADAMS

FROM THEIR OBSERVATION POST, SLUGGER AND DOTTIE HAD WATCHED first one pair and then the second pair of young people exit the house by the kitchen door and enter the stableyard. They then circled around to the front of the house and re-entered by the east door which opened into the foyer. Dottie peeked through the open door to the parlor, at the moment emptied of furniture and smelling of fresh paint.

“What’s going on in here?” Dottie asked.

“Renovatin’, she calls it,” Slugger grumbled. “Redecoratin’, too. Made us drag everything out and put it in the dining room. Next we’ll be havin’ to shove it all back it.”

“Ah,” was all Dottie said.

Reclaiming the kitchen, Slugger and Dottie set about enjoying their own breakfast. The earlier diners had cleaned up after themselves, putting their dishes and cutlery to soak in hot soapy water in the scullery’s galvanized sink. The table had been reset for two and someone—most likely Dora—had thoughtfully popped pie tins covered with foil into the warming oven. A fresh pot of tea reposed under a knitted cozy.

His nervousness at Dottie’s revelations subsiding, Slugger burned with questions. Whether or not he was prepared to accept what she said as fact rather than fiction, he realized that it would be to his advantage to amass as much information as he could absorb about this cuckoo’s egg that had fallen into his nest.

Dottie distributed the contents of the pie tins equally onto two serving plates and poured tea.

“Not sayin’ yer a liar, Dottie,” Slugger was nodding his head, “but I’m findin’ all this real hard to believe. I keep thinkin’ I’m in a dream an’ I’m gonna wake up soon. I mean, a boy what turns into a brute... who would believe that? That’s only in fairytales! An’ now yer sayin’ yer a witch... after all these years.”

Dottie regarded her friend with compassion, knowing he was upset but doing his best to put on a brave front. “Edward... look at me. It didn’t happen overnight, you know. I was born a witch and have been one all along. I’m still me—good old Dottie. Nothing’s changed there. I know what people have said about me over the years and I just let it slide like water off a duck’s back. But whatever you may’ve heard about my girls is untrue... they’re just ordinary cows. Well, except for Queen Maude, of course.”

“Dottie... what if he...” Slugger flapped his hands around, unable to actually say the words.

“It’s called ‘morphing’ and I doubt it’ll be doing that in front of you,” she said drily. “It’s too offputting for the Normals, you see. But Edward, I’m glad you’re asking these questions... shows you’ve taken me seriously.”

“Is he... erm... dangerous? Shouldn’t we call the polis... or somebody?”

Dottie pursed her lips. “Dangerous? No. I shouldn’t think so... but I won’t know for certain until I’ve assembled a few more facts. Frankly, I’m much more concerned with *why* he’s here rather than *what* he is. Think very hard, Edward... have you noticed anything out of the ordinary since he arrived? Anyone behaving differently from the way they normally do?”

Slugger furrowed his brow and concentrated. “Well... now that you mention it... after the fight was over last night and we was all there in the kitchen... Dora got all calmed down and weren’t weepy like she usually is... and Steve, he got over bein’ mad right quick. It weren’t natural. None of it. Normally they’d keep right flappin’ on until bedtime.” Though hesitant to admit that he’d felt a change come over himself as well, he described as best he could how,

directly after shaking hands with Bernard, he was seized with a determination to take charge, to exert authority. “Even got to feelin’ I was stronger, smarter than I know I am,” he admitted with chagrin.

“That’s just the pheromones. His kind seem to be endowed with an overabundance of them,” Dottie said.

“The fair ‘o whats?”

“Chemistry, Edward... body chemistry released into the air. It’s a natural biological function that triggers instincts and behavior between two beings of the same specie.

“What do they smell like?” In his mind Slugger was searching for a parallel to more familiar bodily exudations such as bad breath, underarm odor and flatulence—all of which were involuntary but could be masked or controlled to some extent.

“Mostly there’s no odor... but the ones that do have a scent smell differently to different people and they’re usually benign.”

“You mean... one person might smell hay and someone else might smell apples or cinnamon?”

“Yes... exactly. It works the same way as smelling something good might make you drool. But it’s the ones you *can’t* smell you’ve got to worry about... these are very powerful attractants that can affect the way you think and feel while you’re in their presence. Generally, however, it wears off rather quickly... unless there’s direct physical contact, in which case the effects might last a day or two and could lead you to do things you mightn’t ordinarily do.”

Slugger pricked with alarm. “Can you catch ‘em by just shakin’ hands?”

“You don’t exactly ‘catch’ anything but, yes, any kind of touching can intensify the effect. As for any prolonged intimate contact... kissing, for instance... well, his kind can be deceptively charming—as many a girl has discovered to her later regret. Need I explain further?”

No, she did not need to explain. The one salient fact that Slugger did manage to extract from all this was that Dora could be at risk and he wasn’t having that... *not on his watch!*

“Is there nothing to be done about it?” Slugger fretted.

“There’s always been controversy over pheromone emissions,” Dottie admitted. “It’s not yet understood whether these are voluntary or involuntary. Scientists are working to isolate the chemical compositions and expect to someday create synthesized pheromones for practical application in agronomy and entomology...”

Slugger held up a hand. “Dottie... I’m a simple man. I don’t understand anythin’ yer sayin’. All I want to know is, is it safe to be around him? He ain’t contagious, is he?”

“No, Edward, it’s not like a disease that can be transmitted. My advice to you, though...” Dottie quipped, “... is don’t kiss him!”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Slugger joked back, thinking uneasily... *but what if Dora did?* Not that he could envision that happening.

They both stood and carried their dishes into the scullery, continuing their conversation as they fell easily into the washing up routine as if they’d been doing so for years.

Slugger thought of something else. “His eyes keep changin’ color, too... first they’re gray, then they’re green... and not always the same green, either.”

“That has to do with chromatophores, thermochromatic elements and the presence of a tapetum lucidum—all of which do not naturally occur in humans. He almost certainly can see in the dark.”

Slugger understood only part of this... the part that explained why Steve was so bunged up and Bernard wasn’t. Had the fight occurred in broad daylight, Bernard wouldn’t have stood a chance. Maybe.

“So... he ain’t... human?”

“Of course he is, Edward... well, in most respects. So am I. We just have a little something extra... what the Cajun French call ‘*lagniappe*’ ”

There were a few other points Dottie considered presenting, but decided the poor man had had enough unpleasant news thrown at him for the time being.

“Dottie... how come you to know so much about science and such?”

“I wasn’t always a farmer’s wife, you know. Once upon a time I was at university with a view toward becoming a biochemist and saving the world with my discoveries. Even though I was far brighter than most who applied, the only reason I was accepted was that so many of our boys were off to war and they were desperate to fill the rolls... even if they were reduced to admitting *women* to their sacred halls of academe.” Dottie rolled her eyes as the scorn rolled off her tongue. Although her face showed nothing, Slugger was certain he detected both bitterness and regret.

“What happened?”

Dottie gave him a sideways glance. “Donal Doyle is what happened. You can guess the rest. I was summarily ejected from uni as soon as I started showing. But he did the right thing by me. I was already five months gone when we made it legal.”

“But couldn’t you have gone back and finished?”

Dottie shrugged. “Could have tried, I suppose, but I chose another path... and never looked back. Turned out I was much better suited to farm life than a laboratory. And I wouldn’t have traded Donal or any of our boys for all the degrees at Oxford.”

She let the water out of the sink and briskly dried her hands on her apron. “Now then, if you would kindly direct me to where you keep the Hoover and the cleaning supplies, I’ve work to do.”

BERNARD HAD REFUSED TO ENTER THE YARD until Steve had removed Queen Maude to the west pasture with assurances from Dottie that the cow wouldn’t stray even if there was a fence down. As they walked toward the feedroom, Bernard commented on the obviously recent addition to the buildings where several sleek well-bred heads poked out inquiringly over Dutch doors.

Dora explained that her original plans for additional stabling for boarders had allowed for only four new boxes between the donkey pen and the hay barn, all facing inwards toward the enclosed yard. That plan had been amended so that a breezeway with four boxes on either side, facing each other, opened into the yard at one end and the paddock at the other. A small odd-shaped room on the yard side served as a separate tackroom.

“Those eight are here for schooling. I normally work with them in the afternoons. Steve, too, if he has time. Sometimes Ron. During school hols we hold riding classes for children. Slugger and Hazel handle those. We’re hoping that eventually we’ll take in enough—with boarding, training and riding lessons for children and adults—to cover the costs of the rescue and retirement side of our farm.”

“Who’s Hazel?”

“Someone else who lives here. It was her room you slept in last night. It’s her gap year, you see, and she’s traveling on the Continent.”

The feedroom was a semi-enclosed area within the hay storage barn, with barrels and sacks of feed lined up neatly against two walls and stacks of galvanized pails and plastic tubs along a third. Dora outlined the usual daily routine for Bernard’s benefit while dispensing instructions about mixing up mash and measuring oats and bran into tubs.

After all the animals had been fed, they would be turned out of their stalls and boxes into the yard. The boarders had their own paddock separate from the permanent residents. Any animals requiring additional attention would be tethered to posts and the rest walked out to pasture for the day. Then all the stalls and boxes would be mucked out and replenished with fresh straw. When that was done, everyone would disperse and get on with whatever other chores or business were on tap for the day. At appropriate intervals there would be tea and lunch breaks. Depending on the season and weather conditions, some or all of the equine residents would be brought back in for the night and settled in their boxes before their caretakers went to their supper.

As Dora and Bernard filled tubs, Steve and Ron shuttled them out to the permanent residents and returned empty ones. Dora noted that Steve was moving much more slowly than usual and limping. She wished there was something she could do to ease his discomfort.

"We'll do the boarders last while Steve and Ron turn ours out into the yard." Dora indicated a stack of plastic buckets numbered one through eight in large white letters. "They get a different formulation from ours as they're more active."

"A lot of work for just five people," Bernard offered.

"We've only just started advertising for helpers but haven't got any suitable ones yet. How long do you think you'll be staying?"

"Not long. However long it takes. Maybe by then you won't need me."

"It remains to be seen if we need you now," Dora said tartly. "We don't really know yet how useful you are, do we?" Her tone was playful.

Bernard laughed. "I guess we'll find out."

"So where are you from?"

"Like I said, I'm from the future..."

Dora laughed. "Yes, yes... and you're here to help. Very funny."

"Why doesn't anyone believe me?" Bernard asked in an aggrieved tone.

"Seriously... who is Bernard when he's at home?"

"Bernard is a postgraduate psychology major, on sabbatical at the moment."

"And what is Bernard doing here, of all places?"

"Bernard is researching contemporary mating rituals of young adults in the United Kingdom for his Master's thesis."

"I see," said Dora. "And have you reached any conclusions so far?"

"Not yet. I'm just getting started."

"Well, I don't expect you'll find much material around here. We're a dull lot in comparison to other places."

"You never know."

"Where are you from, really?"

"Montana... that's one of the Rocky Mountain states... we call it the 'Big Sky' country."

"Really? Your accent sounds somewhat familiar... almost like my friend Elle's, except she's from Louisiana. That's in the south, though, isn't it?"

"Elle?"

"Elayne... Lady Elayne Butler."

"Oh well... what you're hearing is the French influence, then. Cajun French in the south and Metis French in the west."

"You speak French?"

Bernard grinned. "Nothing you'd recognize, *chérie*."

When Bernard made no further comment, Dora continued. “My father’s in the diplomatic corp. He’ll be retiring next year and he and my mother have bought a villa in Costa de Almeria... that’s in Spain.”

“You must have seen a lot of the world, then.”

Dora gave him a wistful, sad look. “Not really, no. I was always left behind at boarding school. I’m not very close to my parents. In fact, I hardly know them at all. Certainly they don’t know me. I doubt they ever will.”

“I see.”

“You’ll be going back to university at summer’s end?”

“Yep. Got my BSc and going for a Masters, then eventually a Psy.D in interspecies behavioral theory.”

Dora was mightily impressed though not familiar with the discipline. “What’s that?”

“The dynamics of behavior patterns in both animals and humans and how they relate to each other.”

“Oh.”

“Why aren’t you in college yourself, Dora?”

“My parents had planned for me to continue on to university but then I came here instead and decided to stay.”

“So you’re not interested in higher education?”

“I suppose I’ve given up on it.” Dora changed the subject. “I’ve only met a few Americans and there’s Elayne, of course... but you’re not like any of them.”

“Do I seem that much different?”

“Yes... but I’m not sure why.”

“Your friend... she live around here?”

“Oh yes... she’s married to Sir Hughes Butler. Their estate is just to the west of here. He was a widower, you see, and everyone was shocked when he brought back an American bride from the States,” Dora explained. “She’s a tiny bit, well... not refined enough to suit the tastes of some. But she and I get on famously. In fact, she’s giving me a birthday party next Sunday at Butler Hall. You’ll probably get to meet her before then.”

“Not if I can help it,” Bernard muttered under his breath.

“Excuse me?”

“I said, I’m looking forward to it. So what’s with you and Steve. Is he, like, your main squeeze?” Hoping it wasn’t too obvious a personal question.

“My what?”

“You know... your boyfriend... your fella?”

Dora’s face clouded and she looked a bit sad. “No. Not really. He’s more like... my best friend. I... it’s complicated. We do care for each other, it’s true... but... it’s more or less one-sided, I’m afraid,” she explained ruefully, adding, “We’ve never even been out on a date.”

“I see. Have you ever thought of asking *him* out... or telling him how *you* feel?”

“What?! Certainly not. Maybe that’s how you do things where you’re from, but we’re more... conventional, I suppose.”

“Maybe you need a little unconventionality in your life, cupcake. Live a little. Let your hair down and your feelings out.”

“I can’t. I just... can’t.”

By the time Dora and Bernard had finished feeding the eight boarders and placed tight-fitting lids on the bins to discourage rodents, Steve had turned out all the other horses, ponies and

donkeys. Ron had sloped off for a quick smoke before mucking out got underway. Usually it was Steve and Dora who took the animals out to pasture but today Steve asked her if she minded if Bernard accompany him instead.

Bernard and Steve happened to be standing side by side when the latter made his request. It was Dora's first opportunity to compare the two individuals first hand. With a jolt she realized that while her heart still yearned for her first love, her head was harboring an inexplicable interest in the short blonde American who had conveniently dropped into her world just as she was on the brink of making a life-altering decision. He had an appeal she couldn't quite put her finger on, and she couldn't just turn off her feelings for Steve like a light switch but still... Slightly put out and not a little worried at the possibility of a resumption of enmity, she lied and said she didn't mind at all.

HARBORING A LINGERING RESENTMENT OVER YESTERDAY'S EVENTS and now having this stranger imposed on his fiefdom, Steve had recognized his best recourse would be to go with flow for the time being. He determined that he first needed to accumulate background information on the interloper in order to establish reasonable cause for dismissal. And the only way to do that was to strike up a conversation. Steve didn't consider himself especially shy. He could hold his own in social discourse as long as someone else introduced the topic, but he was rubbish at starting up one on his own. Sometimes he wished he was more like Ron; Ron could talk to anyone anywhere, anytime about anything... whether he knew the person or not.

As they headed toward the east pasture with the small herd following attentively, eager to get to their grass banquet, Steve cast about for an opening gambit.

"Look... I'm really sorry about last night... I know I've got a bad temper..."

"So I noticed," Bernard responded.

"If Dora had told me first..."

"Dude, it's okay. I understand. I might've reacted the same in your sneakers."

"You and Dora've hit it off, looks like." Steve's tone was noncommittal.

"Yeah. She's a sweet kid. Pretty, too."

"Don't go getting any ideas, Yank..." Steve bristled.

Bernard grinned. "Take it easy, Sparky. I'm not here to poach on your patch."

They had reached the pasture and the animals needed no urging to file through the gate, nipping and jostling each other in their haste to get to the deep green grass rippling in the breeze. Steve swung closed the big gate and leaned against it, crossing his arms on the top rail. Bernard followed suit after pulling off his trainers and socks and wiggling his toes in the hoof-beaten dust of the track.

Had an uninformed witness then been called upon to identify which young man was the scholar and which one the knockabout prison parolee, he would invariably have made the wrong choice. Always meticulously conservative about his personal appearance, Steve—aside from his scuffed boots—wore his usual workaday garb of clean, pressed denims, checked cotton shirt neatly tucked in and matching jumper. His aversion to patched or stained clothing was a well-known and continuing source of amusement to Slugger, who was in charge of laundry. Steve's heavy sable hair, though almost shoulder length, he kept regularly trimmed and styled and frequently combed. And he was always cleanly shaven.

Hanging on the gate next to Steve, Bernard was the very antithesis of tidiness starting with his untamed blonde mop. Someone else's castoff blue workshirt—several sizes too big for him—he wore unbuttoned over a faded brown t-shirt bearing a Newcastle Brown Ale logo, neither one tucked in. (Steve despised tees with designs on them and refused to wear them.)

Bernard's bell-bottomed jeans were a snug fit but sported multiple patches on the seat and knees, which clearly identified them as having previously belonged in Ron's teenage wardrobe.

Bernard rested his chin on his crossed arms and watched with pleasure as the five youngest and most fit animals, led by the redgold Anglo-Arab, separated from the band and tore off at a lope just for the sheer joy of it.

"Aren't those a little out of place in this outfit?" he asked.

"Yes... well, they're our personal mounts except for the gray pony, Folly... he's just three. The Arab is Dora's—that's Copper. The Appaloosa is mine—he's called Alex. The black gelding is Buddy... we're not too sure what he is... he's Ron's. The piebald Connemara is Peanut; he's Hazel's but she's outgrown him and needs to move up."

Bernard's eyes followed Copper as he led the little group on a circuit of the pasture.

"Does she ever show him?"

"Dora and Copper, you mean? She has a few times but not lately. Do you know much about competition riding?"

"Very little."

"Dora's has a real knack for schooling horses, and we started taking in boarders for training to make money. But it takes a tremendous amount of time and energy and attention. She barely has a social life anymore."

"That a problem for you?" Bernard inquired ingenuously.

There was a moment of silence as Steve mulled this over. "Why should it be?"

"So tell me about this farm and how you all came to be living here," Bernard asked a few minutes later.

Steve debated just how much information he was willing to part with. Too much and every golddigger in the country would come sniffing around after Dora's considerable inheritance. "Originally it was just a hobby farm of Dora's uncle's for horses no one else wanted—old, sick, lame, abused or just retired. Slugger ran it for Colonel Maddocks—that's Dora's uncle who died last year. Ron's been around since he was a teenager. Dora came to live here three years ago and me right after that. Then Hazel a year and half ago. That's about it. It belongs to Dora now and she came into a bit of money last year when her uncle passed. She had the old farmhouse fixed up so that we could all live in it."

"Are you all, like, orphans or something?"

"As good as," Steve answered darkly but didn't elaborate.

"This sure is a nice little farm... quiet, peaceful... I can see why anyone would be content living here. Shame it can't last forever."

As intended, Steve swallowed the hook. "What do you mean, it won't last?"

Bernard turned his head to look directly at him. "Progress, mainly, whether you want it or not. Population growth, people needing homes and room to build them. New businesses and industries competing for space. Bigger government, higher taxes. Corporate agriculture squeezing out family farms. Not just here but in my country, too. And don't even get me started on environmental issues!"

Steve knew that everything Bernard said was true; no argument there.

"Even if Dora had a whopping big inheritance..."

"Which is none of your business."

"...which is none of my business, it won't last forever supporting a non-productive farm. Our grandparents were probably the last generation in any first-world nation that depended on horsepower. Folks will still keep horses for pleasure as long as they can afford to, but with the

cost of living always on the rise, that'll be what they choose to sacrifice when it comes to that or college educations for their kids."

This, too, Steve knew to be the truth, but he felt he had to make some sort of rebuttal in defense of his home.

"And your point is...?"

"Where do you all go from here? What do you plan on doing after this?" Bernard waved an arm to indicate the farm around them.

A minute evolved as Steve pondered this question that no one had ever bothered to ask him before, but that he had often asked himself. His face flushed and when he spoke, it was with forced casualness.

"There is no 'from here' or 'after this'. This is home. This is it," he finally admitted.

"And you're satisfied with this?"

"No... I don't know. I never finished school. There were... complications," Steve answered.

"You ever thought about going back?"

"To school, you mean? No. Why? What good would that do me, anyway?"

Bernard stooped to snap off a grass stalk and chewed on the crisp end for a few moments before answering.

"First off, you'd feel better about yourself."

"I feel fine about myself."

"Ya think?"

"Anyway, I wouldn't know where to begin."

"You could go to adult night classes and get a high school equivalency certificate or whatever you call it here. From there you could go on to community college and get a degree in something useful... something you'd enjoy doing."

"I like what I'm doing, working with horses."

"Well, that's great as far it goes, Steve, but what if your plan to stay forever or for as long it lasts doesn't work out? Why not take a course in horse husbandry or equine veterinary technician... or even go on to university and become a veterinarian yourself. I'll bet Dora would back you up on that. Think of the money you'd save on vet bills!"

"What's she got to do with anything?" Steve gritted his teeth.

"Aren't you two, like, a couple?"

"No. She's not my girlfriend. I just work here."

"Oh. Well. Sorry I misspoke." Bernard's next question was calculated to get a rise out of Steve and it did. "Pretty girl like that, you'd think she'd be married by now. Is she dating anyone?" he asked casually.

"Look, she's not for the likes of you... or me." The chill in Steve's tone was unmistakable. "Her folks are quality... upper class. She's led a sheltered life. She's nothing like the kind of girls you probably associate with."

"What kind of girls might that be?" Bernard inquired blandly.

Steve was curt. "Fast girls. Party girls. The kind of tarts you'd expect to find swarming at a fancy university like yours. She's nothing like that. You leave her alone."

Oh ho. So he'd been eavesdropping after all and had overheard part of Dora and Bernard's conversation about school.

"Chill out, man. I told you, I'm not after your woman."

"She's not my..."

“Yeah, yeah... I hear ya talkin’. Can’t live with her, but can’t live without her either, is that it?”

Steve gave Bernard a long look that betrayed the longing and conflict in his brown eyes. “Something like that.”

“In any case, I don’t see how I could manage going back to school now. No time,” Steve said brusquely, intending to banish the incipient notion. “We’d better finish up here. Plenty more to do.” But the proverbial mustard seed had been sown and was already germinating.

They were coming up on the house and courtyard, where Bernard paused to look around and assure himself there were no marauding cows on the loose, and to put his socks and trainers back on. Conversation ceased as they rejoined Dora and Ron and got on with the neverending joy of trundling dung from one location to another. With that accomplished, Ron took himself off to the roof of the hay barn to patch a leak. Presently the sound of hammering and loud singing echoed around the empty yard. Dora went to attend to one of the boarders and Steve led Bernard to the next chore: forking manure onto a flatbed trailer which a neighboring farmer fetched once a week to spread on his fields. They worked in silence for a while until Steve got over his snit.

“You seem to know your way around a manure fork,” Steve commented grudgingly.

“I should hope so. I was mostly raised on a ranch and live on one now.”

“You’re a farmboy?” Steve seemed somewhat taken aback.

“Ranch,” Bernard corrected. “Cattle country. Montana. You?”

“Bred and born right here in Yorkshire. Never been out of England. I would’ve taken you for one of those hippies.”

“Who, moi? What makes you think that?”

“That feather thing... does it mean something?”

“Sure. It’s my talisman. Connects me with my tribe, sort of.”

“Tribe? Are you an Indian? You don’t look like one.”

“Guess I should have said ‘my clan’ or ‘my people.’ A cultural association, in any case. Feather symbology features in a lot of cultures... like finger rings. A ring can be no more than personal adornment... or it can indicate status. Everyone has some sort of cultural association.”

“I don’t,” said Steve.

“Of course you do,” Bernard said. “We all do... and countless subassociations within those. The family you were born into is your first association. When you marry, then you and your wife have formed a new association of two and you owe loyalty to each other. Beyond that, you now have an association with her family. That’s three right there. Each new one overlaps one or more existing ones, but doesn’t exclude them.”

“What if you don’t have a wife... or a family?”

Bernard shrugged. “Seems like you have one with the people here, the ones you live with. You care about them; they care about you. That’s an association, see?”

“All this in a feather, huh?” Steve mocked.

Little further conversation passed between them until the remaining manure had been transferred to the wagon and Slugger called them all in for a break with the bell by the kitchen door. As they headed toward the farmhouse, Steve asked Bernard what sort of aftershave he was wearing.

“Pardon me?”

“You know... cologne... it smells, well, a bit cinnamony.”

“I don’t wear aftershave, Steve... because I don’t shave.”

Steve pondered this peculiar morsel of intel while unconsciously rubbing his still aching jaw. Already the details of the previous night's contretemps were receding into hazy memory. Deep in his subconsciousness he vaguely understood that despite the ferocious amount of noise he and Bernard had been generating up there in the darkness of the loft, neither one had actually landed a blow on the other until they'd arrived at the bottom of the stairs and Steve had got his hands around Bernard's neck. On a conscious level, however, he recalled only that this small fellow had fought like a wildcat when cornered. That alone was worthy of admiration and even a grudging respect.

During the course of this morning's conversation Steve repeatedly had to remind himself just why it was that he wasn't supposed to like this person because... strange as may be... he was actually beginning to like him.

RON, AS USUAL, WAS JOHNNY ON THE SPOT FOR TEA BREAK, closely followed by Steve and Dora. Bernard hung back at the door until Dora came back outside to coax him in, assuring him that Mrs. Doyle was upstairs changing out bed linens and would be remaining there.

Afterwards, fortified with tea and scones, Steve excused himself to walk the fence line again in the west pasture to look for other weak spots and Slugger detailed Bernard and Ron to attend the mess in the loft while Dora assumed to her schooling duties.

As they approached the foot of the staircase to the loft, Ron came upon the first of the shotgun shells littering the steps. "Gunfight at the Follyfoot corral?" he queried with raised brows, stooping to start picking them up.

"A minor misunderstanding," Bernard replied equably. "All straightened out now."

They reached the top of the stairs, jeans pockets stuffed with shells. Ron looked around at the evidence of an epic struggle and whistled—the chair reduced to matchsticks, the dresser leaning precariously on its three remaining legs, the jagged edges of the blown out window, the pockmarked walls, the floor strewn with broken glass, feathers exploded from tears in the mattress ticking, and yet more shells. Ron shook his head and automatically reached for his smokes.

"I wouldn't," Bernard advised, pointing to the lantern lying on the floor, its globe and reservoir shattered. "Besides, those things'll kill ya."

Ron suddenly realized the loft reeked of kerosene and hastily put away his cigarettes and lighter, simultaneously remembering that he was now strictly forbidden to smoke in the stables or the barn. Instead, he leaned against the window casing and frankly studied his co-worker. "Before we get started, you wanna explain what happened here yesterday?"

Bernard gave him a potted account of the 'misunderstanding' as together they picked up the ruined mattress, shaking off glass shards and restoring it to the frame, doing the same with the torn bed pillow and blanket and sheets. Ron eyed brown flecks that looked suspiciously like dried blood. "Yours or his?" he inquired.

Bernard grinned. "His, mostly. Slugger went through a whole can of Band-Aids fixing him up. I was too busy trying to avoid getting hit. Your Steve is a dangerous man."

Ron shrugged. "Our Steve is an unhappy man... and I suspect he's just got a whole lot more unhappy now that you're here. You don't want to get on his bad side," he warned, "or next time it'll be your blood that gets splashed all over the place. I suppose we'd best get some brooms and buckets and get to work."

Bernard agreed. "Looks like most of the glass fell outside into the yard. You must have noticed it this morning."

"Did... and swept it up right quick like. Looked up and seen the window was out."

“Didn’t you wonder why?”

“Not especially, no. Wouldn’t be the first time old Stevoh pitched something through it in one of his rages.”

“You been working here long?”

“Used to come in after school for a bit of pocket money, then got my leaving certificate and went off for a year to see the sights, you know? Came back and started working here full time, so I’d already been here two years before Steve and Dora came.”

“So you guys get along okay? He difficult to work with?”

Ron hedged. “We get along well enough when we’re working. Outside... well, you know... I have me own mates in town, blokes I grew up with. Not his kind. Steve don’t have any friends. He keeps himself to himself.”

“What about Dora? Do you like working with her... *for* her.”

“She’s okay. Not too bossy like some women... unless she’s in a mood. Why’re you asking so many questions?”

“Just trying to get a handle on the pecking order around here.”

Ron grimaced. “I reckon I’m at the bottom of the heap. Always have been. Always will be. Of course, now you’re here, I guess I’m not at the bottom no more...”

“Don’t get too comfortable in your promotion, old son. I won’t be here all that long,” Bernard said. “At least, I’m not planning on it.”

Ron regarded him suspiciously, “Why did you bother coming here at all, then?”

“Can you keep a secret?”

Ron burned with curiosity, his eyes going wide. “Sure. Sure. Won’t tell a bloomin’ soul!”

“I’m on a covert mission to divert certain parties from a path of destruction and correct an imbalance in the historical continuum,” Bernard intoned conspiratorially, perfectly deadpan.

“You mean you’re, like, a secret agent? A government spy?”

“Something like that... only you can’t tell anybody, right?”

Ron was twitching with excitement. “You can count on me, mate!”

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## **FIELD JOURNAL: MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 1974 • 11:30AM**

**Atmospheric conditions:** *Sunny and mild.*

**Immediate location:** *Downstairs bathroom. Again.*

**General:** *Very busy first day... and it’s only half over! Dora’s fairly easy to draw out—bright and educated to a reasonable degree. Why is she hiding her light under a barrel on this handscrabble farm? What keeps her here? She seems totally detached from her parents and her former status in higher society. Ordinarily I wouldn’t consider this a healthy state of affairs but then I didn’t grow up in a culture that doesn’t recognize the needs of small children to bond with their parents and sends them away to school instead. Definitely NOT healthy!*

*Steve’s not so easy to get to know—a classic loner type but at least he made an effort to communicate. Good. Saves me the trouble of maneuvering him into a dialogue. Believe I managed to pound the idea of higher education firmly into his head. We’ll see if anything*

comes of it. Smart kid like that could do well for himself if he can be made to believe that he can... and to understand what he's got to do to get there.

What keeps the rest of them here? The old man and Steve, understandable—no other place to go and no other viable skills. Ron and Hazel an unknown quantities at present.

No illumination was shed on the Steve/Dora thing. They both claim they're not lovers or even friends with benefits. Are they really in love with each other or just coasting in a comfort zone of familiarity? If so, why the jealousy toward me, of all people? Mom used to say I was so homely she had to tie a parkerhop on a string around my neck, just so the dog would play with me.

**Observation:** Don't know what got into me to say what I did to Ron... except that he's just so temptingly gullible. Guess I was just overcome with the absurdity of my situation... trapped in a Jane Austen novel 36 years from home! All these unwritten social mores about who has to say what to whom first! Don't these kids know they're living in the Age of Aquarius? Honestly, what is so damned hard about simply telling it like it is?

**Note to self:** Not particularly good news that "Steveh" is prone to throwing things out of windows. Next time it might be me. Better tread carefully around him—he's temperamental as a pit bull, a walking incendiary.

I was waiting for Elaine to turn up and, lo and behold, here she is... yet another Witch to brighten my day. Bet Dora doesn't have a clue about either one. This could get ugly.

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## ***“Philosophy, rightly defined, is simply the love of wisdom” • Cicero***

STEVE FINISHED THE PERIMETER PATROL, having found no other sections of fencing in disrepair, just as Slugger rang the bell announcing lunch. Dora stood outside the door, haranguing a reluctant Bernard with “Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t understand why you’re so afraid of her. She’s not going to bite your head off.”

“That’s what *you* know,” Bernard replied testily. “That woman’s got the Eye.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake! Don’t be such a child and get in there. You won’t even see her. She’s still working upstairs.”

Steve smirked as he skirted around them to get inside and wash up. Of all of the older women in the village and surrounding countryside with whom he was acquainted, Mrs. Doyle was one of the nicest. She had always treated him with kindness, even after word had got around about his having been in prison. Three years later there were others who still regarded him as an unreformed criminal. Her attitude towards Ron was somewhat less cordial but that was Ron’s fault. Her apparent dislike on sight of this new person was curious. Perhaps she knew something they didn’t. He’d get Dora to winkle it out.

They were having ham and cheese sandwiches with pickles and crisps for lunch, plain cheese for Bernard. Slugger had put on a pot of coffee for a change. The sound of industrious Hoovering filtered down from the upper reaches of the house.

“I was thinkin’,” Ron ventured between mouthfuls, “if that horse you found turns up again...”

“What about it?” Steve retorted. “It’s probably long gone by now.”

“If it’s ugly as you say, shouldn’t be too hard to find... and you know I been practicin’ with the lasso...”

“Yeah. So?” True, the redhead had been fiddling with it off and on for months and had finally got to where he could throw a loop more or less where intended. But getting a rope on a running horse was a far cry from settling it over a fencepost or the heads of lassitudinous donkeys and moribund pit ponies.

“I’m thinkin’ if there’s four of us, see, and we find him, then you three could drive him in my direction and I could lasso him. Whaddya think? Be fun to try.”

Steve snickered. “Might be fun IF we knew where he was and IF we had the time.”

“In any case,” Dora’s interjected. “It’s Bernard’s horse. You’d better ask him about it.”

Two pairs of eyes swiveled in Bernard’s direction in surprise. Steve had been upstairs in the bath when that revelation had taken place the prior evening.

“Shouldn’t we be lookin’ for him? Don’t you want him caught?” Ronally finally queried.

“No.”

“But... whyever not?” Dora asked.

“He needs his private time. He’ll turn up when I need him.”

Steve snorted and shook his head. He understood that people needed their private times—hell, he himself needed more than most—but a horse? “What do you do? Whistle for him like a dog? What’s his name, anyway?”

“Squirrel.”

“Odd name for a horse,” Ron opined.

“Hope he rides smoother than he looks,” Steve put in.

“Wouldn’t know,” Bernard said.

“You mean...” Dora was dumbfounded. “You mean you don’t ride him... you’ve *never* ridden him?”

“Nope.”

No one had a comeback for this extraordinary statement although each was thinking the same thing: *Why not?*

Dora stood up when they’d finished eating. “Ron and I are going to Leeds this afternoon to look at a Cortina estate wagon he’s heard of that’s for sale at a good price.” The venerable LandRover had become increasingly undependable lately, to the point where Ron was having to do weekly maintenance on it at the garage his father owned in the town. It needed a major overhaul, but that would take days or weeks and they couldn’t afford to be without it that long. Dora had decided that they needed and could afford a newer ride that could double as a passenger car and light duty utility vehicle.

Steve pulled a face and muttered something about unnecessary expenditures, which Dora pointedly ignored.

“He’ll drop me at my class this evening so someone needs to come get me at eight. Slugger, don’t wait supper for me; we’re going to eat whatever we cook in class. Steve, could you see that the boarders in stalls four through eight get a bit of exercise today? I’ve done one through three. Bernard can help with that, I think. Oh... I almost forgot about Queen Maude... she’s staked out on the green in front of the house. She’s going to be staying here with us so we need to come up with a suitable shelter. In the meantime, we can put her in with the donkeys, Dottie says.”

Steve mumbled, somewhat ungraciously, that he would attend to it.

Slugger started clearing the table and Ron and Dora left. Presently the Rover coughed to life and then wheezed its way northwards towards the county road.

In the new tackroom adjacent to the boarder’s stables, Steve pointed to racks containing saddles and bridles provided with the animals; each rack had a corresponding box number with a slot underneath for a placard with each horse’s stable name. Current residents included Cookie, Dutchy, Rebel, Poppy, Oreo, Pepper, Tarzan and Flash. On the other wall hung an assortment of equipage decidedly shabbier and showing signs of numerous repairs; this belonged to the farm.

Steve grabbed two leads and started to hand one to Bernard, pausing as he remembered the other’s statement about not riding his own horse. “You *can* ride, right?” he asked dubiously.

“Yes, Steve, I *can* ride.”

They walked over to the paddock where the eight boarders were segregated.

“We’ll do maybe an hour apiece,” Steve said, “if that’s alright with you?”

“Fine.”

“I’ll take Tarzan first.” He pointed out a tall bay gelding for Bernard. “You take Dutchy.

SECURING THE TWO HORSES TO HITCHING POSTS, they went to the tackroom. Scooping Tarzan’s saddle and bridle off the rack, Steve watched perplexed as Bernard once again removed his trainers and socks before grabbing a hackamore from a peg by the door.

“What are you doing?”

“I only do bareback,” Bernard said. “Saddles don’t work for me. Shoes don’t work for me, either. Don’t tell Dora.”

Steve opened his mouth to comment then thought better of it and busied himself saddling his own horse, stealing puzzled glances as Bernard who, having slipped the hackamore on over the halter, was standing directly in front of the horse with his hands gripping the cheekstraps on either side. Bernard was carrying on an earnest one-sided dialogue with Dutchy while the big bay stood perfectly still, giving the appearance of paying equally earnest attention. Then, with

an astonished Steve looking on from atop Tarzan, Bernard crouched and vaulted onto Dutchy's back in a single effortless movement.

Dutchy smacked his lips and turned his head as if to investigate this curious absence of both bit and saddle as well as a strange human on his naked back, and decided he was okay with the situation. He moved forward to join his stablemate. Steve and Bernard rode side by side in silence for a while as they traversed the earth dam at the east bank of the lake.

Steve spoke first. "How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Get up there in one jump. He's so tall and you're... not."

"The term is 'vertically challenged'... and I don't know. I just do it."

Bernard's form would cause a riding instructor to hyperventilate, Steve thought. All slouched over, shoulders rounded forward, feet turned inward and toes tucked behind the horse's elbows. But there was no denying he looked relaxed, comfortable and confident. He seemed to be holding the reins as an afterthought. For his part, Dutchy was picking his way as precisely as a tightrope walker.

"I can't promise how they'll behave... they're usually quite spirited and full of beans," Steve warned.

"We'll be fine. Dutchy doesn't want me to fall off so he's being extra careful."

"You talk about horses—and *with* them—like they were human," Steve ventured.

"Sure. Don't you?"

"Well... yes... in a way. I mean, I talk *to* them but I don't expect them to answer back. What exactly were you... uh... talking to Dutchy *about*?"

"I introduced myself. I asked for his permission and cooperation. It's only polite."

Steve wasn't sure if this was a serious response or a facetious one.

"And did you... I feel stupid for asking but... did you get an answer?"

"I got an *empathic* answer."

"Huh?"

"Empathy is being able to experience someone else's feelings and emotions, even if you don't share a common language. Empathy doesn't require speech."

"But you were talking to him out loud," Steve insisted. "I could hear you."

"Force of habit, I suppose... because I can. I'm not telepathic. With a human being, your primary means of communication is speech and writing, plus secondary visual cues in the expression on his face and his body language. But with a horse, body language is *all* you've got—that's his only way of expressing his feelings on account of he can't talk or laugh or give you the finger. That's why I ride bareback—so I can feel his heart beating and his lungs and muscles working... and he can feel mine. It's all in how you interpret each other's body language."

Steve fell silent as Bernard's words percolated. Never before had anyone, not even Dora, expressed so succinctly the understanding he himself had always had with horses. In his heart he believed he had a symbiotic relationship with them... an ability to converse with and understand them as his grandmother had professed to have with all living things... even her cherished potted plants. Everyone talked out loud to their pets and livestock; that was a given. But Steve held actual conversations with them in his mind as well. Privately, of course... not when others were around. For fear of being thought barmy he had never trusted anyone enough to share this, yet here was another human openly articulating this same belief.

“You’re sure putting a lot of trust in an animal that could hurt you if he takes a fright or there’s an accident.”

“Accidents do happen,” Bernard agreed. “But the majority are preventable if people would just use common sense. In the meantime, Dutchy and I have initiated a relationship based on trust: I trust that he’s not going to hurt me intentionally—if he does, it will only be because he’s trying to protect himself. He trusts that I’m not going to do anything he’s going to have to protect himself from.”

“Do you feel the same way about people?”

“Yes, usually. Unless they give me cause not to... like shooting at me.”

“I said I was sorry! And anyway, you fought back.”

“We were both operating on instinct... you were defending your territory and I was defending my life. You might want to work on being a little more judicious about deciding when to go with your instincts and when to trust someone’s not out to get you.”

THEY TURNED OFF THE FARM TRACK ONTO THE WOODS TRAIL. Philosophical discussions being such a rarity at Follyfoot, Steve was intrigued by Bernard’s optimistic—by Steve’s standards—approach to life and relationships. He wanted to hear more.

“Until I came here, my life was... I had a hard time trusting people... still do.” In Steve’s experience, placing trust in other folks and having faith in the goodness of mankind often as not resulted in being kicked in the teeth.

Bernard considered how best to address that statement without coming over too pontifical. “Trust and faith go hand in hand, and neither one is a black-and-white issue. Very little in life is. In most societies, we’re conditioned to trust certain individuals just because they are what they are—authority figures, if you will. Parents, teachers, doctors, law enforcement, elected officials, commanding officers if you’re military. Then there’re some people who just inspire trust because of their charismatic personalities—usually religious leaders of some flavor or another. This isn’t to say they’re all *trustworthy*, because sooner or later someone... and more than likely more than one... will fail you. They’re only human, after all, and no one’s perfect.”

“What if it’s someone you love, though?”

“You mean like a parent... or a lover? It happens. They break your heart but you still love them even if you feel you can’t trust them anymore. You have to either get over it and stay on track... or move on.”

“Aren’t you afraid of anything?”

“Me? Oh sure... many things, but you can’t let fear stop you from reaching out for what you really want in life.”

“Like what?” Steve challenged.

Bernard reined up, forcing Steve to do likewise. They were in the tree tunnel now, their mounts standing head to head.

“Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness... that’s from the American Declaration of Independence. Education, because knowledge is power. Respect. Love. Good health. A happy home and a happy family. Toys. I may not get everything I want but I intend to have everything I need. I’m not religious by any means but I have faith that these things will come to me in time if I work hard enough toward my goals.”

“I wish I had your confidence,” Steve said sourly. “I always expect the worst of people and I’m rarely disappointed.”

“Wishing doesn’t make it so, Steve. Nothing worth having just falls into your lap... you have to set your sights on it and then work to get there. You gotta grab that brass ring if you want to win the prize.”

They drifted on to other topics as they rode, with Steve asking a great many questions while inwardly marveling at how effortlessly Bernard supplied cogent answers and explanations. He was remarkably well-informed for someone who couldn't be much older than Steve himself. Steve wondered if this was due to his being brought up in a different culture... or if it was the result of educational advantage. Perhaps what Bernard had said that morning about the possibility of returning to school was something that merited further consideration.

"You have an interesting way of explaining things," Steve ventured, regarding his companion in profile and thinking how liberating it must be to have such an easygoing personality and upbeat temperament. Bernard didn't strike him as being the sort to lose his temper or sit around whingeing when things weren't going his way.

"And you certainly seem to know a lot about a lot of things..." he added with a tinge of sarcasm.

"Oh well... you know what they say... if you can't bedazzle them with brilliance, befuddle them with bulls... uh... baloney."

"I see. Do you always talk this much with people you've only just met?"

"I'm majoring in psychology, Steve. That's what we do. We ask questions, we listen, we answer questions, we talk. We try to help folks understand why they think and act the way they do and what they need to do to change that if they're not happy with it."

"I did time in borstal... that's like a prison for juveniles... when I was sixteen," Steve stated flatly. He rarely referred to this unfortunate period in his history but was curious to see what reaction would follow. "I had to have sessions with a psychiatrist while I was there. He made me feel like there was something wrong with me."

Bernard didn't bat an eye. "A counseling or clinical psychologist isn't the same thing. We approach a patient with the assumption that the subject has normal mental capabilities, no psychiatric disorders, and is capable of taking control of his or her life with proper insight and guidance. It's about putting the ideas in your head and then letting you draw your own conclusions about your future."

"But you're not a doctor yet?"

"No... that's a good ways off yet... but I will be."

"You sound like one now. I'm beginning to feel like a guinea pig... like you've been counseling me since this morning."

"Really? Excellent! Means I'm headed in the right direction. Of course... that's only the half of it."

"What's the other half, then?"

"Feedback. That's when I'd would sit back in my swivel chair, steeple my fingers and look out over the top of my bifocals and ask, 'So, Steve... tell me how you feel about that.'"

Steve laughed. "That's exactly what he did... that psychiatrist."

"So, seriously, Steve—how *do* you feel about all we've talked about today?"

"I don't much care for someone prying into my business," Steve began slowly, "but everything you say makes sense."

"Good. Glad to hear it."

"But you think I need counseling?"

"Ninety-nine out of a hundred people could benefit from counseling for all kinds of reasons. Getting them to accept that is ninety-nine percent of the difficulty, though."

"Have you ever been to a psychologist yourself?"

"Sure. I had identity issues as a child and emotional problems as a teenager. Counseling got me past that and influenced my career choice."

“You’re really weird, you know?”

“I hear that a lot.”

They returned to the stable and traded out Tarzan and Dutchy for the next pair—Poppy, a chestnut mare with four white socks and a paint gelding with markings that greatly resembled that of a Dutch belted cow... black fore and aft and most of the white appearing amidships. Bernard laughed when informed his mount was called ‘Oreo’.

Steve took his time saddling Poppy while Bernard repeated his getting-acquainted routine with his horse. They followed the same route they had taken earlier with the conversation mostly centered on the boarded horses and what was done with them, in which Bernard made the inquiries and Steve provided the information.

“What all’s involved in ‘schooling’?”

Steve made a slight detour on the way back to show Bernard the training area, a flat piece of ground to the west of the big lake, where he and Ron had constructed simple hurdles of varying heights and designs, designed to give way easily, as well as a variety of standard obstacles used in competition events.

“You don’t do any of this where you live?”

“Not in my world. All we have are working stock and only half-broke at that. You pull a horse off the range when he’s about two, slap a saddle on him and climb on. If he throws you off, you get right back on and keep getting back on until he gets the idea. Then you train him to work cattle.”

“Sounds a bit brutal. Is that how you trained your horse?” Steve asked.

“Not exactly.”

“How is it that you’ve never ridden your own horse?” Steve couldn’t help but ask.

“I just... don’t.”

“Has he not *ever* been ridden, then?”

“Yes... just not by me,” came the enigmatic reply.

“Is he one of those wild horses? He seemed gentle enough and didn’t object to being handled,” Steve said.

“Only because he liked you,” Bernard answered. “Horses can be better judges of character than most people, and they base their judgments on vibes as much as actions. They can sense when someone is kind and compassionate. They know when someone means them harm, too. They don’t care if you’re rich or poor, pretty or ugly, whole or crippled. It doesn’t matter if you’ve got a pedigree a mile long or came up from the wrong side of the tracks. All they care about is how you treat them. If you respect them, they’ll respect you. This old world would be a kinder and gentler place if people would practice the ethic of reciprocity instead of just preaching it.”

“The what?”

“The Golden Rule... you know, ‘do unto others’ and so on.”

Changing the subject, Bernard pointed toward the horizon where clouds were beginning to obscure the lowering sun. “More rain coming.”

“Time to bring the others in, then,” Steve said. “With any luck we’ll get them all settled before it starts.”

BERNARD MADE HIMSELF SCARCE UNTIL THE HOUSEKEEPER LEFT FOR THE DAY after seeing that Queen Maude had been made comfortable in the companionship of the donkeys. Maude lowered in distress at being separated from her mistress but finally laid herself down to chew her cud unhappily. Steve, Ron and Bernard trooped indoors for the early supper Slugger had prepared:

tomato soup and beans on toast. Bernard made do with soup and bread with butter. The other two would have preferred something more substantial and said so.

"There's always leftover stew in the fridge," the chef threatened and there were no further grumblings.

"Think Dora's learned anything in her cookery class?" Ron asked.

"We'll find out soon enough, Slugger answered. "She'll be doin' the honors soon enough on Missus Doyle's days off."

"Better have a good antidote!" Ron groaned morbidly.

Slugger shook a reproving finger. "Look here. The girl's tryin' to learn something that'll benefit all of us... I hope. So I expect you boys to be on your best behavior. No smartalecky remarks or you'll be answerin' to me."

They finished their simple meal. Slugger sent Steve off to shower first and co-opted Bernard to help clear off the table and wash dishes. "And Ron, you can go take out the trash and bring in some firewood before it gets too wet. Wipe your feet when you come back in."

"I have to go pick Dora up," Ron objected.

"Not yet you don't. Now git."

Steve, freshly showered, elected to fetch Dora instead while the other two had their baths. She was in a convivial mood as they regrouped at the table, sharing pudding and tea while she told them about the '72 Ford Cortina estate wagon she had decided to purchase.

"It's perfect for our needs. Ron test drove it and says it's worth what the owner is asking so I've signed the papers and the man will be bringing it over Wednesday after he's fixed a few things.

As Dora briskly outlined her plans and made requests, Bernard sat quietly but watched and listened intently as the other four conversed, parsing out how this obviously close-knit 'family,' though unrelated by blood, interacted. Meanwhile, he was uncomfortably aware that Slugger was watching him just as closely.

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## FIELD JOURNAL: MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 1974 • 11:00PM

**Location:** *Bedroom.*

**General:** *Steve is interested in what I have to say even if he's still trying not to like me. He's paying attention and starting to think outside the box, which was my intent. If he takes to heart the notion of furthering his education, he could have a solid future ahead. Aside from acquiring new job or professional skills, involvement in an academic community will most certainly assist him in resolving some of his socialization issues, which in turn will enable him to better relate to Dora's outlook on life. Too soon to again bring up the relationship business with Dora, though—he's still touchy about that. All in good time.*

*So Dora's taking cooking lessons? A sign her nesting instincts are kicking in? Her problem is more in the area of romantic intimacy and there's only so far I can go with that. In the meantime I'll work on her self-confidence deficit.*

*Slugger maintains an apprehensive attitude toward me but doesn't (yet) appear inclined to interfere. I can't tell yet if the Witch has outed me to him, which of course she can't do without outing herself as well. Ron is too wrapped up in himself to be concerned with me, although he's nosy as hell.*

**Plan:** Squirrel needs to put in a brief appearance to back up my story. A team-building exercise in the next day or so might prove useful.

**Note to self:** Not bad for a day's work. Feeling positive about progress so far. Must keep in mind: don't give away too much; don't push too far.

Beans on toast??? Gag me with a spoon. Soup was good.

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# Tuesday

***“Wheresoever you go,  
go with all your heart”*** • CONFUCIUS

THE DAY DID NOT START OUT AUSPICIOUSLY. A steady rain fell from darkly overcast skies. Everyone was in an equally dark mood and bickering erupted almost immediately they assembled in the kitchen, beginning with Steve and Ron.

“We don’t need another car. The Rover’s got plenty of mileage left in her,” Steve griped.

“Easy for you to say, mate... you’re not the one having to keep ‘er running!” Ron retorted and complained to the room at large. “Never a minute’s peace around here... either up to my knees in manure or up to my armpits in grease!”

“Ha! When you’re not skivving off... which is most of the time!” Steve said belligerently.

Dora jumped in. “We’re getting the Cortina and that’s that, so shut up about it, Steve!”

“And where’s your American wonderboy? Still coozied up nice and warm in bed, I’ll bet,” Steve sneered.

“If you lot don’t get a move on, won’t no one get any breakfast!” Slugger threatened with a scowl.

And so it went as everyone climbed into their wet weather gear. The last one awake, Bernard had silently descended the stairs but upon overhearing the commotion in the kitchen wisely parked himself in the shadows on the first landing, intending to remain out of range until the arguments ran out of fuel. Which they showed no sign of doing as the trio moved out of doors, passing Dottie on her way in.

Slugger, ever the gentleman, rushed to help the housekeeper out of her wet things and insisted she warm herself by the stove with a cup of tea before setting to work. Clutching his boots and socks, Bernard had furtively scooted to the bottom of the staircase. Pausing to work out if there was any way of getting to the mudroom and out the door without being seen, he was spotted by Dottie, who crooked an imperious finger.

“You there. Come here.” Bernard apprehensively sidled into the kitchen.

“Sit!” He sat down, hard, clutching his boots to his chest and shooting rabbitry glances toward the exit.

“You, too, Edward.” Slugger sat.

Dottie addressed herself to Slugger, ignoring Bernard for the moment. “Before I pass along what I learned yesterday evening, do you have any questions for this... *person*?”

*Questions, she asks!* Of course he did... the biggest one being, did he really want to hear the answers? With his eyes darting back and forth between Bernard and the housekeeper, Slugger screwed up his courage and cleared his throat before speaking hesitantly.

“Dottie had some right disturbin’ things to say yesterday... about you, about herself... put me off, it did. I’m wonderin’ how much truth were in it.”

Their eyes locked and held.

“I imagine whatever she told you is most likely true,” Bernard sighed, “so I suppose you’ll be wanting an explanation. You probably won’t like it, though.”

“But... what are you?” Slugger blurted out.

“Pardon?”

“Are you... real?” It came out as a growl.

Bernard rolled his eyes. “*‘If you prick us, do we not bleed?’*”

Seeing Slugger’s incomprehension, he sighed and added, “Shakespeare. Merchant of Venice. Geez, don’t any of you folks read around here?”

“That’s enough out of you,” Dottie warned, dropping her I’m-just-a-simple-countrywoman façade and turning to Slugger. “I brought our dilemma before the board and, as it happens, our Madame President is aware of this *person’s* presence. Lady Elayne vouches for him and claims he’s under her protection. In any case, all was explained.”

“Could you... er... explain it to me, please?” Slugger inquired.

“First of all, we can rest assured this *person* is not here to harm anyone and poses no threat to us.”

Slugger wondered if a character reference from a witch was all that reliable—even if she was president of an organization and a titled (by marriage) lady as well.

“He’s been sent here on an authorized mission with a bearing on future events. A successful outcome will cement the relationship between Steve and Dora. If it fails, they won’t be any worse off than they currently are. I can’t recall an instance where one of his kind has ever been enlisted in this sort of endeavor—it contravenes all tradition. Used to be charms and spells were good enough but perhaps times have changed and it’s the modern way,” Dottie sniffed.

“This *‘person’* has a name,” Bernard muttered.

“Shut up. I’ll get to you in a minute.”

“Yes m’am.”

“She says we’re to regard this *person* as a facilitator... a sort of counselor... for people who can’t resolve their differences and need someone outside the situation to talk them through their troubles. Edward, you’ve done your best as a surrogate father to help them along—better than their own parents could have done—but it hasn’t been enough. And that isn’t your fault. This *person’s* job is to bring them together. Apparently in his own dimension he’s considered an expert at this sort of thing. She asks for our forbearance... for us to have faith that this is going to work out and to trust him on this. We’re to let him proceed as he sees fit. Do you understand?”

Slugger didn’t understand anything but nodded his head in agreement.

Dottie turned her attention to Bernard. Her eyes pinned him to the chair like a deer caught in headlights. Her voice was soft and steady, but menacing.

“I know what you are, Bernard.”

“Yes m’am.”

“And I expect you know what I am.”

“Yes m’am.”

“Just so we’re clear on where we stand with each other.”

“Yes m’am. Got it.”

“Now, I realize my presence has thrown a spanner into what was supposed to be a covert operation. Believe me, I was just as surprised to see you as you were to see me. Had I been apprised beforehand I would never have spilled the beans to Edward. However, as that can’t be undone and Edward and I share your desire to unite Steven and Dora, Lady Elayne strongly suggests we combine forces and render aid in any way possible. But in order to do that, we’ll need to know your plans for executing this mission. What have you accomplished so far? Go on, young man... or whatever you are. Speak up!”

Not entirely reassured, Bernard proceeded cautiously.

“I started with a baseline drawn from case notes. Steve and Dora love each other—that’s a given—but they can’t openly admit it to each other for a variety of reasons. That’s the first obstacle. I’ve opened up a dialogue with both and introduced some topics for their consideration, and I’ve provided some initiatives about ways to deal with their issues. That was yesterday. Today I’m expecting... hoping... to find which if any of my suggestions have taken root... so I’ll have a clearer idea how to create an interface.”

“Interface?” This from Dottie.

“Yeah... once I’ve got a lock on a viable interface, I’ll concentrate on realigning their operating systems and tweaking their hardwiring to bring their software into compatibility...”

Blank stares. “Say what?” Slugger finally said.

“What I mean is, I have to identify parallel areas of interest and expectations then get them to think in the same direction and on the same level—intellectually, logically and emotionally. Once they reach the point where they can publicly acknowledge that they *are* in love with each other, it follows that they’ll recognize the need to *do* something about it... in theory, anyway.”

Dottie sneered. “We’re talking about love here. Logic doesn’t enter into it. Neither does intelligence. Seems to me all talk and no action isn’t going to win the day. What’s your fallback plan if plain talk doesn’t suffice?” The woman was relentless, but Bernard had regained some spirit.

“Gimme a break! It’s only the second day and I don’t have a Plan B yet. I’m doing the best I can,” he said doggedly.

“Then you’ll have to do better, won’t you?” she snapped. “I understand you’re on an advanced schedule. A poke in their primal instincts with a sharp stick would get the job done sooner.”

“I’m not following...” Bernard said, puzzled.

“Oh... I know you’re not that thick, laddie,” Dottie retorted. “It wouldn’t take much to ignite Steve. All you have to do is provoke him into believing someone else has a serious interest in Dora and he’ll go off like a Roman candle.”

“Are you suggesting we bring in someone to pretend to go after Dora? Like live bait?”

“Hey... wait a minute!” Slugger objected and was ignored.

Dottie pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Why would we need to introduce a new player when we already have *you*?” she said smugly.

“What?!!! Me? No no no no no! I can’t get involved that way! It wouldn’t be ethical.” Bernard objected.

“I’m not saying really *involved*... just act as if you are. That shouldn’t be too great a stretch for someone with your *special* abilities. It’ll be easy as pie. You’re already here. She already likes you and he doesn’t. All you have to do is attract her attention away from him long enough and he’ll blast off like a Polaris missile!”

“Oi! I ain’t havin’ him triflin’ with Dora’s affections!” Slugger huffed.

“Thanks for the suggestion but no thanks!” Bernard stated, gesturing at the puce-colored discolorations on his throat. “I’ve already enjoyed my ration of pounding for the week. I’m sticking to Plan A, if you don’t mind.”

Dottie shrugged. “Have it your way. But if you end up having to resort to Plan B—as I expect you will—I trust you’ll be keeping your own primal instincts in your trousers... or else!” She didn’t need to expound on the implicit threat. “So let’s just hope it won’t come to that. And another thing... it simply won’t do for you to skulk around and avoid me as if you expect to be

stuffed into a stew pot at any moment. They'll become suspicious. I've given my word I won't harm you and I won't... unless you cross the line. I'm sure I needn't explain what that line is."

"Yes m'am. Farthest thing from my mind." Bernard remained polite but guarded.

She wasn't quite done with him yet. "Your hair wants cutting," she reproved.

"Could we leave my hair out of this, please?"

Dottie shook her head sadly. "Your poor parents... must have been a great trial and tribulation to them, their only son being differently oriented."

"With all due respect, m'am, I didn't choose to be the way I am."

"Still... a great pity. Now go do whatever you're meant to be doing. Get those socks and boots on or you'll be getting the tetanus. We don't need that aggravation!" Once a mother, always a mother.

Bernard dutifully dragged on his footwear, excused himself and stalked out of the kitchen to join the others outside.

Slugger was mystified. "Differently what?"

"Oh, nothing important... it's just that his people are all cat—as I suspected—and he's... not. It's like having a son turn out to be a poofster, is all," Dottie explained offhandedly, abruptly shifting from inquisitor to housekeeper mode. "When was the last time any new towels or sheets came into this house? All the ones here are only fit for the ragbag."

"Cat? But what about...?"

Dottie tut-tutted. "I'll speak with Dora about bringing some down from Hollin Hall if the moths haven't got at them. They're no use to anyone sitting up there in storage. And the curtains in the boys' rooms are a disgrace."

"What I wanted to..."

"There's clothing all over the floors in all their rooms, but I'll soon break them of that habit. I'll be bringing a couple of extra hampers from home and..."

MUCKING OUT TOOK TWICE AS LONG AS USUAL. They had to work around the horses still in their stalls and the animals were restless, cantankerous and not inclined to move out of the way. As rain always manages to work its way down the necks of mackintoshes and into boots, the four stablehands were damp and chilled by the time they were free to come into a late breakfast. Steve had managed to dispense a few caustic remarks regarding Bernard's tardy arrival but the squabbling had diminished in the face of their shared misery. Both Dottie and Slugger fussed and insisted they first all change into dry clothing.

No one but Dora noticed the housekeeper giving Bernard stern looks every time she emerged from the scullery. Bernard seemed to shrink into himself and kept his eyes determinedly fixed on his cereal. Breakfast was consumed in monasterial silence until they were done and Dora reiterated what was on for the day.

"The new furniture I've ordered for the parlor is scheduled for delivery today. It's supposed to stop raining by the afternoon," Dora announced. "The paint is finally dry in Slugger's room so Dottie and I will be moving him back in. We'll need some help. Who wants to volunteer?"

Steve held up a hand. "Me! I'll do it. We have paperwork to attend to later anyway, Dora."

"Good. Ron and Bernard... you two can go sort out the old tackroom. It's a pigsty." Ron grumbled but Bernard was happy to oblige... anything to get away from that terrifying woman—not Dora... the other one.

Dora had in mind a complete makeover for the stuffy Edwardian parlor and would have liked to redecorate Slugger's room as well, but there he held his ground, wanting everything

back exactly as it had been. He had, however, agreed to new curtains and duvet. It didn't take long to set it to rights, after which Steve and Dora closeted themselves in the study to go over the books.

In prior years, Slugger had kept receipts in a shoebox and a running list of expenses in a simple ledger, which the Colonel would settle at the end of the month. After the the Colonel's death, however, Lawyer Burnham had sent over his personal accountant to instruct Dora in the financial workings of the farm and the intricacies of double entry bookkeeping. Paperwork of any kind had never been her forté; it made her head spin and her eyes blur. The accountant had also made suggestions about reconfiguring the study into a proper office. The Colonel's ornate desk had been sent into storage and replaced with a sturdy work table. Steve had even less business acumen than herself and it took a while to get him interested in this endeavor although he'd never been short of opinions concerning how the farm should be managed and funds disbursed. Now, though they'd never admitted as much to each other, each relished the time they spent together in the closeness of the room, sitting side by side at the table with elbows touching.

THE ONLY AVAILABLE LIGHT IN THE OLD TACKROOM came from a single low-wattage bulb suspended from the ceiling and, in daytime, a small grimy window. Ron took a paraffin hurricane lamp from a row of six on a low shelf and attempted to light it. The sputtering wick smoked and refused to catch. Same with the second one. The third one caught and gave off only the feeblest of light. Bernard laughed when Ron groaned dramatically.

"Those could do with some cleaning and refilling, looks like," Bernard said, clapping his workmate on the shoulder. "We should do that first. Or I'll do it if you want to get started on the tack."

Ron grunted and assembled the materials. "Nah. Might as well do 'em all and get it over with."

They dragged bales of straw as close to the open door as they could sit without getting wet and set about the task, making light conversation as they worked. An hour ticked by unnoticed as Ron recited the history of the acquisition and refurbishment of his prized motorbike, a topic to which Bernard contributed nothing, claiming massive ignorance where combustion engines of any ilk were concerned. When asked, Bernard allowed as how he liked Yorkshire very much as its topographic features were similar to the area of Montana from which he hailed. Ron expressed an interest in someday being able to visit the American west. Like many other country boys, he had been lured to The City—London, with its promise of bright lights and action—for a short period of time during his late teens, but had soon grown disillusioned with the crowds, the pollution, the frenetic pace of city life. In short, he had been homesick for the wide skies and rolling hills of Yorkshire.

"So here I am, mucking out stables for a living. Not much to show for twenty-three years in the world, is it?"

Bernard responded with the same advice he'd given Steve about defining his ambitions and pursuing a higher education with which to achieve his goals.

Listening attentively, Ron was suddenly struck with two illuminating flashes of insight: One, that he was thoroughly enjoying the easy exchange of views with this odd Yank... a polar opposite of Ron's mates in the village—a gang of rowdy, raucous, boisterous louts whose ideas of good times ran to perpetrating cruel jokes on weaker folks and mindless destruction of property, just because they could. Kindness and consideration were words alien to their vocabulary. Two, that it would be nice to have a confidante with whom he could share his innermost thoughts and

feelings, his hopes and dreams... a concept that would have his mates howling with derision. They would perceive such an association as a weakness and would turn on him like a pack of jackals.

It further occurred to Ron that he'd been blind to the most likely candidate for such a friendship: Steve, with whom he had worked side by side for three years and yet hardly knew. They talked, sure, but never on deep or personal subjects. They exchanged jokes and banalities and played pranks on each other. Occasionally they fought, once with a very real intent to injure on Steve's part that had scared Ron, temporarily, into a more sober regard for Steve's sensibilities. Ron realized with regret and shame that he'd been playing the part of jackal all along... too often goading Steve just to see how much he could get away with and creating difficulties just for the fun of it. And Ron wondered if, now, it was far too late to attempt cultivating a closer friendship.

"Earth to Ron! Come in, Ron." Bernard dragged the redhead back to the real world. "Let there be light!"

With two of the newly cleaned and refilled lanterns hung on overhead hooks, they turned to their original chore. They fell to rearranging cans and boxes in a more orderly fashion and started a trash pile for obviously useless or worn-out items. In short order they had finished and the tackroom was organized to a degree they both agreed would satisfy Dora.

Ron placed improvised saddle trees on two bales of straw and drew up two more bales. "My own invention, these," he said proudly. "So's you can sit down while workin'." He went to fetch the supplies—soap, conditioner, sponges, clean rags, bristle brushes and metal cleaner—two of everything. Lastly he dragged out an old beaten-up footlocker and wrested open the lid.

"Been meaning to work on this some," he crowed, lifting out a burlap bag with something bulky in it. Unveiled, the something turned out to be an ancient Western stock saddle, rubbed and worn with the leather cracked in places but in serviceable condition... barely.

Bernard took one look and snickered. "Where in hell did you dig up that relic?"

"What? All it needs is a bit of cleaning up and it'll be good as new, I reckon. Got it at a pawnshop last year."

Bernard leaned forward for a closer inspection. "Vintage Heisner Denver. 1880s I'd say... look at that cantle. You couldn't fall outta that in an earthquake. Probably worth more now than it cost new, especially if fully restored. Nice tooling on the skirts and fenders but a bitch to clean."

Ron gave Bernard a calculating look from under his red fringe. "Bet you got one like this at home, right?"

"Nope. But my dad does; inherited it from his dad. I don't use saddles, myself."

Ron was flabbergasted. "Steve says you live on a ranch, with cows and wild horses. How can you be a proper cowboy without a proper saddle?"

"I never said I was a cowboy. Which of these saddles should I do first?"

"Oh... er, Copper's I suppose, if you aim on bein' Dora's new swain."

"Her what?"

"You know, boyfriend."

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Why wouldn't you want to be, unless maybe you already got a bird of your own at home?"

Bernard paused and gave Ron a cool look. "If I do, it's my business. And it appears Dora's already got a full plate."

“Steve, you mean? Nah. Nothin’ going on with them two... Steve don’t love nobody but hisself.”

“He just might. You never know.”

“Why don’t *you* ask her out? Don’t you think she’s pretty?”

“Very pretty, yes. Why haven’t you asked her out yourself?”

Ron looked around guiltily. “I sorta did, when she first come here. I offered, see, but...um...”

“But?”

“Wipeout. Not interested. I know I’m not as good-lookin’ as Steve but I’m a fun bloke if she’d only given me half a chance. Maybe I was too flash or something.”

Bernard looked at him critically. “Could be. Some girl like flash... some don’t. Dora strikes me as the kind of girl who goes for the quiet, introspective type... like Steve. I wouldn’t take that as a personal rejection, though.”

“I reckon I did... at first... no man wants to think he’s not good enough.”

“And now?”

“Now we’re more like brother and sister. Probably better that way, with Hazel in the picture. How come you know so much about birds, anyway?”

“Six older sisters. I’m the only boy. Believe me, I know what women want. Been hearing it all my life.” Bernard rolled his eyes. “Sure, they all go for the good looks; that and money... in the beginning. But ultimately it’s a man who knows how to love—in the heart, I mean, not the other thing... although that’s important, too, when they get old enough to know about that. A man who’s smart, dependable, considerate, gentle and pleasant company. Someone who’s kind to children, animals and old people. They want to feel cherished and protected. Dora sees all these qualities in Steve although he doesn’t recognize them in himself.”

“They sure want an awful lot, don’t they?” Ron hooted.

“Well, think about it: Don’t you want the woman you finally decide to spend the rest of your life with to have those qualities?”

“Yeah. I guess so,” Ron admitted grudgingly. “But I wouldn’t say no to a rich knock-out. Just kiddin’... I’m with Hazel now, anyway. But for the record, what’s Steve got that I don’t got?”

“Who knows why one person is attracted to another, Ron? It just happens that way. I don’t pretend to understand how women *think*, Ron. Sometimes they get all those things and it still isn’t enough.”

There were a few moments of silence as Ron processed this information.

Bernard threw in a non sequitur with a grin. “There is *one* thing you have that he doesn’t... red hair! Do you know you’re an endangered specie?”

“Say again?”

“It’s true. Scientists estimate that only one to two percent of the entire world’s population has red hair and only four percent carry the gene for it. They predict that in another hundred years there won’t be any natural redheads left on the planet.”

“Is that true?”

“Scout’s honor. All the more reason for you to settle down, so you can start contributing to the gene pool and save redheads from extinction.”

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Steve bearing a Thermos and three mugs.

“Ah! THE TEA FAIRY COMETH... AND NOT BEFORE TIME, TOO!” Ron jumped up to take the items from Steve so he could get out of his soggy mac. “What? No biscuits?”

Steve shook his head, spraying droplets of water everywhere. “Mrs. Doyle says too close to lunch. Why does it smell like cinnamon in here?”

Ron gave him a confused look. “Cinnamon? I thought it was coconut. Oh well... come to join us, have you?”

“Until that delivery van gets here with the new furniture.”

Steve caught sight of the newly polished Western saddle, its old and worn leather gleaming in the lantern light. “That’s coming along nicely, Ron. I’ve never seen you put that much effort into anything.”

“Bernard says it might be worth a mint can I fix it up.”

“Somewhere between two and three thousand,” Bernard said, “to the right collector.”

“Two or three thousand quid? No way!”

“Dollars... and yes way... you could list it on eBay and... never mind.”

Steve and Ron looked at each other and shrugged. Steve pulled up his own bale and set to work on a bridle.

“So, what have you two been talkin’ about?”

“Your ears burnin’, mate?” Ron quipped, then faltered under Steve’s expression.

“Just jokin’,” he amended. “Girls. Life. What else is there, eh? Bernard here was expoundin’ on his knowledge of women.”

“Don’t let me interrupt, then. Go on.” Steve said drily. “We’re dying to hear, aren’t we, Ron?”

“Bernard here thinks it’s time you and me get married and settle down, start raising a family.”

Steve chortled. “Sorry, mate, you’re not my type.”

Bernard stopped rubbing and looked up, his green eyes almost phosphorescent in the soft yellow lamplight. “What I was telling Ron was that the qualities women look for in a potential spouse aren’t all that different from what we men want in the wife of our dreams.”

Steve had nothing to say, his head down and his face obscured by shadow and wings of dark hair as he continued polishing.

In a rare moment of honesty, Ron confessed, “Any road, I don’t know I’d make a very good husband or father. I’m kinda scared of the whole idea. Me Mum doted on me, when I was a little ‘un, but she died. And me dad... I reckon I’m somethin’ of an embarrassment to him. Shiftless, he says. Won’t hardly look at me much less talk to me these days. What if I turned out like him and treated my sprouts like worthless dogs?” There were tones of regret and more than a little sadness in his voice. “Slugger’s more a dad to me than me real dad’s ever been.”

“Same here,” Steve said softly. “I don’t remember my father. He died when I was two. My mother didn’t have any use for me, either. Still doesn’t. She left me at an orphanage when I was four. Slugger, Dora, Ron and Hazel—they’re my family now. I wouldn’t know how to be a good father, either.”

Bernard looked from one to the other. “Well, now. I disagree. I think you’d both make good husbands and even better fathers, precisely because you *do* know what’s been missing from your lives. I think you would both love your wives and keep them close, and you’d be good to your children and never pass up an opportunity to show your love for them, either, because you both know how it feels to be unloved. Dora will make an wonderful wife and mother for the very same reasons.”

Apparently this was a subject that had never been broached with either Steve or Ron, and Bernard could see that he had their rapt attention. He pressed on.

“I hope that my legacy to my children will be that they remember me with the same love and respect I have for my folks. I take family happiness for granted so I probably won’t be challenged to work as hard at it as you guys will. My folks were strong disciplinarians but we didn’t fault them for that. A good parent sets boundaries as well as a good example of how life should be lived. We kids tested the limits and their patience because that’s what children do. We knew right from wrong, even though every once in a while wrong was just a little bit too tempting to resist. If we weren’t caught, we hadn’t learned anything. When we were, which was most of the time, we took what was coming to us because we knew we deserved it. But we always, *always* knew we were loved.”

He let his two companions stew on that for a while. Ron stood up and stretched. “I’m taking a break.” Which was Ron-code meaning he was going to find a dry hidey hole to sneak a smoke.

Steve and Bernard worked together in silence for a while before Steve finally spoke.

“I guess I’ve been too wrapped up in my own problems to think much about Ron’s situation. He hasn’t had it easy, either, with a father like that. I suppose I’d be tempted to show off, too, just to get the old man’s attention if nothing else.”

Bernard agreed.

“And Dora... she had all the advantages money could buy, but it never occurred to me that money can’t buy love and attention from her parents. And it should have... it really should have because I had that brought home to me by my own mum. I tried to help her once, but it didn’t mean anything to her. There was nothing I could do to make her love me. She didn’t want me in her life.”

Steve shook himself. “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this.” he said curtly.

“The thing is, Steve,” Bernard said softly, “when you do find the right woman, when you’re sure she’s the one, you have to trust your instincts and make that leap of faith into commitment before some other fellow beats you to the prize. Like we say back home, ‘you snooze, you lose.’ Dora may not be the *perfect* woman, but if she’s the perfect one for *you* you’d better make a decision before someone else decides she’s the perfect one for him.”

“Like you, you mean?” Steve said ominously.

Bernard shook his head. “No, not me. I’m not the one. But someone very much like me.”

“Anyway, Dora just thinks she’s in love with me. It wouldn’t work, us getting married.”

“Why not?”

“You wouldn’t understand. You come from a different world from us, as different as hers is from mine.”

“You know, where you come from and what you were shouldn’t matter. What should matter is where and what you are now. Looks to me like you and she are pretty much inhabiting the same world here. It would make sense to move forward together.”

“Looks to me like you need to mind your own business,” Steve said coolly. “We’d better finish up and start putting things away.”

AFTER DORA AND STEVE HAD FINISHED THEIR PAPERWORK and he’d gone out to join the others, Dora lingered in the study, congratulating herself on her great good fortune in having obtained such a sterling individual as Dorothy Doyle to ‘do’ for them. She had only mentioned in passing, when stopping to pick up their weekly consignment of milk, butter and eggs, her intention to hire someone and Dottie had immediately offered up herself. With her Jeremy taking over the dairy and his wife increasingly in charge of domestic chores, Dottie needed ‘something to keep active and a way to earn a bit of pin money.’

Dora had been delighted to accept the woman's proposal. Despite her and Slugger's best efforts, housekeeping was a hopeless endeavor. Other than her and Hazel's bedrooms, the old farmhouse retained its overall appearance of bachelor habitation. Dora recalled with grim amusement her uncle advising her that she would have to 'help Slugger clean house' if she wanted to live there. Up until then, she'd never lifted a finger at home except to summon her governess or a servant. She hadn't the faintest idea how lavatories got cleaned or stayed that way. A maid bore away soiled clothing and another one returned laundered and ironed frocks to her wardrobe and neatly folded delicates to her dresser drawers. Meals were conveyed to the table by other menials from the shadowy recesses of a cavernous kitchen forbidden to her, ruled by an ill-tempered Cook. Ponies and later full-sized horses had been presented to her all tacked up and ready to ride, later to be whisked away by efficient grooms to the stables... another area she wasn't allowed to frequent.

Yes, her way of life had certainly changed radically in the past three years. So had her perception of how ordinary folk lived. Though an unwilling and inattentive student in her years at boarding schools, Dora had absorbed the fact that a burgeoning 'new' middle class was furthering the divide between the privileged wealthy, who continued to employ domestic help, and the lower orders who provided those services. Previously, 'middle class' had encompassed all who fell between those ranks—the ordinary people who comprised the 'nation of shopkeepers' so derided by Napoleon.

The 'new' middle class were the so-called 'Baby Boomers'... the children born to returning soldiers at the conclusion of World War II... children who began reaching adulthood and entering the workforce some six to eight years ago, in ever greater numbers. Boomers had advantages over the preceding generation in that they were better nourished, better educated, better informed, and had access to material goods and emerging technologies such as their parents had never dreamed of. On the cusp of the information age, they had higher expectations than their parents and refuted the notion that one shouldn't attempt to rise above one's station. Boomer women kept their own homes, prepared their own meals, and raised their own offspring while holding down professional positions or fulltime jobs outside the home. It was a new order and Dora meant to adapt herself to coping with it. Still, she was profoundly grateful that they now had a competent hand at the housekeeping helm.

A mouthwatering aroma drifted from the kitchen down the hall and into the study. Dora got up and followed it back to where Dottie was laying the table for lunch.

"Cock-a-leekie soup made with potatoes instead of barley, and yeast rolls warm from the oven with fresh dairy butter," Dottie announced, adding, "I even made some up special without the chicken for the vegetarian. Would you call those boys in and make sure they wash up? I'll be upstairs sorting the linen cupboard, so that Bernard can eat in peace. I seem to cause him indigestion."

Dora opened her mouth to ask exactly what was the problem between stablehand and housekeeper, but the latter had already gone up the stairs. Dora went to ring the bell for lunch, noting that the rain had slackened off as she had hoped.

THEY HAD SCARCELY FINISHED EATING WHEN THE DELIVERY VAN CHUGGED UP THE DRIVEWAY. The housekeeper swooped downstairs, ordering the boys to clear the table and do the washing up and directing the driver and his assistant to pull around to the front side of the house with its rarely used double doors that opened into a foyer. They would then only have to negotiate the front steps, the foyer and a left turn into the parlor. She had already laid down old blankets and towels so that they wouldn't track mud onto the new fitted carpeting. Fortunately, the front drive of the

house had always been kept well-graveled right up to the steps. The delivery men were efficient and accomplished their task within an hour.

A removal van arrived shortly thereafter. Dora had also engaged haulers to take away all the old furniture which had been temporarily pushed into the unused dining room. As they were all antiques and probably valuable, they were to be stored at Hollin Hall. Steve and Ron were detailed to follow the van in the LandRover to let the men in and help them unload it.

Slugger plopped into his rocker by the stove, preparing to take his customary après-lunch siesta. Dottie loomed over him. "And just what do you think you're doing? We're not done yet!"

"Aw Dottie..."

"Don't 'aw Dottie' me. Piano. Herself wants it in the parlor. You and Blondie over there trying to disguise himself as a patch of wallpaper." Which indeed Bernard was attempting to do.

Dottie turned her attention on Bernard's naked feet. "Did I not tell you to wear shoes?" she scolded. "Go upstairs this instant and at least put some socks on. And do something with that hair!"

Dora could have sworn she'd actually heard a whimper as he fled past and scampered up the staircase.

For some reason no one could recall, the circa 1920 upright Steinway had always occupied the narrow wall between the door to the scullery and the portal to the back hall. No one had ever shown any interest in it other than Slugger's late wife and Ron, who played it occasionally. Nevertheless, the Colonel had always insisted on its annual maintenance and tuning and Slugger continued to uphold that tradition.

Equipped with casters, the piano wasn't difficult to move but did require some delicacy in maneuvering through the hall, past the study and around the corner into the parlor. Once it was installed in the desired position, Dora set the two men to scootching around the new plushy sofa and its matching loveseat until those items achieved a pleasing configuration. Next were two overstuffed armchairs and a reproduction Windsor rocking chair with plump cushions which was given pride of place near the fireplace.

"Especially for you, Slugger!" Dora beamed. His eyes welled and she was afraid he might cry, but he didn't.

End tables and a coffee table were the last to be placed, and Dora told Slugger he was free to go have his nap... if Dottie didn't have anything else for him to do, that was. Dottie indicated that she didn't and said she would be in the scullery preparing dinner if anyone needed her.

Which left Bernard and Dora alone in the parlor.

"Can I help you do anything else?" he asked pleasantly. "Believe me, between my mom and sisters I've got plenty of experience in this sort of thing."

"Well, yes... if you really don't mind. You can help me hang drapes and put pictures up on the walls."

"Sure thing. Got a stepladder?"

"Yes... you'll find that and a toolkit in the cupboard beyond the scullery, right next to the kitchen garden door."

Bernard's enthusiasm faltered but he quickly recovered. "Okay. Be right back."

Slugger was well into a snooze in his old rocker by the stove. Bernard eased open the scullery door and slid in warily, not entirely convinced that this Under Witch would keep to her bargain with the Head Witch.

"What do you want?" Dottie barked from her workstation at the counter.

"Just coming through to get the stepladder?" he answered faintly.

“While I’m thinking about it…” She pointed her wooden spoon at him. “Don’t go thinking you’re going to get on my sunny side with any good smells.” The air of the scullery was permeated with the delicately powdery, slightly milky scent of new baby, fresh from the bath, which Dottie was determined to dispel from her head.

Bernard reddened but didn’t answer.

“Oh, go on and get your ladder.”

“Yes m’am. Thank you, m’am.” Bernard skirted the wall toward the opposite door, keeping as much space as possible between himself and the formidable housekeeper. After wrestling the stepladder from the closet, he exited through the kitchen garden door rather than risk going back through the scullery again. He walked all the way around to the front, entering by way of the front door.

“Don’t even ask,” he said to Dora just as she was about to.

“You forgot the toolkit,” she pointed out.

Bernard blanched and said a bad word. “Sorry.”

Dora gave him a sharp look. “Never mind. I’ll get it.”

She returned shortly with the box of tools and they set to work.

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## **FIELD JOURNAL: TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 1974 • 3:00PM**

**Atmospheric conditions:** *Rain over but still overcast.*

**Immediate location:** *Downstairs bathroom.*

**General:** *Wasn’t expecting to get much accomplished today but it’s moving right along. Re tackroom discussion: apparently no one’s ever taken the time to sit down with either Steve or Ron just to talk about life, the universe, and everything. A shame they’ve worked together so long and still don’t seem to know much about each other—or care. Now it looks like I’ll have a couple of hours at least with Dora all to myself. How fortuitous!*

**Technical issues:** *No current aberrations.*

**Observations:** *A fine kettle of fish! This was supposed to be a secret mission—get in, do my thing, get out. Now half of Yorkshire knows I’m here and why. Publish it on WikiLeaks already!*

*The Witch threw me for a loop. First she scares me out of a year’s growth (and I don’t have one to spare) and now she wants to help? What’s up with that? I understand and accept her repugnance for my species, but active cooperation from one of the sisterhood? I have no choice but to trust she’ll keep her promise. It’s all fine and good to lecture someone else on learning to trust, but not so easy to do when you’re scared spitless yourself. Steve and I have that in common, it seems.*

**Plans:** *Formulating on the fly.*

**Notes to self:** *Had forgotten how intimidating life can seem when you’re that young and don’t have a firm footing in the world. The future can look pretty grim and scary.*

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# *“Sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast”* • WHITE QUEEN

SANDWICHED BETWEEN THE FRONT ENTRANCE FOYER AND THE OFFICE, the long unused parlor sported two sets of tall double windows facing east.

“What is it with you and Mrs. Doyle?” Dora asked, looking up to where Bernard was ensconced at the top of the ladder affixing replacement drapery hardware.

“That woman has the Sight,” he replied evenly.”

“The what?”

“Back home we’d call her a ‘*quatre yeux*.’”

“Four eyes? What does that mean? She doesn’t wear spectacles.” Dora’s schoolroom French was rusty but serviceable.

“She has the Eye, I’m telling you. Hand me that Phillips screwdriver, would you?”

“Bernard... there’s no such thing as an evil eye... that’s just an old wives’ tale.”

“I’m not saying she’s evil, Dora... just that she’s got powers you can’t even dream of. And she doesn’t like me.”

“Don’t be silly... she’s a dear lady who’s sold milk and butter and eggs since... long before I came along. And she’s a perfectly ordinary woman with four ordinary children.”

“I know a conjure woman when I see one. I need the needleless pliers—no, not that one... the other one.

“You mean like... a witch?” Dora asked incredulously. “Dottie Doyle is no more a witch than I am and anyway I don’t believe in them.”

Bernard descended the ladder and moved it to the other side of the window. “You don’t believe in magic? You sure about that?”

Dora followed with the toolbox. “Not really... no.”

“Is that why you chuck a bucket of water on that dead tree every day, expecting it to come back to life. I’ve seen you talking to it and asked Slugger what all that was about.”

Dora was nonplussed. Bernard had just pointed out her not-so-secret belief that a dream could come true if you really wanted it to.

“Well... I... it might... it doesn’t hurt to try. You’re a very strange man, Bernard. I just don’t know what to make of you.”

Bernard shrugged and the ladder trembled precariously. “Not so strange. There’s plenty others like me and your Mrs. Doyle all around you... you’re just not aware of them. The world would be a very dull place if everyone were normal.”

“Are you implying I’m dull?”

“Not at all... I’m just saying you should keep an open mind where the differently abled are concerned. People aren’t always what they seem. Phillips again, please.”

“So what if I have dreams... and believe in some of them. People make wishes all the time. Sometimes they do come true?” She paused... “Sometimes they just... don’t.”

Time to move to the next pair of windows. Bernard continued talking as he worked, quietly but intently, as if the subject were as ordinary as the weather or the merits of local politics.

“Have you ever asked yourself why—over the entire recorded course of human history—stories of the supernatural and paranormal keep cropping up? That would include some pretty tall tales in the Bible, too... stuff that millions of people take literally... like miracles. Did you ever consider that there might be some basis in fact for people to keep believing these stories?”

“No... I’ve never thought about it that way.”

“And what about the popularity of science fiction and fantasy fiction literature? Where do you think all that comes from?”

“I don’t know. I suppose... people make it up? It’s not real...”

“*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*” Bernard quoted. “Recognize that?”

“Yes, of course. Shakespeare, in ‘Hamlet’.”

“Try this one... *Sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.*” I need the hammer and one of those long nails.”

Dora handed up the items. “Um... that would be the White Queen in ‘Alice in Wonderland’?”

“Correct. So then, what’s your position on fairy tales?”

“What do you mean, my position? They’re stories for children.”

“C.S. Lewis wrote *Some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again*. What do you think he meant by that?”

“I have no idea.”

“Maybe he was saying dreams come true if you want them to.”

Dora was shaken... now he was quoting *her!* But how could he have known?

An insular child both by nature and circumstance, Dora had always found solace and escape in literature, particularly—in her very young years—fanciful tales of the fey world, where fairies and elves brought joy into the lives of sad children. Dora had believed she would find happiness and a purpose in life at Follyfoot and indeed she had—except for her unresolved relationship with Steve. An absurd notion began to unfold in her consciousness that whoever, whatever Bernard was—in some way she wasn’t necessarily meant to understand—he really was here because of her, for her. But lacking Slugger’s rustic handed-down credence in malevolent otherworldly beings, Dora wasn’t frightened or repelled by the suspicion that this singular person might not be quite as ordinarily human as he appeared to be. She was, however, bewildered. What her heart wanted to believe, her rational mind was rejecting with prejudice.

“You know, there’s not all that much difference between religion and the supernatural. If you believe in angels and demons, you may as well believe in witches and fairies. Hedge your bets, so to speak,” Bernard remarked casually as he moved the ladder to the last window.

In her formative years, Dora had attended church services regularly with her parents before they had embarked on their overseas travels, and later as required at the succession of boarding schools she had attended. But in her time at Follyfoot she had eschewed church attendance except for the occasional wedding, funeral or baptism. Since coming here she had witnessed such acts and results of violence, abuse and neglect perpetrated on both man and beast that she had many times doubted the existence of a benevolent supreme being. How could there be, when such horrors were allowed to happen? But all in all she still maintained a tenuous belief in a higher power and divine intervention... and, to a lesser degree, in angels of mercy. Had she not wished only a few days ago for her own guardian angel to show her the way, admittedly for a selfish cause?

She formulated her reply carefully. “I’m not sure what I believe anymore.”

“*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*” Hebrews 13:1-2,” Bernard quoted soberly.

Bernard in no way fit Dora’s mental image of a celestial being... still, goosebumps popped up on her arms.

With the hardware in place, they adjourned to the dining room where the new drapes had been carefully laid flat across the table after ironing to prevent them from becoming creased. Dora showed Bernard how to install the hooks and they set to work.

“ELAYNE... MY AMERICAN FRIEND THAT I MENTIONED YESTERDAY? She says she’s a ‘trophy wife’ and then laughs about it, but I don’t know what that means... do you?” Back to the parlor and back up the ladder, with Dora relaying the panels up to be hung.

“Let me take a wild guess here... he’s old, homely and stinking rich... and she’s young, blonde and gorgeous with a great set of kn... a nice figure.”

“Oh... have you already met them, then?”

“No, Dora. I have not met them.”

“Then I don’t get it...”

“It’s an arrangement... she’s in it for the money and the cachet of being Lady Gotrocks, and he gets to show off the arm candy and be the envy of all his buddies.”

“Arm candy?”

“Arm candy is a girl by your side who’s so beautiful everyone else wonders why on earth she’d want to sleep with you.”

“Oh,” she said, and then blushing as understanding seeped in, “OH!”

Bernard was laughing. “Dora, Dora, Dora... you’re so enchantingly lovely and so delightfully naive.”

“Excuse me? I am not... well, I suppose I am naive in some ways.” Bernard had noticed how she had this way of demurely lowering her face and eyes when she was uncertain or embarrassed... as she was doing now.

“And... you really think I’m pretty?” She asked shyly.

“More than just pretty... you have the kind of beauty that radiates from the inside out.”

“Thank you... that’s... um... very kind of you to say so.”

“*De nada*,” Bernard said, recognizing a prime opportunity to introduce his approach. “Pity Steve can’t see what a treasure he’s got right under his nose.”

“Steve’s not interested in me that way,” she retorted.

“What? Are you kidding? Sure he is. He’s just more commitment-phobic than most men.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes you do. He’s jealous as hell, too... but too scared to do anything about it. Jealousy and fear are pretty potent emotions.”

“Steve’s not afraid of anything.”

“Oh sweetie... you’re *so* wrong about that. Cat’s been running against the wind so long he’s forgotten how to live any other way.”

“What makes you think so? You don’t know us... or anything about us,” Dora said, fetching the next panel.

“I know enough... from what little he’s said about himself, from listening to Ron, and from watching him when he’s around you. Steve’s in love with you, Dora... Ray Charles could see that. But he’s been too burned to let himself get close to anyone, and he’s too scared to trust in love. That’s why he’s so angry all the time... it’s an anger born of frustration. He knows what he wants but he doesn’t know how to get it.”

“Thank you for that not at all helpful bit of information,” Dora snapped.

“Then there’s you... lost in love yourself and too hidebound in tradition to lay it on the line for him.”

“And just how did you arrive at *that* determination?”

“The same way... look me in the eye and tell me it’s not true,” Bernard challenged.

When Dora clammed up, pointedly ignoring him, he started humming the tune to a popular song from a decade ago—a little before her time but she remembered it well, and when he started singing the words, she giggled and joined in...

*'Wishin' and hopin' and thinkin' and prayin',  
Plannin' and dreamin' each night of his charms...  
That won't get you into his arms...'*

When they'd finished they were both laughing. "Oh alright... you win! I am... I was... but I'm not so sure anymore... after three years of... nothing..."

"Seems to me what you two have is a classic failure to communicate."

"I'm well aware of that. I've tried talking to him but it hasn't got me anywhere."

"Maybe you've been using the wrong words, Dora. All it takes is three little ones. I think you know what they are. They've been known to move mountains," Bernard said gently.

"I am not about to make a fool of myself," she asserted.

"He probably feels the same way. So there you both are... going nowhere. Maybe it's time to try another approach, then.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you shot me down when I suggested *you* ask *him* out on a date. Maybe you should try being a little more physical?"

"If you mean throwing myself naked into his bed like some common chippy, that's just not on!" Dora responded with disgust.

"Maybe a little *less* physical than that," Bernard chuckled. "I've noticed you're not shy about going to Slugger for a hug when you need one... or when you think he needs one, or giving him a buss on the cheek. But all I've seen you and Steve do is maybe put a hand on a shoulder or an arm. If anyone around here needs cheering up, it's him. Would it kill you to put your arm around him once in a while and give him a little squeeze?"

"Why are we even discussing this? It isn't any of your concern!"

Bernard adjusted the final panel and descended the ladder, leaning against it. "Wrong again. It most definitely is my concern. It's why I'm here... to help. Just like I said."

"Excuse me... I thought you came to help take care of horses and shovel manure."

"Yeah... well... I needed a plausible cover story and that was the most convenient one. What I'm really here to do is bring you and Steve together."

Dora took a few steps backward away from him. "I'm beginning to believe, Bernard, that you're some kind of lunatic that I should send packing soonest. You're beginning to worry me." She wasn't scared, really, but made an exaggerated effort to appear as though she were.

"Nothing to be frightened about. I'm just an ordinary guy with a few unusual abilities and a depressingly difficult mission. All you have to do—both of you—is listen and hopefully learn and then act on what you've learned. Trust me... your future—and his—depends on whether your relationship can be salvaged or if you decide to go your separate ways. I can't make decisions for either of you... that's something you have to do for yourselves. I'm just trying to give you something to work with toward resolution."

Dora studied the completely earnest face. "You're serious, aren't you?"

Bernard shook his head. "Absolutely. Sometimes it helps to unload on a sympathetic but impartial ear. Sometimes you're just too close to a situation to get the overall picture that's clearly obvious to someone outside it.. someone who's been there, done that, and can provide ideas on alternative solutions."

“If I felt like confiding my feelings to someone else it would be to another woman... not a man, especially a strange man!”

“Well, sure... if there’s another woman around you feel comfortable with, go for it. On the other hand, did you ever consider there might be some value in hearing a man’s point of view?”

“No. I guess not.”

“Will you at least think it over for a day or so? Then, if you tell me to leave, I will. Keep in mind I’ll be talking to Steve, too... but I’m not passing along any confidences from either one of you.”

Dora indeed was thinking about it. Bernard most certainly was not, as he purported to be, an ‘ordinary guy.’ Exactly what he was she didn’t know and wasn’t sure she wanted to know. The scent of apples in the room was especially heady at that moment.

“Give me your hands,” she demanded, holding out hers.

“What?” Bernard was caught offguard.

“Just do it.”

Cautiously he extended both hands and she clasped them firmly, never taking her eyes off his. Almost at once a mildly euphoric tingling sensation started in her palms and crept up her arms until it engulfed her whole body.

Mrs. Doyle chose that moment to poke her head in the door. Her eyes fastened on the joined hands with undisguised disapproval. “What’s going on here, then? I thought I heard...”

Bernard hastily extricated himself. “Singing... we were just singing!”

“Just talking!” Dora piped up brightly.

Dottie sniffed loudly and withdrew.

“What was all that about?” Bernard inquired softly.

Dora nibbled her lower lip and looked faintly embarrassed. “When you were holding my hand Sunday night... I thought I felt something, and then I thought, ‘Oh it must only be static electricity... but it wasn’t, was it?’”

“No. It wasn’t.”

Dora paused but no further explanation was forthcoming.

“For the sake of argument, say I *do* accept that there’s something otherworldly about you... who else knows about this... about you?”

“Mrs. Doyle knows... she knew right away. She really is a witch, you know. And Slugger... ‘cause she told him. As far as I know, that’s all. Probably would be best to keep it to ourselves, though, and not share with Steve.”

“You’re right about that,” Dora agreed. “He’d be furious if he thought he was being manipulated. Anyway, this whole discussion is hypothetical... isn’t it? It’s not as if you and Mrs. Doyle are planning to whip up a love potion and add it to his soup... or sprinkle fairy dust on him while he’s sleeping... or are you?” she added, dripping sarcasm.

“Those are passé, I’m afraid. Nowadays we aim for psychological mediation—though there’s still plenty of mystery in the world that science can’t find an explanation for. So no, it’s not hypothetical at all.”

Dora just rolled her eyes.

BACK TO REALITY. With all these disclosures percolating on a mental back burner and the bones of the room in place, Dora declared they were ready to apply the finishing touches.

From the outset of Dora’s plans to renovate the farmhouse she’d pored over editions of *Ideal Home* and *Country Life* with vague notions of what she wanted to achieve in the way of decor,

especially in the parlor—not as spartan or utilitarian as Scandinavian modern, not overly fussy and chintzy, not drearily formal. She wanted restful, neutral earth tones with mood-enhancing bright accents, a few eye-pleasing objets d’art, attractive wall hangings. Above all, the room had to be cheerful and inviting, a place to relax with comfortable seating for all. To that end she had been accumulating accoutrements for months, storing them in the dining room until needed. As the items were retrieved from their various packing crates, boxes and shopping bags, Dora directed Bernard where to place them.

Scenic landscapes replaced archaic hunting prints. Occasional tables and reading lamps were strategically placed. Colorful oversize cushions were distributed. The fireplace was swept out and logs laid, the woodbox was filled with fragrant sticks of cherry and hazelwood. An assortment of candles in various sizes and colors occupied mismatched hurricane lamps adorning the mantel. Books, magazines and Ron’s comics were stacked neatly in rush baskets within easy reach, and his guitar rested on the bench in front of the piano which had been polished within an inch of its life.

“What do you think?” Dora asked her co-worker, stepping back and sighing with satisfaction.

“Perfect!” Bernard attested. “It’s not a parlor anymore. A parlor is somewhere you take visitors to impress ‘em. Back home we’d call this the family room, because it’s set up for the family to enjoy in its together-time. Except...”

“Except what?”

“Over there...” Bernard gestured to an expanse of wall between two tall windows. “We’d probably have our entertainment center.”

“Entertainment center? What’s that?”

“You know... a shelf unit where you’d set up your wide-screen TV, your VCR and DVR, your Nintendo and CD player, your...”

Dora was regarding him blankly.

“What I mean is...” Bernard recovered promptly. “Your television and record player and records and maybe a radio. I notice you don’t have a television.”

“Oh... well, perhaps it’s time we acquire one.” *Americans really do speak a different language*, Dora was thinking.

Hours had flown by while Dora and Bernard had been busy in the ‘family room’. Steve and Ron had returned some time ago and gone ahead with the evening chores, seeing they wouldn’t be getting any assistance any time soon. Dottie and Slugger had busied themselves with supper preparations.

Dottie had business in the village, but before she left she summoned Dora to accompany her out to her car. Bernard had gone upstairs on a personal errand.

“Dora... if I may speak freely?”

“Of course, Dottie. Please do. Is there a problem?”

“At the risk of sticking my beak in...”

“Yes? What is it?”

“That new boy... that Bernard... I can see you favor him...”

Dora frowned. “Well, yes. I do like him. I’m not sure why you don’t...”

“It’s just that...” Dottie fumbled for words. “He’s not one of us... you don’t know anything about him... a foreigner, an American. They have... how shall I put it?... looser morals than we’re accustomed to.”

“I’m not sure what you mean, Dottie.”

“Just don’t let him take any liberties, dear. Don’t kiss him... or rather, don’t let him *kiss you*.”

Dora laughed. “For heaven’s sake, Dottie! I’ve only known him five minutes... why would I want to do that?!” *What an extraordinary thing to say!*

“Just... don’t!” Dottie said darkly and with that she left.

Slugger rang the bell for supper to call Steve and Ron in from the stables and Bernard from whatever he was up to upstairs.

As further evidence of the new regime in the household, the kitchen had been tidied and the faded oilcloth on the old oaken farm table hidden under a cheerful red and white checkered tablecloth decorated with three tall red candles fixed in jam jars, a bowl of apples and pears and three bottles of chianti. Five matched place settings of dazzling white stoneware crockery awaited, along with five gleaming goblets. The atmosphere was redolent of tomato, onion and garlic.

When the three young men were seated, Dora went to the scullery to assist Slugger in carrying out an enormous tureen brimming with spaghetti and meatballs in a rich, red sauce and a second smaller serving bowl with meatless sauce for their lone vegetarian. Next came a wicker basket covered with a white cloth, from which arose the tantalizing scent of fresh hot yeast rolls. With Slugger acting as sommelier, they were finally ready to eat.

Before they proceeded, Bernard stood up, holding his goblet aloft. “I’d like to say a few words...”

Ron, already reaching for the bread, groaned. Dora, serving spoon in hand, froze. Steve and Slugger looked at each other questioningly, assuming some sort of blessing—not usually practiced at this table—was forthcoming.

Bernard grinned. “Brief words, I promise—from my vast store of quotable knowledge. To Slugger, from Abraham Lincoln: *‘It’s not the years in your life that count. It’s the life in your years.’* To Steve, from Davy Crockett: *‘Let the tongue speak what the heart thinks.’* To Ron, from Ecclesiastes: *‘To everything there is a season... a time to keep silent, a time to speak.’* To Dora in celebration of her upcoming twenty-first birthday, from Horace: *‘Carpe diem—Seize the day!’* And to all of us, from Spock, *‘Live long and prosper.’*” Following a puzzled interval as each examined the quotation selected for them, Bernard sat back down amidst a chorus of cheers, clapping hands and ‘hear, hear’s.’

With the festive, unprecedented feast consumed down to the final morsel of bread and the last pasta noodle, the five lingered at the table to polish off the dregs of the wine and allow their heavy meal to settle.

Dora declared lazily, “Slugger, we absolutely must have a modern cooker. I’ve already measured where the new one can fit into the scullery. Oh... don’t look so alarmed... you can keep your Black Beauty! And I think we should get a television, too...”

Ron and Steve exchanged troubled looks. To what could be attributed this sudden fit of domesticity on Dora’s part?

Slugger thought he knew. He and his Tiny had been living together for almost a year when she’d inexplicably transformed from happy-go-lucky maiden to goal-driven virago shortly before laying down the ultimatum: either they married or he could hit the road. This had been delivered at the conclusion of just such a household reorganization as this. And as the acknowledged surrogate father figure, Slugger knew he couldn’t put off much longer having that man-to-man talk with Steve.

Apropos of nothing, Steve made a casual pronouncement. “I’m thinking of going back to school... night classes. Might go by the Adult Education Centre tomorrow evening and see what’s on offer. Talk to someone about it.”

There was dead silence at the table; Slugger's and Dora's mouths hung open. Bernard industriously applied his attention to his wine and Ron nodded his head up and down.

"I think I might just go along meself, mate."

"You probably think it's a dumb idea," Steve said to Dora.

"No, Steve. It's an absolutely brilliant idea... for both of you. I'm just surprised, is all... you've never mentioned an interest in doing that before."

"I never thought of it before today."

She knew without asking that Bernard had had some part to play in this and carefully avoided looking at him.

"Do you have any idea what you would like to study?"

Steve described, more or less exactly as Bernard had mentioned, courses he was interested in... all of them involving animal care.

"What about you, Ron?"

"Well... I love the horses and all, but I'd like to try something in automotives. After all, I might inherit me dad's little empire some day." Which was likely true; Stryker Senior owned several other garages besides the one in Tockwith and two used motors lots as well. And Ron was his only heir, even if neither one thought much of the other.

"I think this calls for a celebration... and a fitting opening night for our new 'family room'. The parlor is dead. Long live the 'family room'." They clinked tea mugs.

"I have an ideal!" Dora announced. "After we've cleared the table and washed dishes and everyone's had their bath, let's do something different. Let's have a pajama party in our new family room!"

There was a sudden silence as everyone except Bernard goggled as if she'd just gone stark raving bonkers. Veteran of girls' pajama parties since birth, he just took it in stride.

"You mean..." Slugger began weakly, "in our nightclothes... all of us... together?"

"Well, yes... of course. That's what you do at a pajama party. It'll be perfectly decent. You can cover up with a dressing gown if you wish." She looked around at them cheerfully. "Come on, boys... it'll be fun!"

Ron groaned dramatically. "That's such a girly thing!"

"No it isn't," Dora insisted. "Boys have sleepovers with their friends, too... and they have pajama parties."

"I never did," Steve said.

"Me neither!" Ron added.

Slugger pondered the indignity of five adults sitting around in their sleepwear. "If that's what you want, Dora," he agreed doubtfully. He was a nightshirt man, himself.

Steve feared how silly he might appear, gamboling around in his pajamas, but if it would contribute to Dora's happiness, he'd do it. "I'm game if you are," he said, looking at Ron.

Ron wondered if he had any clean pajamas without holes in them. Normally, he just slept in his underwear. Additionally, he wondered if Dora owned any racy nighties, having thus far only ever seen her enshrined in neck-to-wrist-to-ankle flannel granny gowns. Not that she'd ever appear in any racy nighties, of course. But you never know...

"I'm in," he declared. If anything, it promised to be an interesting evening.

Bernard didn't give it a second thought, having spent the better part of his life surrounded by sisters and hordes of girl cousins wearing every conceivable form of sleeping attire. He usually slept in the buff but for this occasion he would, naturally, be making use of the pajamas he'd been provided.

"No problem."

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## **FIELD JOURNAL: TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 1974 • 7:30PM**

**Atmospheric conditions:** Rain (again). It sure rains a lot here.

**Immediate location:** Bedroom (getting into pajamas)

**General:** I've been lax about making any clinical notes so here goes...

I've had to revise quite a few of my initial assumptions about Steve Ross as a person. Considering his background, Steve is a surprisingly well-adjusted young adult. Very few American youths would have survived the traumatic experiences of his childhood/teenage years with the same degree of normality or ability to function in mainstream society. Yes, he retains anger issues that are occasionally overwhelming but other than that I can detect no sign of criminal recidivism. Possibly the event that earned him prison time was simply a matter of bad judgment, bad timing and bad luck. (Suggest anger management counseling?)

He has a tendency toward mean-spiritedness and makes disparaging comments re petty matters—frequently makes Dora feel bad about herself. However, he's usually aware of when he's done so and immediately tries to make amends. (Could be linked to inability to give or receive compliments? Low self-esteem?)

Aside from his trust issues, Steve is polite, articulate (more so than his lack of formal education would indicate) and generally able to socialize at an age-appropriate level of acceptable behavior.

His existential awareness is a little fuzzy but could be redirected and developed by increased exposure to other individuals with expanded philosophical/liberal views. (Push the higher education angle!)

Steve's personal habits are exemplary and I have to wonder where/from whom he learned them. He's always neat and clean and dresses conservatively. He doesn't appear to have any of the usual vices such as smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, keeping questionable company, rude or rowdy behavior, or inappropriate or unwelcome advances toward females. In fact, he's just a little bit TOO clean. (Borderline or emerging obsessive-compulsive disorder?)

Dora Maddocks is an enigma... but then, she's a woman and aren't they all! I can see now that the case file is not a fair or accurate representation of her as she is today—a young adult with admirable humanitarian qualities.

**Technical issues:** None.

**Plans:** None. Playing by ear.

**Notes to self:** Dora found the matching top for my pajamas. I look like a dork.

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# *“The greatest talents often lie buried out of sight”* • TITUS MACCIUS PLAUTUS

Leaving a few table lamps on for ambience, Dora had firmly shut the doors to the newly-redecorated room after she and Bernard had finished in there, saying that she wanted to save it as a surprise for the others until after supper.

Now, as they reconvened in the kitchen, everyone besides Bernard supremely self-conscious and avoiding each other's eyes, Dora led the way down the hall and threw open the door to reveal her creation.

“Ta-da!!!”

Slugger, Ron and Steve trooped in single file and took stock of the room in wonderment. The room appeared even cozier than Dora had envisioned it by daylight, especially with the susurrus of raindrops pelting the panes beyond the drawn curtains. Bernard's keen eyes caught Slugger paying particular attention to the paintings, with a slight intake of breath and a darted look of recognition. But the older man made no comment so neither did Bernard. None of the others noticed.

Slugger got a nice fire blazing in no time and each one quickly claimed a spot in which to burrow. Dora, accompanied by Steve, went to fetch dessert and coffee after admonishing Slugger to remain seated. “You're off duty now... we'll serve you for a change.”

The raspberry tarts with clotted cream were absolutely delicious. Whatever his deficiencies in other areas of the culinary arts, Slugger was an excellent baker, his bread alone testament to that. With dessert consumed, a peaceful atmosphere permeated the room.

Bernard went over to the piano and lifted the keyboard cover. “This thing been tuned lately?”

“Just last month,” Slugger replied from his rocker with a holey stocking in one hand and a sock egg in the other. “For Ron, you see. Go on, boy, play something nice for us.”

“Nah. Maybe later.” Ron was already comfortably slouched with his feet on an ottoman and a comic book deployed in front of his face. Steve had picked up the latest newspaper and wedged himself among cushions at one corner of the sofa, feet propped on the coffee table. Dora curled up at the other end with her feet neatly tucked under her, watching Bernard expectantly.

Bernard glanced around. “Anybody mind...?”

“Help yourself,” Slugger grunted.

Removing the guitar from the bench and standing it in a corner, Bernard seated himself and ran several experimental chords on the keyboard, playing a few bars of something soft and waltzy, before turning around. A new feather, silvery gray, shined opalescent in the muted light of the table lamps. “I'm a little rusty. Dora, you want to help me out here?”

A Mona Lisa smile tugged at her mouth. “Me? Oh no... it's been years... I'm sure I don't remember anything.”

“Sure you do... it's like riding a bicycle. You never forget.”

Steve had dropped his newspaper, looking at her in amazement. “I didn't know you played... you never said!”

“I don't... that is, I haven't... not since school, anyway.”

“How come *you* knew?” Steve demanded of Bernard. “Ron's the only one ever touched the piano as long as I've been here.”

“Any finishing school worth its salt includes music in its curriculum. Maybe you should have asked her more about her life before Follyfoot,” Bernard countered in his husky voice.

He scooted over on the bench and patted the empty space. “Come on, *ma chérie*. Give it a try, at least.”

She laughed and got up, going to sit beside him. “Oh alright. Don’t blame me if they go howling from the room.”

“I’ll start us off with some Chopin. Just close your eyes and visualize the keys.” He played some opening bars then paused, “Okay, now you take the left hand and I’ll take the right.” Starting over, the result was a little discordant at first but seemed to come together after a minute or so.

“You take over now.”

He pulled his hand away and she finished the piece, not too badly.

Her eyes widened. “I do remember! You’re right! That was always one of my favorites,” Dora exulted.

“Me too, but I don’t remember which one it is...” Bernard trailed off, waiting.

From behind the comic book came the muffled declaration: “Nocturne No. 20 in C Sharp Minor.” Ron dropped the comic in his lap, his mouth a round “O” of indignation. “Oi! You tricked me!”

And from Steve, “Ron? You? Classical music? I’ve heard it all now!”

“How do you think I learned, dummy? Me mum made me take lessons, didn’t she?” he said irritably. “Don’t go tellin’ anyone, either. I’d be the laughingstock over to the pub.”

Steve indeed was laughing. “Oh, this is rich!”

“I wonder what else we don’t know about Ron?” Dora remarked.

“Nothin’ you need to know about!”

She slid off the bench and resumed her position on the sofa. “It’s Ron’s turn!”

Bernard picked up the guitar from its resting place and presented it to Ron. “Bet you do classical guitar, too... right?” he challenged, returning to the bench.

“Can... but ain’t in a while,” Ron grumbled, positioning the instrument anyway. “What didja have in mind?”

“How about... the adagio from ‘Aranjuez’?”

For the next five minutes the audience of three was spellbound as the duo filled the room with the haunting strains of Joaquín Rodrigo’s best-known and beloved concerto. As the last notes faded Bernard abruptly swung into John Denver’s ‘Annie’s Song’, currently Number Three in the top forty pops. Ron picked it up without missing a beat and the two of them harmonized the lyrics with Steve and Dora joining in after the first stanza. More popular contemporary tunes followed, with Ron leading vocals and the others following along with what lyrics they could recall.

A round of enthusiastic applause broke out as Ron stood to return the guitar to its niche. Dora leaped off the couch and enveloped him in a hug, exclaiming, “Ron! I had *no* idea! That was wonderful!” Ron blushed, simultaneously pleased and embarrassed. She wrapped her arms around Bernard’s neck from behind. “And you, too!”

From his corner, Steve fought off a surge of envy with the internal recognition of an admirable performance well-deserving of Dora’s approbation. “Is there is anything you *can’t* do?” he asked sarcastically.

Bernard turned around on the bench to face him. “Sure. Lots of things. You never know until you try what you’re capable of. The older I get the more I learn to face my limitations... but that doesn’t stop me from trying something new because I learn as much—sometimes more—from my failures as from my successes. Discovering new facets of your own personality is just as

exciting as discovering something new and wonderful about the people you love. I'm betting you don't know each other as well as you think you do."

"And I'm betting you're wrong, mate." Steve challenged. "I think we already know everything there is to know about each other."

"Ya think? Well... let's see... Most everyone possesses some kind of untapped talent or ability that they may not even know they have, something that it takes an impartial observer to spot—someone like me, for instance. Or they know but choose to keep it to themselves."

"Yeah? Like what?" Steve insisted. "What kind of hidden ability do *you* have?"

"Oh... you'd be surprised. You'd be very surprised." Then, meeting Slugger's penetrating stare, "Or maybe not."

"What about us, Bernard?" Dora queried. "What do you see in us?"

Bernard winked at her and grinned impishly, closing one eye and laying a finger aside his nose

"Well... let's see. Ron's a musician and singer. Secretly he'd rather be a rock star or actor than a mechanic. He'd make a pretty good actor since he's got great comedic timing and a gift for mimicry."

"Actually," Ron said, nodding his head in agreement, "I've thought about acting. Wouldn't know where to begin, though."

"You could start by auditioning with a local amateur theatre. They're always hungry for new players."

"What about me?" Steve piped up. "Could I be an actor, too?"

Bernard regarded him thoughtfully. "Possibly. But I predict you'll find your fortune in your voice. I'd describe it as 'mellifluous'... and that could take you far in public speaking and lecturing..."

Steve laughed. "I can't see myself standing up in front of a crowd, blathering like a fool."

"There's other venues... there's a need for narrators and voiceover specialists in the film and television industries. And audiobooks... that's another coming thing. Spoken books on records and cassette tapes for the blind or other people who can't read for whatever reason. And radio plays—I understand those're very popular over here."

"And me?" Dora asked in a small voice. "Do I have any sort of special gifts?"

"Absolutely. The name 'Dora' means gift and that's exactly what you'll be to the man smart enough to marry you. Yours will be the hardest job of all with the best rewards of all—wife and mother to an exceptional family who'll all think you hung the moon. Everyone for miles around will know you by your good works and look up to you as *the* role model of the community."

"Oh." She was hoping for something a little more glamorous but she supposed that would do. It was, after all, what she really *did* want—a quiet life in a home of her own, a *normal* life, surrounded by a loving family and a support network of understanding friends.

"As for Slugger..." Slugger had not participated up to the point, but he raised up his head from his darning when he heard his own name mentioned. They all looked to Bernard for another off-the-wall exposé.

"Dora, would you mind telling again—for the others' benefit—about these paintings on the walls?"

"Oh... er... When I was cleaning out the bedroom I'm using now—before the contractors came, I found a box of rolled-up canvases hidden in the bottom of an old clothes press. They fit so nicely with the new decor, I took them to the framers to have them cleaned and mounted. I

meant to mention that, Slugger, and ask if you knew anything about them but I forgot. I hope it's all right to use them... they are lovely, don't you think? So much better than dogs with dead birds in their mouths. There's even one of our farmhouse and the two original barns."

Slugger's eyes darted from one to the next of the six paintings gracing the walls but still he said nothing.

Bernard prompted. "Did you notice they're all done by the same artist between 1952 and 1962... and initialed by that artist?"

"Yes... EAJ... but who could that be?"

"When I was installing the hanging hardware I noticed an inscription on the back of one... faded and hard to read... 'For Tiny with all my love, Edward Arthur Jones.'"

There was a collective gasp of astonishment followed by a gabble of startled comments.

"Slugger... we never knew..."

"Why didn't you ever tell us...?"

"Amazing!"

"Why did you hide these away all these years...?"

Slugger had set aside his needlework and clasped his hands in his lap, sighing heavily. When he looked up at them, tears rolled down his lined cheeks.

"When I couldn't box no more, it was a long while before I was fit to do anything else. The Colonel, God rest his soul, set me and Tiny up in this house. She worked with the strength of two to keep us up and bought me my first set of paints to keep me busy so's I wouldn't feel sorry for myself. When she passed, I rolled 'em up and put 'em away because the pitchers reminded me of what I'd lost." Slugger choked up a little.

Dora was appalled. "Oh Slugger... I am so, so sorry... I'll take them down immediately!"

But Slugger smiled. "I never thought I'd want to see them pitchers again but... it's been twelve years and I'm long past grieving. I'm that pleased that you chose my daubs to hang in here and I'd be even more pleased if they stayed right where they are."

Shedding her own tears, Dora flung herself on Slugger while Steve, on his corner of the sofa, wished he had some remarkable talent that would bring forth such an emotional display... or that he was capable of expressing such deep feelings over Dora's accomplishments.

The evening continued with more music, more laughter and much animated conversation, all embarrassment over the pajamas forgotten. Before they knew it, eleven o'clock—way past everyone's normal bedtime—had come and gone. Dora's last conscious thought as she drifted off to sleep was not of Steve... but of Bernard and the changes his arrival at Follyfoot had wrought in just three days. What if... just what if... *he was the one...*?

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## **FIELD JOURNAL: TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 1974 • MIDNIGHT**

**Immediate location:** *Bedroom*

**General:** *As team building exercises go, this evening was outstanding... and it was all Dora's doing—along with a little bit of inside info, a soupçon of exhibitionism and some incredibly cunning intuition on my part, of course. They each have many new facets about one another to consider and I fervently hope this leads to a deeper understanding of and appreciation for their 'family' dynamics. Pretty sure an evening like this one isn't a normal occurrence around here. Pajama party for grown-ups—what a superb idea! I would never have thought of that.*

Dinner was excellent... best sketti sauce I've ever thrown a lip over. The Witch is an amazing cook (but then, most of them are). And Slugger's yeast rolls are to die for! The amount of wine we put away may have been a trifle immoderate but no one's yakked anything up yet so I guess we weren't too overserved.

Dora certainly has an eye for tastefully modern interior decor. I personally found the end result quite appealing. Whatever low self-esteem/self-confidence/self-image issues the girl may have, they weren't on display tonight. She seemed really happy and playful.

Steve was obviously very surprised at just about everything. Evidently he just thinks he knows this woman, thinks she's just all emotion and no substance. A dreamer. Is it possible he's never asked her what she wants out of life, what her expectations are? Conversely, has she ever asked him? Do they ever have serious conversations and if so, what about?

Slugger was being very quiet and watching me like a cat sitting outside a mousehole. Ron puts on a good show of being a bad boy but isn't quite the class clown I originally thought. Too bad the case histories on those two weren't more comprehensive. Would very much like to know their stories and what compels them to behave as they do.

Also... and this is very hard for me to admit, considering my attitude toward witches in general and their traditional loathing of my kind... the only thing that could have made the evening any better would have been if the Witch had been there. I suppose I should start referring to her by name rather than occupation. She seems to be a very practical lady and well-informed. Oh... and the missing Hazel person- too bad she couldn't have been there. I don't know anything about her but she would have completed the family circle.

**Technical issue:** Still holding with no problems.

**Plan:** Too full of sketti and too sleepy to think on this tonight.

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# Wednesday

***“Believe and act as if it were impossible to fail”*** • CHARLES F. KETTERING

AS BEFORE, THE RAINS WERE OVER BEFORE DAYBREAK and Slugger smiled as dawn brightened the window where he was watering the potted geraniums on the sill and revisiting the previous evening’s soiree. He was feeling fairly good this morning with only a few minor arthritic twinges in knees and elbows reminding him of his age. It wasn’t yet six o’clock when Bernard sauntered into the kitchen, yawning and pulling on a tee shirt and clearly in a sunny mood himself.

In the clear morning light it was difficult to equate Dottie’s extravagant claims with this seemingly ordinary young man with his sleepy green eyes and tousled hair. True, that feather provided a jarring note but it was no more gaudy than some of Ron’s furred, fringed and riotously multi-colored vests. He could easily have passed for any local farmboy except for his accent and obviously dusker skin tones. Slugger poured tea them both.

“Good morning, Slugger. Thanks.”

“Yer welcome.” Slugger glanced at the clock on the mantel; they had fifteen minutes before the alarm clocks upstairs would begin awakening the rest of the crowd.

“That were a nice party last night,” he offered. “Can’t remember when we’ve had as much fun around here. Was that yer idea?”

“Oh no... strictly Dora’s, although I might’ve provided a little instigation. It’s all too easy for a family to fall into a rut of chores and business and forget life is for living *and* enjoying.”

“We’re not really a family, yer know... not related by blood or anything, even though I do think of them as my children.”

“You function as a family, and that’s what counts... all you’re lacking is a mother figure and it’s kinda looking like you’ve just acquired one.” Bernard nodded significantly toward the window where Dottie’s Hillman was rolling into view.

“Oh... er... aye...” Slugger blushed for no apparent reason and jumped up to hold the door open.

Bernard was studiously pulling on his socks and boots when Dottie swept in.

“Any progress?” she queried without preamble, thumping her carryall onto the table and herself into a chair opposite Bernard while Slugger hurriedly prepped a third mug and slid it over. “Thank you, Edward.”

“Good morning to you, too, Mrs. Doyle.”

“Call me Dottie. And you’d better get busy. Time and tide, you know...”

“I know! I know!” Bernard barked.

Taking exception to his tone, Dottie launched into a harangue that quickly dispelled any latent afterparty good humor Bernard might have been enjoying, concluding with a reminder that only four more days—including today—remained in which to accomplish his task. Furthermore, Plan A—a no-go from the get-go in her opinion—did not appear to be yielding quantifiable results at a significant rate. Her rant subsided only when the faint ringing of alarm clocks going off upstairs signaled the imminent arrival downstairs of the parties under discussion.

Bernard morosely slurped down the rest of his tea and excused himself to trudge out the door. "I'll be in the feed shed starting the mash." By the time Dora came out twenty minutes later he'd already mixed up rations exactly as she had shown him and had a row of buckets ready to be distributed.

Dora instantly noted that Bernard seemed dispirited about something but didn't comment. Conversation was sparse as they joined Steve and Ron to finish feeding. Steve and Dora went off with the horses to the pasture, leaving Ron and Bernard to put away the barrows, tubs and tools and start the mucking out. During breakfast Bernard kept his nose in his cereal bowl and didn't join in the usual breakfast banter.

"What's wrong with him?" Ron asked eventually, pointing with his fork.

Dora chuckled. "He thinks Mrs. Doyle's a witch out to get him. But then, he also claims he's from the future."

Naturally, Ron couldn't let that one go by. "Flew in on the TARDIS, didja? You and yer magical horse."

"Actually, we did." Bernard looked up. "How did you know?"

"I was making a joke."

"I wasn't."

"You're a nutter!"

"So everyone keeps telling me," Bernard replied sourly and refused to say anything more for the duration of the meal until Slugger read out his to-do list.

Steve volunteered for some of the minor chores around the yard as the farrier was due for his monthly visit this morning and Steve would be needed then. Animals requiring attention had been kept back and allowed to roam the confines of the stableyard. Ron was detailed to begin construction of a byre for Queen Maude adjacent to the donkey pen. Dora went to her boarders without inviting Bernard to join her, which left him at Slugger's mercy.

"We need kindling. Can you handle an axe?" Slugger asked.

"Yes sir. Just point me in the direction of the woodpile."

"North side of the house... axe is in the shed next to it."

And there went any chance of valuable face-time with either Dora or Steve.

BERNARD DIDN'T RESPOND TO THE LUNCH BELL and Dora went to fetch him. With his shirt off, he was industriously chopping away at a fair-sized alder log and she paused to study the play of muscles under the sun-bronzed skin of his arms and back. Not as classically proportioned as Steve nor as whipcord thin as Ron, but very nicely put together and easy on the eyes all the same. The early afternoon sun glinted off his riotous hair and a blue-black feather that had formerly graced a raven's tail. He'd been hard at it since breakfast and a considerable pile of kindling was already neatly stacked inside the woodshed. She walked around into his line of sight and he put the axe down.

"Didn't you hear the bell? It's lunchtime."

"No." Bernard grabbed his shirt off the woodpile and wiped his face with it before putting it on.

"Slugger and Mrs. Doyle have gone shopping. We're having leftover stew." Dora screwed up her face and made a gagging gesture with a forefinger.

"That bad?"

"It's enough to turn anyone into a vegetarian who isn't one already."

When Bernard emerged from the lav to join the others at table, Steve and Ron were scowling and using chunks of bread to prod at glutinous gray lumps squatting on their plates, swimming

in gelatinous mud. Bernard leaned over to investigate the contents of the soup pot on the table and recoiled. Dora reached around to pull another smaller pot out of the warming oven.

“Sluggo says there no meat in this... whatever it is.” It looked and smelled exactly the same as what was in the larger pot. Bernard shuddered. He noticed Dora had buttered several large doorsteps of bread and was applying a secondary layer of an unidentifiable gooey brown substance from a glass jar.

“What’s that?”

“Marmite. Want to try some?”

“What is it?”

“No one knows for sure, but I don’t think there’s any meat in it.”

“I’ll pass. Do you have any peanut butter?”

Dora slid over the platter of sliced bread and the butter dish, followed by a jam jar. “No, sorry... I think there’s some Nutella in the pantry.”

“And that would be?”

“Something like peanut butter but made with hazelnuts and chocolate.”

“I guess I’ll stick with jelly or jam,” Bernard sighed. On the other side of the table, Steve and Ron smirked and consumed their mystery meat as Bernard made do with a butter and plum jam butty and an apple from the sideboard. The telephone rang in the office and Dora went to answer it.

“That was Lady Butler,” Dora informed them, returning to the table. “She’s got two new horses on trial and wants us to have a look at them to see if they might be show jumping prospects.”

“Where’d they come from?” Steve asked.

“They’re two-year-olds, Thoroughbreds from Blair Statham’s... evidently they didn’t make the cut for racing so he’s offering them on the cheap. Will you have time to ride over with me this afternoon since Sluggo and Mrs. D have the Rover?”

“Can’t,” he said, “Farrier’s late already and I have to be here.”

“Right, I forgot!” Dora smacked her own forehead. “What about you, Ron?”

“Sorry, luv. The man’s coming with the car today and I should check it out before accepting delivery. Make sure everything got fixed that was supposed to be.”

She sighed with irritation and turned to Bernard. “I guess that leaves you. Feel like going for a ride? We need to exercise some of those boarders anyway.”

“I guess so.” He didn’t seem overly enthusiastic, though.

WITH LEADS IN HAND, DORA POINTED OUT AN UNDISTINGUISHED BLUE ROAN GELDING and a bloodbay with a zigzag blaze. “Pepper and Flash could do with a little cross-country work. Steve mentioned your problem with saddles but I don’t see how you’ll manage without one. It’s four miles to Elle’s place and there’s walls and watercourses along the way.”

“I’ll manage,” Bernard said easily.

The two horses came along peacefully and Bernard helped Dora secure the saddle on the bay, then gave her a leg up. She watched with curiosity but no comment as he went through his bonding ritual with the roan. Steve had also described this and Bernard’s mounting technique.

“We try to alternate the horses when we work them in pairs,” she explained as they rode south along the farm track. “We don’t want them becoming dependent on each other’s presence because then they tend to become intractable when separated.”

“Makes sense.”

The south side of the big lake was fringed by a thin strip of trees and beyond were great expanses of meadow and rolling hills. Dora gestured toward that as they rode side by side, saying, "Almost everything you can see is part of the Harewood estate; the rest belongs to Sir Hughes Butler. Harewood allows access to the general public. Sir Hughes doesn't but he was a personal friend of my uncle's so we have special permission to cross his property and do some of our schooling there. We... Steve and I... feel these two are ready to be introduced to the kinds of conditions they'll encounter in the field. The terrain here is diverse with a lot of natural obstacles and bits of old drystone walls and such. We'll have a warmup first."

They turned off the track into the practice jump area and Dora indicated that she'd go first. Bernard's task would be to replace any rails that Flash knocked down. Even at a restrained canter it was clear the bay had potential, collecting and tucking nicely if not doing so well with hanging and recovery. After three rounds she dismounted and tied Flash to a tree as Bernard untied Pepper and once again leaped up onto the horse's back.

"I'm not so sure this is a good idea..."

"Don't worry about it."

"Wait a minute... there's something you should know about him..."

Flash and Pepper, though matched in size and general conformation, unfortunately did not share equal talents, Dora commented ruefully. The roan was sulky and disinclined to follow directions. "I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to do much with him. He's just not trying. He balks, too, just when you least expect it and there's you with nothing to hold onto..."

"I'll be careful."

As Dora looked on, Bernard first walked his mount up to and around each hurdle, allowing the animal to examine it. When they'd made a full circuit, he scrunched forward and said something to the horse, who swiveled his head around and appeared to be listening intently. Then Pepper moved off and broke into a canter with Bernard maintaining a loose rein, both hands tightly woven into mane. Without a visible signal, Pepper approached the first jump and took it flawlessly... and the next... and the next. Dora was completely baffled by the time horse and rider concluded the third round and pulled up.

"I... I just don't understand it. Why won't he do that for me... or Steve? It's as if he's... bewitched."

Bernard shrugged. "There's nothing wrong with this horse. He's got opinions about how he wants to be ridden, is all."

"Still, he's of no use to anyone if he can only be ridden bareback."

"That's not the problem," Bernard said, "but I think you might be right about him not being suited for the field. He'll do okay in a controlled environment like a show ring but only with an experienced rider who understands him."

"What do you mean?"

"First, he doesn't like a snug rein. Second, you have to let him pick his own pace and make his own judgments about the barriers..."

"But that's nonsense!" Dora broke in, "The whole point of schooling is teaching the horse that the rider is in control."

Bernard ignored that. "Third, he's easily distracted if he feels his rider isn't feeling secure, so it's important that you feel comfortable and don't even *think* about falling off because he'll sense that."

Dora shook her head in disbelief but clucked to Flash and they moved off briskly. They rode over a greensward blanketing several modest hillocks and threaded by small streams, not quite

giving the horses their heads but letting them out just enough to see how they reacted when confronted with unfamiliar objects. At first Flash and Pepper tended to stop and inspect such overwhelming oddities as watercourses, boulders and clusters of shrubbery. But after thirty minutes of stop-and-go ambulation they had both become so blasé that they started hopping over rivulets and small embankments. The riders steered them toward more heavily vegetated areas where fallen logs abounded. Dora had to admit that Bernard was a superb horseman, crouching low on Pepper's neck and clinging with burr-like tenacity and inhuman balance.

They had reached the summit of a small grassy tor crowned with a granite outcropping. Dora signaled a halt so that they could dismount and stretch their legs for a few minutes. Bernard sprawled on his back in the grass while Dora leaned against a squat flat-topped rock.

Prior to their departure, Bernard had removed his boots and socks in the face of Dora's disapproval. She wondered if this was an American thing or just a Bernard thing. They'd had a short, sharp exchange before leaving the paddock in which she'd lost the argument over his stubborn insistence on going barefoot.

"What is it about you and shoes, Bernard?" she finally asked. "You could so easily step on something sharp and hurt yourself."

Bernard rolled over, propping himself on one elbow. "When you were a little girl, didn't you ever stand in a puddle and let mud squeeze up between your toes?"

Dora thought about it and couldn't suppress a giggle. "Yes... just the once. My governess took me for a walk in the park after a rain and I escaped from her long enough to pull off my shoes and stockings and jump into a mud puddle. I got in so much trouble for that, though."

"But do you remember how it felt?"

"Oh yes... it was delicious!"

"Have you ever stood on a sandy beach, right at the edge of the water... and felt the sand shifting under your feet as the waves receded? Almost like the sand itself was alive and caressing your feet, didn't it?"

"Yes... that's exactly how it felt!"

"And after you've had shoes or boots and socks on all day and you finally take them off... how nice it feels just to wiggle your toes..."

"I'm beginning to get the point..."

"In some cultures, the foot is considered an erogenous zone because it's so sensitive."

"Oh go on!"

"No kidding... a good footrub is the next best thing to... well... never mind that. Anyway, when someone asks you how something feels to touch, you generally think in terms of how it feels to your hands and fingers. Most people overlook the fact that there're just as many nerve receptors in their feet as in their hands. Shoes block tactile sensation. The earth itself is alive, Dora, and nature speaks to me through my hands *and* my feet, along with the other four senses."

"I never really thought about it but it does make sense, I suppose... except, what about in winter when there's snow on the ground?"

"Why, then, I wear boots like everyone else," Bernard grinned. "I may be eccentric but I'm not an idiot."

DORA STEERED THEM ALONG A NARROW ACCESS ROAD leading to the rear of the Butler estate. Several dozen or so horses of varying breeds, all in prime condition, grazed in the pastures abutting either side of the road. Four long low stone outbuildings formed a quadrangle around a cobbled yard where a bevy of young men and women were busily attending to other horses.

Prominent among them, a slightly older woman grooming a massive grey hunter looked up and smiled and waved—the trophy wife in the flesh: thirtyish and indeed petite, blonde and attractive.

Dora and Bernard dismounted a short distance away and a pimply-faced teenage groom rushed up to take charge of their mounts. Dora took a few steps toward her friend and neighbor before realizing Bernard had not moved. When she turned she could see that he had assumed an expression similar to his earlier reaction to Dottie but decidedly more hostile.

“Bernard... what...?” Before she could complete the question the other woman had approached them and stood with her hands on her hips, critically regarding Dora’s companion.

When she spoke it was with the syrupy Cajun accent Bernard knew only too well.

“So this here’s your new stablehand I been hearin’ about?”

Dora flinched. Bernard’s presence wasn’t supposed to be common knowledge and that the news had got around so quickly was disconcerting.

“Uh... Bernard, this is...”

“Good afternoon, Elayne,” Bernard said flatly.

“Good afternoon to you, too. Lookin’ mighty good there... for your age.”

“One might say the same for you,” Bernard returned drily.

“Excuse me... do you two know each other?” Dora demanded.

“Oh... Boo and I go way back, don’t we?”

“Boo?” Dora looked from one to the other.

Elayne explained. “It’s a family name... ‘Bernard’ is soooooo stuffy, don’t you agree?”

“But you said you’d never met the Butlers!” Dora addressed Bernard with confusion.

“That was before I knew who you were talking about. And she wasn’t a Butler last time we met.”

“How did you know he was here, Elle? No one’s supposed to know...”

“Pah. You cain’t poot around here without the hired help gossipin’!”

Had to have been Ron, Dora thought furiously. Telephone, telegraph, tell Ron and the whole world knows. She’d recognized several of the stableworkers as Ron’s mates from the village.

“I’d like to have a closer look at that grey,” Bernard said and walked around Elayne, rather rudely Dora thought.

“Feel free to take Hagrid out for a test drive, Boo,” Elayne called out after him. Without turning around Bernard made a subtle but unmistakably rude gesture with his right hand. Dora was shocked.

“What do you mean... ‘Boo’ is a family name?” she asked, “and how is it you know each other?”

“Related by marriage... distantly. Boo’s his nickname, short for Booger.” Elayne took Dora’s arm, guiding her in the direction of a pair of satiny black Thoroughbred geldings tethered side by side across the courtyard. “Come take a look at these bad boys. I’m thinkin’ they’ll make right nice show jumpers for my stepgrandsons. But I wanted your opinion first since you’ll be the one trainin’ ‘em.”

Dora inspected the two horses and observed as Elayne had a stableboy walk each one around. She knew her friend had a keen eye for horseflesh and no need whatsoever for a contribution from Dora.

“Why do I get the feeling you’ve got me over here under false pretenses?”

“Who, me? But since you’re here... I got these nieces visitin’ from the States and we aim to go shoppin’ tomorrow. I want you to come along so’s we can find you somethin’ special to wear to the party Sunday. My treat.”

“I have a perfectly good frock in the closet...” Dora objected.

“Three years outta style, I bet. Look, I’m buyin’ you a new outfit and that’s that.”

“But you don’t have to...”

“No arguin’. We’ll pick ya up around nine-ish, okay?”

Dora knew better than to try to change her friend’s mind once she’d got the bit in her teeth. “You could have just telephoned, you know.”

“Yeah, but I wanted to check out your new boy. How’re you and him gettin’ along?” Elayne jerked her head toward where Bernard was communing with the immense grey horse. Most of the stableworkers had stopped what they were doing to gawk. The animal had an evil disposition and they all feared him to some extent. Their mistress was the only one who could—or would—ride him and he was her favorite.

“Very well, actually... he’s... interesting. I like him. I like him *a lot*,” she confessed. Despite her natural reticence about personal matters, Dora had always felt at ease around Elayne and found herself saying things she would never dream of voicing to anyone else.

Elayne got a crafty look on her face. “I imagine Steve ain’t happy with the competition.”

“What competition? There’s nothing between us...” Dora protested. “I have to admit, I’m sort of drawn to him... but...”

“But what?” Elayne prodded. “C’mon sweetie... you can tell ole Auntie Ellie. Go ahead, spit it out! No one’s close enough to hear.”

That much was true. By now Bernard had levitated himself onto the fearsome Hagrid’s back and was trotting toward the nearest gate, which a startled stablehand swung open before leaping back out of the way. The gate opened to a large paddock ringed with practice jumps. The rest of the workers had abandoned their tasks to hang googly-eyed on the fence as the bareback rider took the huge grey gelding over competition-height barriers as casually as if stepping over caavaletti poles.

“It’s the oddest thing... the other day I was doing some hard thinking about Steve’s and my relationship... about how it wasn’t going anywhere... and what I should do about it...”

“And?” Elayne encouraged.

“I’d just about made up my mind to give up and maybe start dating other people. I love Steve... I do... you know I do, but.. well... then Bernard came along and you wouldn’t believe some of the strange tales...”

“Yup. He’s a silver-tongued rascal all right,” Elayne interrupted. “I suppose he’s been giving you all kinds of advice on how to fix things with your man?”

Dora looked at her friend curiously. “As a matter of fact, he has... and that’s what’s odd. It’s as if he’s known both of us for years. What he says sounds logical, in a way. I just don’t know if I can follow through on it. I’m not sure how to phrase this but... just how well *do* you know each other?”

“Well enough. Why do you ask?”

“Oh... well... it seems you don’t have a very high regard for each other...” Dora let the statement trail off, not wishing to give offense.

“Ain’t no law says you gotta like everybody, honey. And it’s true there ain’t no love lost between us... but that’s fambly bidness. Nothin’ for you to worry your little head about.”

“He’s not.... erm... exactly normal, is he?”

Elayne contemplated this for a few seconds, her face going quite serious and her voice very low. “No, sugar... he sure ain’t and you might wanna keep that in mind. I can’t imagine what he’s told you about hisself, which he shouldn’t have done... or even *why* he told you, but I’ll tell you this much: that boy might be a *loa* but he’s damned good at helpin’ people sort out their troubles. He’ll make a right fine doctor one day. I respect him for that. So when he gets to talkin’ serious, it wouldn’t hurt to pay attention.”

Dora would have liked to continue the conversation but Bernard was bringing Elayne’s big grey hunter back into the yard, scattering stablehands like chickens.

Elayne was speaking hurriedly. “One last word of advice, kiddo... his kind can charm the panties right off a gal, so whatever you do, *don’t let him kiss you!*”

“Elle!” Dora pretended shock, but then she giggled. “I’ll keep the warning in mind, but you forget you’re talking to the oldest virgin in Yorkshire. I don’t charm that easily—not that anyone’s tried recently.”

“I’m just sayin’...”

Watching Bernard tie the grey up to a post, no one having volunteered to take the horse from him, Dora noted that this was the second time she had received that particular admonition about her companion.

DORA AND BERNARD ARRIVED HOME IN AMPLE TIME for afternoon tea, which was a slapdash affair hastily thrown together and eaten on the run, except for the blacksmith and his assistant, who were in no hurry at all. Steve was still occupied with bringing to the crossties one at a time each animal needing adjustments or refittings. Slugger and Dottie, returned from their shopping expedition, were shuttling back and forth between the laden LandRover and the house, putting away their purchases. Ron was tinkering with the new car that had been delivered as arranged.

Dora and Bernard had taken the shortest path home. During the ride and while they were putting their horses up, not much talk had passed between them. But Dora’s mind was tallying the many ways in which Bernard was, as she had phrased it to Elayne, ‘not normal.’ There were what should have been an alarming number of points... the ever-changing eye color, for instance. That, at least, she had figured out for herself: green meant he was comfortable, gray meant he wasn’t.

It occurred to her that while neither Steve nor Ron had heavy facial hair, both usually sprouted some measure of stubble by evening whereas Bernard’s face remained unbearded at all times of the day. Unlike Steve and Ron, who walked with the rolling gait characteristic of horsemen and sailors, Bernard appeared to glide. She had noticed how, when something caught his attention, he would become still and turn his head with unblinking eyes—very much like an owl—in the direction of the sound or object of interest. And why was his presence almost always attended by the scent of apples?

And, of course, Dora wondered in what other aspects he might be ‘not normal.’ Why were two different people so insistent that she not kiss him? If simply holding his hand had such a dramatic effect on her mood, what state of mind might possibly be induced by a kiss?

At the moment, Bernard appeared to be experiencing the sort of discomfort one might expect after riding eight plus miles and several hours bareback.

“I seem to have developed a hitch in my getalong,” he announced ruefully. “Think I’ll go for a short walk, work out some kinks.”

“Good idea,” Dora agreed, suppressing a snicker and a snide comeback. “Just be back in time for chores and dinner.”

“Will do,” he replied and limped away.

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## FIELD JOURNAL: WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 1974 • 3:30PM

**Immediate location:** Under a tree in a field, several miles from the farm.

**General:** Since it looks like I'm not gonna get a crack at Steve today, I might as well focus on Dora, who possesses a much more complex personality than I initially assessed. One thing I am sure of, though: a girl that young and attractive shouldn't be so depressed so often. But I'm not a psychiatrist so I have no idea what she has to be depressed over, nor can I help her with that problem. In my time there would be hundreds of legal medications available in the form of over the counter drugs. In a way it's a good thing she lives in an out-of-the-way locale where street drugs aren't that readily obtainable, not that it would ever occur to her to go that route.

If Dora had never come here... if her life had followed the usual path of overindulged, wealthy but aimless young women, this is what I would have prophesied: She would have drifted into a loveless marriage with some feckless fop of her own class, borne the two requisite children to be nurtured by hired minders, been bored out of her mind by the endless cycle of social demands, and probably taken up drinking or prescription drugs as a way of escaping the tedium and uselessness of her existence. Have seen that happen too many times!

Fortunately, Dora has found a purpose in life that suits her personality and isn't in any danger of being plucked away from it. Being estranged from one's parents is an undesirable situation but in this case it's the best thing that could have happened to her. Her uncle provided, and now Slugger continues to provide, the adult supervision, guidance and attention she needed and didn't get from Mom and Dad. Steve provides an outlet for her affection, even if there hasn't been any return (yet) on that investment.

I've rarely seen a young girl so uninterested in girl things. She keeps herself up and always looks nice, but couldn't care less about clothing or fashion or being wined and dined. Much like my sisters except they've all had the presence of mind to marry men who take them for what they are, not as they'd like them to be. I think Steve might be that kind of man, except she's going to have to grow some backbone or he'll run all over her. Also, Dora will always need continuing reassurance from the man in her life and he'll have to learn to give it.

That's not to say Dora is a doormat. There's a fierce temper lurking under that demure presence. I'm thinking that before she came to Follyfoot she was probably never in an environment where she was allowed to express it. Could be all she needs is a little bit of courage, a lot of motivation, and a buttload of practical advice on how to be a woman.

I thought she was gullible and could be easily led. Wrong!

**Technical issue:** None at present.

**Plan:** Also none.

**Note to self:** I don't know why I'm feeling so antsy. Maybe if I let Squirrel out for a run it might blow the cobwebs from my head.

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# *“O, for a horse with wings!”*

• WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Dora had intended to work two more boarders that afternoon but kept getting interrupted. Two teenagers stopping by to inquire about rental horses. A string of phone calls about the stablehand position, about the “lost” horse, about a charity sale. First Dottie and then Slugger wanted ‘a word’ about non-expendable household needs.

A venerable old dame rattled up in an antiquated termite-riddled trap drawn by an elderly purblind pony mare; they had been expecting her for some time, she reminded Dora. She cried piteously as Slugger, sniffing himself, helped her into the Rover for the return trip to her home, from which her grandchildren would shortly be removing her to a nursing facility. This was the last joy ride she would ever take with her beloved Pansy. Dora felt like flooding the yard with tears herself.

Dora was thoroughly exasperated by the time she was summoned to the telephone yet again. This time it was Blair Statham, racing magnate and owner of an upscale breeding establishment some miles to the east of Follyfoot. She listened with growing alarm as the irate businessman ranted on about a horribly ugly dun stallion—obviously one of her lot—that had got in with his broodmares. His men had tried and failed to capture it and he was preparing to shoot to kill. After a five-minute harangue interrupted by Dora’s impassioned pleas, the man finally agreed to hold off until they could get there with their horsebox. Dora flew out to the yard where Steve was just seeing off the farrier and communicated the emergency to him and to Ron working nearby on the car. Slugger and Dottie had run out after her in time to hear.

They scrambled to load the horsebox with ropes, a good stout halter and Ron’s lasso and tore off down the road at top speed, gears grinding. Fifteen minutes later they turned off under an imposing concrete entranceway with “Statham Racing Stables” emblazoned across the arch. Pristine white fencing separated the the two-lane paved private access road from the hundreds of acres of weed- and wildflower-free grass on either side, dotted here and there with future steeplechase champions and their dams. In the distance gleamed an enclave of whitewashed buildings surrounded by paddocks radiating outwardly like pie slices. Enclosing all this was a full-sized oval racetrack. Steve pulled into a dedicated parking area and halted their shabby vehicle next to a line of gleaming white-enameled horse vans, conspicuously decorated with the scarlet and green Statham logo.

A bespectacled adolescent in a green and logoed uniform skipped out to greet them and personally escorted them into the august presence of Blair Statham, industrialist and financial wizard, currently masquerading as Squire Statham, breeder of exalted horseflesh whose mares might (or might not) have been compromised by the unwelcome intruder. He stood at the gate of one of the pie-shaped paddocks, bellowing at three mounted fellows desperately trying to isolate a small yellow horse from among the sleek bays and chestnuts, who were not cooperating. The three would-be vaqueros spread out, slowly converging on their quarry only have to the band of eight or so mares scuttle away with the visitor safely tucked among them.

Statham whirled around, aiming a finger at the three arrivals. “You! If any of my mares are damaged I’ll sue! What hare-brained idiot keeps such a filthy beast, much less allows it to run amuck!” The diatribe continued in the same vein for a few more minutes with occasional asides to scream at the luckless riders. At length the man ran out of threats, or wind, and Dora boldly stepped up.

“Mr. Statham, sir... if I may, you’re going about this all wrong. I believe if you’ll call your men to withdraw and quit frightening the mares, we’ll be able to just walk in there and get our horse without such a fuss. He knows us, after all.”

Steve nervously eyed the shotgun Statham wielded; not that he was afraid of firearms, but that he was concerned the man might get too carried away with himself and actually discharge it. “Sir... please put that away. You wouldn’t want to accidentally hit one of your own horses, would you?” Apparently that possibility had not entered Statham’s head; he handed it over to one of his lackeys.

His mouth opened and shut several times before he finally growled, “Alright, we’ll try it your way... but if that doesn’t work...” He made cocking, aiming and firing motions with his empty hands.

The horses scrunched together in a corner of the paddock as Steve, Dora and Ron walked toward them slowly. Slowly settling down, the mares allowed the humans to ease between them. One by one they moved off, leaving Squirrel by himself, tensed to bolt, swinging his head from one to the other. He was less than twenty feet from the stout six-foot-high fence separating this paddock from the next and they were confident they had him cornered.

With Dora to one side, Steve on the other and Ron in the center holding the lasso, they slowly closed in only to halt in stunned amazement when the animal simply pivoted in place and catapulted himself over the fence and into the adjoining enclosure with daylight to spare. He trotted a few feet away and turned to watch them. If he’d had fingers, he’d be giving them two.

“That. Did. Not. Happen,” Ron stated flatly.

“Why am I not surprised,” Steve said.

“I think we have a problem,” Dora opined.

They trudged back toward the paddock gate, over which Blair Statham was frozen in astonishment, his mouth hanging open. “What the hell was that?!!! There’s not a horse alive could have made that jump from a standstill!”

“This is a very special horse, Mr. Statham. That’s why we’d like him back.” Dora said sweetly, trying not to laugh. “Would you do the honors?” She gestured at the gate and Statham allowed them to exit. They followed him to the gate of the adjoining paddock, where they repeated the plan of attack and attained the same result. A covey of stablehands accrued to Statham, lining the fence along with him as the circus moved from one paddock to the next.

It came to Dora that Squirrel was playing them along and enjoying himself immensely. He could at any time have chosen the curved outer edge of the pie slice and escaped to the track, and beyond that to the open pastures. She had to stifle her laughter. Steve himself was torn between irritation and amusement; he had also twigged on to what was going on. Ron, however, was grimly determined he was going to get to use his lasso one way or another.

The little horse seemed to be tiring and, as the capture re-formed in the last paddock, he stood dejectedly with his front legs splayed. Ron’s purported lasso technique wasn’t even required; he merely strode up and dropped the loop over the animal’s head, grinning and making a “V” for victory. Too late he realized he should have been maintaining a two-handed death grip on the other end of the rope, as it was rudely ripped from his hands. Squirrel went over the outside fence to the accompaniment of a report from a gunshot.

“Damnation, I was sure I got him,” boomed a familiar voice as the three spun around in shock to find the district veterinarian lowering the tranquilizer rifle he always carried in his truck. He had already been on the premises for other reasons and had been summoned by Statham.

Squirrel, meanwhile, was streaking to freedom with Ron's lariat whipping behind him.

Blair Statham grabbed Dora by arm as soon as they exited the gate, simultaneous pulling out his wallet. "How much?" he demanded.

"Excuse me?"

"I said how much for that animal, young lady. Name your price!"

"Uh... er... he's not for sale, Mr. Statham."

"Money's no object, Miss Maddocks. I'll give you a blank check..."

Steve stepped in, gently prying Statham's hand off Dora's arm. "Sorry, sir. He's not ours to sell. He belongs to a guest at Follyfoot."

"Tell me the feller's name... I'll deal with him direct then!"

"The horse is not for sale, Mr. Statham," Steve reiterated. "Sorry for the inconvenience. We'll capture him as soon as he can and make sure he doesn't get away again."

"Give us a name. I'll make it worth your while..." The man was gibbering and practically foaming at the mouth as visions of outrageous stud fees galloped through his head. The horse couldn't possibly be shown, of course, but his splendidly high-flying progeny would set world records!

The trio hurriedly retreated to their van, with Ron bemoaning the loss of his almost brand-new rope.

BERNARD DIDN'T APPEAR FOR EVENING CHORES OR SUPPER. Slugger had cajoled Dottie into staying for the excellent meal which she herself had prepared over his mild resistance.

Eyes kept straying to the empty chair and a cloud of speculation hung over the table.

"Something's happened to him. I just know it," Dora fretted.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, girl," Steve said. "You're not his mum. He probably just pulled a Ron and skived off to the nearest pub. He'll be back when he sobers up."

"Not nice!" Ron objected, adding, "Funny thing, that. I been askin' around. Everyone seems to *know* about this Yank but no one's *seen* him. It's like he materialized out of thin air. Maybe he's an alien from outer space... or just a fig of our imaginations!"

"That's 'figment,' Ron," Dora corrected.

Slugger shook his head and muttered something about kelpies.

"I'm sure there's a good explanation," Dottie assured Dora. "You're not to worry."

Steve and Ron announced they were going into town to visit the Adult Education Centre and persuaded Dora to join them. The three went upstairs to their rooms to change into suitable clothes.

Lingering over tea before clearing the table, Slugger and Dottie discussed in lowered voices the abortive horse-catching venture.

"He's not... er... dangerous in that condition, is he?" Slugger asked anxiously.

"Probably not," Dottie said, "The danger lies in what might be done *to* him by others."

"Eh?"

Dottie sighed. "I'll put the kettle back on."

Slugger's mind had been in turmoil since his indoctrination into the realm of fantasy. Everything Dottie had said had been put forth so reasonably, so matter-of-factly... so *normally*. But getting his head wrapped around the idea that much of the folk superstition he'd been fed as a child was *true*... that was proving most difficult to absorb and accept.

“Likely he was having a lark, don’t you see? Taunting them. He could have gone over any fence anytime he liked. But if that idiot Statham had shot him... well, that would have been messy indeed. Or fatal. Because in either form he can be shot just as dead.” Dottie’s comments were not reassuring.

Slugger closed his eyes and shivered. “Why would he have done this?”

Dottie colored slightly and twiddled her teaspoon. “It’s not too hard to figure out why he ended up down the road in a pasture full of brood mares... bloody fool.”

“How’s that?”

“Edward... I’ve raised four boys of my own... four very *healthy* boys, understand? At that age, they’re simply et up with... erm... *urges*. I assume you remember what I’m referring to.”

Slugger got the drift.

“He’s been spending an inordinate amount of time alone with Dora and she’s the only eligible female around here. Obviously he’s not going to... er... you know... so...”

“Got it,” Slugger interrupted, his ears flaming.

Dottie got up with a chuckle. “Wouldn’t be surprised if Squire Statham got a few surprises of his own in his foaling sheds eleven months from now.”

Slugger was scandalized.

“Now, there’s nothing we can do so we might as well get busy and tend to our own knitting. I’ve got work to do and so do you.” Dottie bustled off to the scullery with an armload of crockery.

WITH THE WASHING UP DONE AND THE YOUNG PEOPLE GONE OFF, the house were eerily quiet except for Dottie humming to herself as she prepared to leave for the day. Slugger collapsed into his rocker by the stove and snapped open the newspaper, a treat normally reserved for late in the evening. But his mind wandered. He heard the washing machine start up and a door open and close as Dottie went out to the kitchen garden. It was nice to have a woman about the house again, he realized—a solid, comforting presence and conversational peer. Well, there was Dora, of course... but that wasn’t quite the same, more like having a grown daughter.

Slugger had called himself self-sufficient all these years since his wife’s passing and would never have admitted to himself or anyone else that he suffered spells of loneliness and self-pity. Now, he suddenly realized, he was already accustomed to Dottie’s presence and found he was quite liking having her around... if he didn’t dwell on those other aspects. A germ of a thought sprang into his mind... but, no... there was no reason to suppose that an attractive widow might have the slightest interest in a washed-up boxer almost a dozen years her senior... No, that line of thought wouldn’t do at all.

His ruminations were interrupted by Dottie’s unsmiling face appearing around the scullery door and a crooked finger beckoning him.

“Come with me please. It appears we have a casualty in the cabbage patch,” she said calmly. He lumbered out of the rocker and followed her through the scullery and out into the garden. Bernard, looking as if he’d been dragged through a hedge backwards, sat on an overturned bucket with his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands and his clothing in tatters. He looked up and croaked something unintelligible and attempted to stand up, promptly pitching face forward into the soft soil between two rows of cabbage heads.

“Hell’s bells!” Dottie swore, kneeling by the inert body. “Help me get him inside.” They each took an arm and hauled Bernard upright.

“Oh... eeyew!” Slugger exclaimed. Had he not known the circumstances he would have assumed the boy was intoxicated, although there was no telltale reek of alcohol. Still, he had sicked all over himself.

“Straight to the bath!” Dottie ordered, and once they had manhandled their unresistant victim through the door, the scullery, the kitchen, the hall and into the lavatory, “Off with his clothes and into the shower. You too... you’ll have to hold him up.”

“Er... *Dottie*...” Slugger had no intention of stripping down to his unmentionables in her presence, but Dottie the cheerful housekeeper had turned into Dorothy the efficient, ruthless charge nurse. “Just do it. For heaven’s sake, old man, neither of you has anything I haven’t seen a thousand times over... and when you’ve seen one, you’ve seen ‘em all. Keep your drawers on if you’re that modest, but his clothes have to go.”

Bernard wasn’t entirely unconscious, but his slitted eyes were hazy and unfocused. He protested feebly but to no avail at the indignities being visited upon him and gasped when the cold water hit his face. Self-conscious in his plaid boxers, Slugger gingerly took a washcloth and bar of soap from Dottie’s hand before she yanked the shower curtain closed. Depositing two oversize bath towels on the commode seat and a plastic disposal bag in which to put the ruined clothes, Dottie withdrew from the bathroom.

With the mission accomplished and towels discreetly wrapped mid-section, the two were directed upstairs where Dottie then ordered Slugger to install pajamas on their patient and tuck him into bed, where Bernard immediately fell asleep. Dottie pointed out the rope burn on the victim’s neck and a puncture wound circumscribed by a vivid bruise on his left shoulder.

“Seems the vet didn’t miss after all,” she said.

Slugger considered the grievous effects on a relatively small human body of even a mild veterinary sedative intended for the mass of a horse. Dealing with an errant dose of tranquilizer was beyond his purview.

“Shouldn’t we call the doctor?” he asked.

“And what will he find? A young adult male in apparent good health other than having overindulged in alcohol or some other questionable substance, which isn’t all that unusual amongst young people these days. No, best let him sleep it off. He should be recovered by morning. Check in on him every now and then and make sure he gets plenty of water to drink and nothing to eat until he’s up and walking on his own.”

Back downstairs, with Slugger properly reattired, they reconvened at the kitchen table for more tea. “One for the road,” claimed Dottie.

“What are we going to tell the others,” Slugger bleated.

“Ordinarily I wouldn’t condone lying...” Dottie said, “but in this case... it would be best to keep it simple: the boy is suffering the brutal consequences of having gone on a monumental piss. He can’t remember anything. Period. End of story.”

“You think they’ll buy that?”

“Why not? He wouldn’t be the first drunk to fall into a ditch... that would include my boys and your Ron.”

Dottie continued, “Soon as he wakes up, you need to coach him with that story, understand? Before any of the others talk to him.”

“Understood,” Slugger agreed.

“I’ll be on my way, then. Good night, Edward,” Dottie said, pushing up from the table and picking up her carryall.

STEVE, DORA AND RON RETURNED TO FIND SLUGGER SNOOZING IN HIS ROCKER, newspaper over his face. The boys were in a rousing good humor but Dora less so. Her first words to Slugger were to inquire if Bernard had turned up. Slugger informed her that he had, but was a bit under the weather and had gone on to bed.

“Is he alright? I’ll just go up and have a look in, shall I?”

“No, no... I just did and he’s sound asleep. Let him be, girl.” No sense burdening her with the sordid and smelly details at this hour.

Steve wasn’t satisfied with that answer. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Don’t rightly know yet. Looks like he might have had a wee dram too much, is all. What did you find out at the school?” Slugger adroitly changed the subject.

“Oh... well, I’ve signed up for some prep classes so I can get a proper leaving certificate. Then in about six months I can start with some night courses that will give me uni credits if I decide to go on.” Steve grinned, looking pleased with himself. “And Ron’s going to start with basic automotive maintenance at the same time. We’ve got orientation on Friday and classes start next week.”

Ron was looking smug as well. Dora claimed to be both pleased and proud of both of them.

“What about you, Dora? You find anything to interest you as well?”

“Just the advanced cooking class, once I’ve done with the one I’m doing now. I’ll think about it.”

They chatted a few more minutes before drifting off to their respective bedrooms, leaving Slugger to bank the fire for the night and ponder what fresh calamities were in store on the morrow. *It’s always something*, he thought gloomily.

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**No journal entries for Wednesday night**

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# Thursday

## ***“Yield not to calamity but face her boldly”*** • VIRGIL

MORNING CHORES WERE CONDUCTED WITHOUT BERNARD'S PARTICIPATION. They were already gathered at the breakfast table genially discussing weather, livestock and the latest football scores by the time he finally put in an appearance, looking like death warmed over.

“Sorry. Overslept,” Bernard croaked. “Shoulda woke me.”

“Are you alright now? Dottie said you were taken ill,” Dora inquired solicitously.

“Other than a headache, peachy keen.” A blatant lie

Ron chortled. “Not to put too fine a point on it, mate, but you look like sh... *OW!*” Again with the boot under the table. Dora was staring daggers at him.

Steve sniggered. “Local poteen too much for you, was it?” He shut up when The Look swiveled his way.

Dora was concerned. “Bernard... think... what’s the last thing you remember from yesterday?”

“Riding over to someone’s house to look at some horses?”

“And after that?” she prompted. “What did you do after we got home?”

The look of concentration on his face gave way to incredulity. “I... uh... don’t remember...”

“You said you were going for a walk in the woods.”

“Did I?” The import of that dawned. “I don’t remember anything before waking up just a while ago. That’s sure odd.”

“Odd doesn’t begin to cover it,” Steve snorted.

“Too bad you missed all the excitement yesterday,” Ron commented, “We almost caught that horse of yours but he got away.”

“Yeah. And if you’d been here like you were supposed to, we would have got him. You want to tell us what happened?” Steve was gripping his mug with an intensity that threatened to crush the china to fragments. “You’re not much use if you can’t be around when needed.”

“Leave him alone, Steve,” Dora rebuked.

Sluggo said nothing as he doled out biscuits he’d just taken from the oven.

Irrepressible Ron piped up. “You shoulda been there! We got him cornered in a paddock and I lassoed him proper...” He proceeded to describe the roundup attempt in avid detail, concluding with, “Then the vet shot at him with his tranquilizer gun but he missed and then he up and went over the fence and ran away. Took off with me best rope.”

“You owe us an explanation!” Steve insisted, flinging a black look across the table.

Dora was conciliatory. “We were very worried about you, but the important thing is that you’re back safe.”

*Speak for yourself,* Steve thought.

Bernard was hunching his shoulders defensively. “Sorry guys... I really don’t know what happened.”

Steve was unappeased. "Why can't you just admit you went to the village and got drunk... or worse..."

"I can't very well admit to something I don't remember doing," Bernard retorted.

"Did Ron hook you up with some of his junkie friends, was that it?"

"Here now, don't go blamin' me!" the redhead yelled.

"That damned horse of yours could have... *ack!*" Whatever Steve was about to say was cut off as a large booted foot connected with his ankle under the table.

"That'll be enough, Steve," Slugger advised.

Sitting at Steve's right and across from Bernard, Dora suddenly realized that even though Dottie had been in and out of the kitchen several times, Bernard wasn't displaying any of the anxiety that had plagued him earlier. She recalled that after breakfast on Tuesday he'd hung back for some sort of private conference with Slugger and the housekeeper. At the time she hadn't given it a second thought. And now she wondered what all that had been about.

Dottie plunked herself down at the foot of the table, facing Slugger at the head and deftly diverting the conversation to a safer topic. With six at board, the old farm table had almost reached maximum capacity.

"Edward and I were having a look at the gardens, or what used to be the gardens. Perhaps you're not aware that he's mad keen on gardening only he's never had time to deal with it, so we've come to an arrangement. He'll continue to cook breakfast and other meals on my off days. But from now on I'll be doing luncheon and supper... if that meets with your approval, Dora."

Dora fought to conceal her astonishment at Slugger's having so easily yielded his cooking domain. He'd been none too agreeable about her cookery classes and stated intentions of sharing meal preparation in future. "Only if you agree to take meals with us, Dottie."

"We'll see. Now, I think that with a tiny adjustment to the household budget we can manage to..." and she was off on a discussion of plans for overhauling the landscaping around the farmhouse.

Dora listened attentively and agreed to everything. She hadn't yet got that far ahead in her renovation plans and it would be wonderful to have someone taking over that portion who knew about gardening and didn't have a brown thumb.

Bernard had said nothing further until the platter of scrambled eggs was passed his way. Turning an unsavory shade of green, he bolted from the table and made straight for the loo.

WITH BREAKFAST CONCLUDED, DOTTIE BEGAN CLEARING THE TABLE and Dora repaired upstairs to change into clothes suitable for a shopping expedition. As Slugger was dispensing marching orders to his two remaining foot soldiers, a blue-and-white Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow with dark tinted windows purred to a halt just outside the kitchen door. An elegantly attired blonde woman got out of the driver's seat, coming around the front of the car and waving at them through the window. She didn't bother knocking but came right in, greeting everyone in her downhome style. Everyone immediately jumped to their feet, Slugger making an effort to suck in his gut.

"Hello, Elle," Dottie said. "Tea?"

"Hey how are ya, Dot. Nah. Thanks anyway. My girls're all in a lather to go spend some money. Dora 'bout ready?"

"She'll be down in a tick... make that two or three ticks," Dottie said easily. "Why don't you bring your young ladies in and introduce them while you're waiting?"

Elayne stuck her head out the door and emitted a strident whistle, gesturing to the unseen passengers in the car to come on in. Three young women emerged and filed into the kitchen.

The three men were gobsmacked at what were possibly the most exotic specimens of womanhood ever seen in these parts, with glowing amber eyes, flawless café au lait complexions and deep brunette hair pulled straight back into French braids that fell to their waists. Elayne made the introductions: “This is Mr. Slugger Jones and this is my friend Mrs. Dorothy Doyle.”

“*Bonjour*, Monsieur Jones, Madame Doyle,” the twins chorused with dazzling smiles.

“And this is my niece, Marie-Solange, and my great-nieces, Marie-Thérèse and Marie-Françoise—twins, as you can see.” Terry and Frankie, as they asked to be called, were perhaps sixteen or seventeen.

“These two splendid young men are Steve Ross and Ronald Stryker.” The splendid young men themselves were speechless as the beauties presented their hands to be shaken.

The obviously much older woman graced Slugger with a smile that revealed tracteries of laugh lines at the corners of her mouth and eyes. “I am very pleased to meet you, Monsieur Jones,” she said in a velvety soft voice with just the merest hint of an accent that Slugger figured must be French.

“Just... Slugger. I’m... uh... pleased ta meetcher as well, missus,” he stammered. She gracefully spread the fingers of her unattached left hand, exhibiting a broad golden band on her ring finger. “Please... call me Solange.” Slugger suddenly realized he was still holding her right hand and dropped it like a hot potato.

As Dotty stepped forward to welcome Solange as well, recognition of their common status was automatic and she understood without being told that this one was the mother of the other two, and that for some reason that relationship wasn’t being publicized.

“Elayne says you have a house guest—a relation of ours, another American? I should like to say hello to him.”

Dottie glanced at Slugger. Although the distressing sounds of wretching had subsided, the door to the lavatory remained firmly closed.

“We do... but the young gentleman is indisposed at the moment. Another time, perhaps?” Dottie answered smoothly. She fancied she saw a shadow of something like concern cross the other’s face.

“Nothing too serious, one hopes.”

“No, not serious at all... just uncomfortable and inconvenient, for him.” Dottie hoped she was right. A flicker of intuition blossomed into a brilliant flash of illumination. A tiny smile and a slight inclination of the head in her direction by Elayne confirmed it. Well, well...

Dora burst into the kitchen and the spell was broken. “Sorry, sorry. I’m ready to go now!”

The five women piled into the Roller and it growled to life, bearing them off to the shopping mecca of Leeds. In the kitchen, Dottie threw her head back and guffawed. “If you could just see yourselves! With your eyeballs hanging out at the ends of their stalks!” She leaned close to Slugger and whispered *sotto voce* behind her hand, “Lady Butler’s nieces are quite *bewitching*, aren’t they?” and chortled when he twitched.

Presently the menfolk recovered and found their voices. Slugger suggested the remainder of the morning would be best employed in exercising a few of those boarders in Dora’s absence. Steve and Ron ambled out the door, still in awe.

“Should one of us go and see about Bernard. He’s been in there a long time,” Slugger asked.

“Just waiting on them to get gone, I expect,” Dottie said, adding cryptically, “Too many of us in one place make them nervous.”

“I’m right here.” Slugger and Dottie were both startled as Bernard quietly reappeared.

From the looks of him Dottie deduced that strong hot tea was called for and set the kettle on to boil before rejoining Slugger and Bernard, where the latter slumped miserably with his arms crossed on the table.

Dottie's maternal instinct was aroused despite her inbred antagonism toward Bernard and all of his ilk. He looked so pathetic and dispirited. The back of her hand automatically went to his forehead; just as she thought: hot and dry. "Let me see your arm," she commanded, pulling up the sleeve of his tee shirt.

The puncture wound on his shoulder was a hard red welt surrounded by an angry purple bruise. And, as with all his kind when unwell, the color had leached from his eyes. His irises were pale grey, barely distinguishable from the sclera. Dottie couldn't bear to see another living creature in pain and not do anything about it.

"Don't move. I'll be right back." She went to the scullery and rooted around in her carryall, coming up with a vial of brown powder and a baby food jar filled with a evil-looking greasy yellow ointment which she proceeded to spread on the injury. Into a mug of steaming tea she upended the vial of powder.

"He can't have no drugs, he says," Slugger put in. "That's how he got this way in the first place."

"How *did* I get this way?" Bernard asked.

Slugger explained about the veterinarian's tranquilizer gun.

"I guess I'm lucky I'm not dead as a doornail." Bernard grinned weakly. "What's that stuff you're putting in the tea?"

"Don't ask, don't tell. Believe me, you won't find this in any chemist's shop," Dottie said darkly.

Bernard sniffed the contents of the mug and made a face but drank it anyway, almost gagging at the bitterness.

"This will take a few hours to work, but it *will* work," she advised. She folded her hands together and leaned across the table toward him. "What will work even better is for you to go back to that place where Dora found you and let the water spirit do what she will. For all her failings, that Myrtice always was a good sort and used to be a very good healer. It appears she's taken a liking to you."

"Sounds like a good idea."

"Not just yet... perhaps in a few hours. I take it your mission isn't progressing as well as you would like?" Dottie asked gently, almost sympathetically.

"Doesn't seem to be. And that's what I need to talk to you about. I've got the ball rolling... Steve's doing some serious thinking about the future, for instance. And I've tried to get Dora to understand that just wishing for him to approach her of his own accord won't make it happen. She's got to make an effort, too. But things aren't moving along fast enough. He's got to make a commitment to her by Saturday night and she's got to make him make it. It has to happen before the birthday party and I'm running out of time. I'm afraid we're gonna have to go with Plan B."

"How can we help?" Dottie asked, replenishing their tea.

"I have a couple of ideas but I'll need Slugger's assistance with Steve and your's with Dora."

"Let's start with Edward, then. What do you want him to do?"

Slugger's head swiveled back and forth like a metronome.

"Steve looks up to you, Slugger..." Bernard began slowly. "He respects you... he needs the advice a father would give about how loving a woman calls for courage and responsibility. How

if he lets her slip away he'll regret it the rest of his life. You've got to make it clear to him that it's now or never."

"Been thinkin' about doin' that anyway," Slugger admitted.

"Tomorrow would be good. That'll give you time to work up your presentation and him to chew on it."

"What about Dora?" Dottie asked. "What do you have in mind for her?"

"Ah... well... that's a more delicate matter. Maybe Slugger doesn't need to sit in on this..."

"I'm not going anywhere!" Slugger said sternly. "Anything involves her, I want to hear it."

"As you wish," Bernard shrugged, turning to the housekeeper. "I have six older sisters. I know how women use what they've got to manipulate men..."

"Dora's not that kind of girl!" Slugger objected strenuously. "She's sweet and innocent!"

"Yeah... and that's the problem," Bernard pointed out. "She could use a short course in practical application from someone... another woman... a *mature* woman."

"You mean about the birds and the bees...?" Slugger choked, his face red with mortification.

"Not that, you ninny!" Dottie scoffed. "At her age I'm sure she already knows where babies come from."

Slugger sputtered in indignation.

"Look," Bernard said, "She's got all the equipment but none of the knowledge. She needs someone who can give her the right instructions on how to use what nature's already provided."

"If you're thinkin' what I think you're thinkin'..." Slugger raised his voice, building up a head of steam.

"That's exactly what I'm thinking. Sometime a guy needs a good whomp upside the head before he can see the light, hypothetically speaking. All we have to do is provide Dora with the baseball bat."

Slugger had started to come up out of his chair when Dottie held up an admonishing hand.

"I understand what you're proposing," she said thoughtfully. "In principle I would disapprove of any young lady using her feminine wiles to snare a man. But in practice..." Here she shook her head ruefully. "That's what women have had to do for thousands of years. And if the human race is to endure, that's what they'll have to keep on doing, men being the gutless creatures they are when it comes to matters of the heart."

"However," Dottie continued, "I'm certainly not the woman for the job, no. What you need is someone with a little... a *lot*... more experience in that department... someone like Elayne Butler."

"I was afraid you'd say that," Bernard concluded. "But you're absolutely right."

"I'll talk to Elayne myself."

"Thanks, Miz D.," Bernard said with sincerity. "I'd really appreciate it."

"And I'll do my part, too," Slugger agreed grudgingly.

"Guess I'd better go earn my keep now." Bernard started to get up and dropped back into his chair with a thwump.

"I think not," Dottie said briskly. "The only place you're going, young man, is right back upstairs and into bed!"

IN MIDAFTERNOON THE ROLLER RETURNED, decanting a merry Dora plus a number of parcels, Lady Butler and her trio of nieces. Slugger rushed out to help carry as did Ron and Steve from the stableyard, vaulting the gate in their eagerness. On the pretense of showing off the

rejuvenated parlor, Dottie drew Elayne away for a tête-à-tête while Slugger served tea and biscuits in the kitchen. Bernard remained out of sight, purportedly napping upstairs.

As the Butler entourage was ready to leave, Elayne took Dora aside. “Solange and the girls are taking a day trip to the City tomorrow and my manicurist is coming to do my nails. Why don’t you show up about noon and we’ll get mani-pedi’s together, have lunch, go over party plans?” Dora agreed that was a splendid idea.

Steve helped Dora carry her purchases upstairs to her room. “Find what you wanted? Have a good time with your rich friends?”

Dora decided to ignore the heavy sarcasm. “Oh yes! Elle treated us to luncheon at Brown’s Bar and Brasserie. It’s a new place, just opened. It’s been ever so long since I’ve been anywhere nice or bought any new clothes for myself.” She insisted on showing Steve her purchases, except for the lingerie.

Steve winced at her exuberance, and at her rare smile of pure pleasure. His income didn’t run to such extravagances as expensive clothing and meals at fancy restaurants. And it never would. Unless, of course, he moved on to a better paying job... which would mean leaving Follyfoot... and her.

At length Dora shooed him out the door so that she could change back into working clothes. The afternoon was still young. She came downstairs to find Bernard in the kitchen with Dottie wielding a large pair of shears over a pair of aged and faded jeans with the knees blown out. “How short do you want ‘em?”

“Right about there would be fine,” he replied, pointing. Dottie lopped the legs off and handed the newly created cutoffs to Bernard, who went off to the lav to change.

“What are those for?” Dora asked, curious.

“Bernard’s going for a swim and needed a bathing costume. Apparently this is standard attire these days.” Dottie looked doubtful.

Steve had been loitering off to the side with a face like a thundercloud, muttering not quite to himself about layabouts and people who couldn’t be depended upon. He looked for all the world like a two-year-old whose most-favored status as an ‘only’ had unhappily been usurped by the unwanted and unwelcome arrival of a new baby who suddenly sucked up all the attention available in the household, leaving little or none for the ‘old’ baby.

Though herself an ‘only’, Dora was familiar with the syndrome, having had it explained to her by mothers frazzled by introducing competition to their firstborns and having to cope with the results. When Slugger, standing with arms crossed next to Steve, made direct eye contact with her and cut his eyes sideways, Dora knew what he was suggesting.

She walked over to Steve and touched him lightly on the cheek—to her own very great surprise... she’d never done that before and didn’t know what made her do it now. “Why don’t we take a few hours off and go along? I haven’t been bathing in years and it’s such a beautiful afternoon.”

But all Steve did was tense and pull away. “Sorry. I’ve got other plans, something I need to do in town,” he snarled. “But you go right on ahead since you seem to enjoy *his* company so much. It’s not like we’ve any *work* to do around here!”

Dora narrowed her eyes, not liking his caustic tone. “I think I will.”

Steve turned on his heel and stomped out of the kitchen while Dora looked after him with dismay. The other two politely pretended they hadn’t been party to Steve’s little tantrum.

A grey cloud of disappointment smudged what had so far been a nice day. Why couldn’t Steve be happy for her? And why couldn’t he—every now and then—depart from his rigid

schedule and make time to be with her? What other plans could he possibly have, anyway? Steve didn't *have* a life outside Follyfoot, as she very well knew.

"Ask Bernard to wait up, would you? I'll be right back." By the time she descended the stairs, a knot of resentment had firmly wedged itself in the pit of her stomach. Under her shorts and sleeveless blouse Dora wore her old regulation black maillot from the swim team at her last school, faded but still a perfect fit.

About to step into the LandRover on his invented, nonexistent errand, Steve watched as Dora and Bernard exited by the kitchen door and tried to shake off the old familiar flush of jealousy and resentment. He should have been the one by her side... and he could have been had he not let his own foolish pride get in the way... again. He should have been man enough to admit he couldn't swim. Dora would have understood and would probably have offered to teach him. Angry at himself, he jammed the key into the ignition and ground the gears as he roared away with no particular destination in mind.

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## FIELD JOURNAL: THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 1974 • 3:00PM

**Location:** *Downstairs bathroom*

*Feeling much better but still rocky around the edges. What was I thinking??? I wasn't... that's the problem... and a great worry. The human element has always (almost always) overridden the other... and yesterday it didn't. SHE will say (about Squirrel) "I told you so." I hate that. I hate being out of control and not remembering what I did or didn't do.*

*Haven't been this sick since Cousin Eddie and I discovered Granddaddy's moonshine still up in the hills behind the south pasture when we were twelve years old. I feel like I've thrown up stuff I haven't even eaten yet. Hope Myrtice will take pity on me. Worst of all, I've lost an entire afternoon and most of today.*

*Next step: Light a bonfire under Steve and force him to make a move. How? He's already got a burr under his saddle today on account of me. (If looks could kill!) Maybe should figure on a way to exploit that. When will the 'talk' between Elaine and Dora take place? It has to be soon... no later than tomorrow in any case. Must remember to remind Mrs. Doyle about that. At this point, it doesn't matter who makes the first move, just so someone does something.*

*Is there any occupation less rewarding and more frustrating than couples counseling? Which is why I've always avoided it. When two people are so far apart, so diametrically opposed in their attitudes, it's next to impossible to achieve a successful resolution. It's like trying to herd chickens.*

*I'm that close to giving up. And what am I going to tell my alleged future favorite grandson? 'Sorry, Charlie... your old granddad failed to unite your potential future grandfather- and grandmother-in-law, therefore the potential future love of your life will fail to be born.' At least, that's what I extrapolated from what SHE declined to explain—that all of this is geared toward potential future production of a young lady who will (or might) become MY granddaughter-in-law.*

*OMG!!! Just realized what this means... that someday I might be related to these people!*

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# ***“Don’t let a fool kiss you nor let a kiss fool you”*** • AFRICAN PROVERB

DORA AUTOMATICALLY HEADED FOR THE BIG LAKE and Bernard said nothing to divert her, knowing she’d find out soon enough. At the dock, she slipped off a trainer and dipped her toes into the water, snatching her foot back. “Ooooooh! It’s much colder than I thought it would be!”

Bernard then suggested the pond in the woods, explaining that its thermal spring provided a more comfortable environment. Too, he pointed out, there would be less risk of Dora’s becoming sunburned as the pond was mostly tree-shaded. Skirting the bank, they set off around the earth at an unhurried pace and turned onto the trail that circled through Follywood from the north.

Unbeknownst to them, other eyes were charting their change of venue. Boarding up the broken window in the loft, Ron quickly put down his hammer and made his way from the upper stable to the hay barn, skipping out its back door. From there he couldn’t be seen as he raced through the west pasture and around the far side of the big lake, hidden behind the treeline. There was no need to keep his quarry in sight; he knew where they were headed. And once he got there, there were plenty of convenient thickets in which to hide and observe whatever they got up to. With any luck he’d be acquiring some choice gossip fodder or even blackmail material!

Back in the kitchen, Dottie was attempting to soothe an agitated Slugger, who’d stepped outside just in time to see the pair leave the larger lake and head for the smaller one.

“No tellin’ what’ll happen once they’re in the water!”

“Calm down, you old goat. This is the twentieth century, not the Victorian era. It’s perfectly proper for them to go off unchaperoned and, anyway, they’re of age. Besides, Dora has more moral fibre than you give her credit for.”

“But...”

“This may work to our advantage,” Dottie pronounced. “If Dora’s in a receptive frame of mind, Myrtice might be obliging enough to provide just the right boost to the libido that girl needs. With that and the talk she’ll be getting from Elayne tomorrow, it might be enough to tip the balance in our favor.”

Slugger didn’t understand the words but he got the gist of what Dottie meant. “But Dottie, what if he... what if they... what if he tries...?”

“Oh... him. Don’t worry about him,” Dottie said airily. “I’m certain that one has a mate... and not too far away, either. He’s too well-mannered and polite. Someone’s trained him up respectful, alright. He won’t be doing anything with Dora that she doesn’t want done... or even if she *wants* it done.” Dottie suddenly realized she had come around one hundred eighty degrees in her thinking: that what she had always regarded as vile and treacherous wasn’t necessarily so, and that she was now one hundred percent on Bernard’s side.

Slugger’s ears were burning. “A mate? You mean... like a wife?”

“Yes, Edward. A wife. A lifelong companion.”

“That don’t necessarily mean he wouldn’t take advantage...”

“No, Edward. You don’t understand,” Dottie said kindly. “You see, his kind mate young... and for life.”

DORA’S HAPPY MOOD EVAPORATED AS THEY APPROACHED THE POINT in the circuit where last Sunday she had discovered the intruder swimming in the hidden lake—where the previous year Steve had explained, or thought he was explaining, why they couldn’t become lovers. As if on

cue, her eyes filled with tears and she didn't even realize she had stopped walking until Bernard stepped in front of her and took both her hands. They sank down on the bank together.

"Wanna tell me about it?"

And it came out, all of it... from the time she had first seen Steve kneeling by an injured horse until their parting a half hour ago after yet another unpleasant exchange.

"I'm sorry... I just can't seem to stop." She wiped her eyes and sniffled. "I shouldn't have dropped all this on you. You're so patient."

"That's what I'm here for, Dora.

A question Dora had meant to ask Elayne came back to her: "Bernard, what's a *loa*?"

"Where did you hear that?"

"Elle called you that, yesterday."

"Ah."

"What did she mean by that?" Dora persisted. "Is it something bad?"

"Depends on who you ask. A '*loa*' is a spirit horse in the Voudoun... voodoo... religion. Could be good, could be bad."

"Voodoo? Is that... real?"

"Millions of people all over the world believe so." Which didn't really answer her question. "What else did Elayne tell you about me?"

"She said you weren't what you seemed... but that I should listen to you."

"Just what I've been trying to tell you all along. So here's where you get to listen. Okay? The thing is, I don't have very much time to accomplish what I came here to do. I've already stepped way outside protocol and told you some things I wouldn't ordinarily share, the other day when we were fixing up the family room..."

"Uh huh."

"Oh come on, Dora... you said you believed me then. Don't you believe me now?"

"I'm not completely convinced. But keep going. This is very entertaining."

Bernard sighed. "To recap... some people in another dimension discovered a problem here in this one—one that affects your future, and they've sent me to help you fix it.

"I see. And how, exactly, do you propose to do that?"

"I'm not going to *do* anything... *you* are. And Steve. I'm just the mediator. Well... with Elayne's help, it looks like."

"What's Elle got to do with it?"

"Elayne is a witch... a good witch, or what people call a 'white witch.' She wants to help you and Steve find the right path. So does Mrs. Doyle. So do I. But none of us are allowed to use magic of any kind... just, I guess you could call it, influence."

"I see. First you tell me my housekeeper is a witch and now you're saying my best friend is, too?" She spoke with brittleness.

"Mrs. Doyle is... I don't know how she factors in here, or even if she's supposed to. I wasn't warned about her and her miserable familiar," he said frankly.

"What? You're saying Queen Maude is her familiar... that's hysterical!" Dora dissolved in a fit of hiccups and giggles.

"You don't believe a single thing I've said, do you?"

"No. Of course not. But you do tell such good tales and make me laugh. What are you, then, some kind of witch or wizard?"

“No. I’m something else altogether, but that’s not important. Can we move on here?”

“Of course.”

Bernard had lost the momentum of his exposé. “So do you, um... have any questions so far?”

Dora picked up the thread as calmly as if they had been discussing the weather. “I do, yes. First, how can you possibly expect me to believe such rubbish?”

Bernard took her literally. “I didn’t think you would but I was hoping you might; it would’ve made my job easier, that’s for sure.”

“Second, even if I were to believe it, what gives you or anyone the right to meddle in my life?”

“Hey look... it wasn’t my idea, believe me. Don’t shoot me... I’m just the errand boy.”

“Third, you’re assuming that I still *want* Steve. How do you know I haven’t given up and decided I’m going to start seeing other men?” Her arms were tightly crossed and she was looking at him strangely. “Or perhaps that I might have *already* found another man I fancy... another *different* sort of man that I’ve discovered I really like. Can you answer me that, Bernard?”

“But isn’t that what you want... what you and Steve both want... to be together?” It was Bernard’s turn to be confused.

“I have no idea what *he* wants,” she spat. “Look, Bernard, I’ve decided... in fact, just last Sunday, I made up my mind... I’m through waiting. Three years is long enough. There are plenty of other men who’d like... who have asked... to take me out, and I’m going to say yes to the next one who does! Steve Ross can just... go jump in the lake.”

“Unfortunately, that’s what I’m here to avert,” Bernard said morosely, looking down. “If you hook up with some other guy at your birthday party—either someone you already know or someone you meet there—and you end up marrying him instead, that event *will* alter the course of history.”

“You are barking mad if you believe that.”

“So I’ve heard. Come on, let’s swim before it gets too late.” Bernard pulled off his tee shirt and looked from the water back to her questioningly.

“Dora, you ever gone skinnydipping?” he asked casually.

She blushed to the roots of her hair. “Certainly not. What an absurd question!”

“Why not? It was good enough for Adam and Eve. Girl, you need to lighten up. Seriously.”

To her utter astonishment, he turned his back to her, shucked the cutoffs and dove into the pond headfirst, gliding underwater and coming up for air when he was more than halfway across. He caught a brief glimpse of Dora poised at the far bank in her simple black maillot, having stripped off her blouse and shorts, before she too dove in gracefully. He carefully imprinted his vision of her at that instant for later posting in his journal.

The pond was deep and clear and pleasantly warm. Dora fancied she could see all the way to its sandy bottom. It seemed to be devoid of aquatic life and vegetation as well, unlike the larger lake. She made a few vigorous laps back and forth before rolling over and floating on her back, eyes closed, giving in to the soporific warmth lent by the thermal springs below. As she alternately swam and floated and ducked beneath the surface, she sensed rather than felt a friendly presence—not Bernard, who kept a discreet distance. A languid well-being stole over her, penetrating her pores, and she experienced a pleasant prickly sensation in her fingers and toes as if being nibbled at by tiny fishes.

The maelstrom in her mind gradually subsided and in its place arose a sense of empowerment... and of freedom and purpose and resolve. In a moment of reckless abandonment she pulled off her maillot underwater and threw it up on the bank. And went back to floating. So what if he saw

everything. It no longer mattered. But perhaps it would have had she known that sweaty-palmed Ron was getting an eyeful from his hiding place in the bushes.

Bernard silently floated at an unintrusive remove, watchful, and on a deeply subconscious level communicating with the spirit who dwelled there and thanking her for her benevolence in healing his physical hurts and Dora's psychical ones.

Gradually Dora became aware of her name being called and righted herself to find Bernard decently attired and sitting cross-legged on the bank.

"Time we were getting back, Little Mermaid," he called as she paddled toward him.

"But we only just got here!" she complained.

Bernard grinned and shook his head. "You've been in there an hour, girl. No sense overdoing it."

He automatically got to his feet and courteously turned around before Dora scrambled up onto the bank to examine her pruney fingers and toes. "Oh! I didn't realize..." As she dried herself off with her towel and pulled on her clothes she noted that his hair was already dry. Evidently he'd been out of the water a good while, just sitting there... watching. She should have been embarrassed... but she wasn't.

THEY RETRACED THEIR EARLIER STEPS ALONG THE TRAIL WITHOUT SPEAKING until they reached the farm track. Instead of turning north toward the buildings, Dora crossed over and hiked along the scrim of trees on the south side of the larger lake. "Come along. There's a lovely view of Follyfoot from this side of the water." She ducked onto a smaller path that led upward to a narrow bank wide enough for pedestrian traffic but not substantial enough for a horse. Follyfoot's compound was visible in its entirety on the far shore. The sun was lowering in the sky. A thin skein of smoke trickled from the chimney of the farmhouse. The LandRover wasn't to be seen in its customary parking place, so Steve wasn't back yet. Dora and Bernard stood side by side enjoying the vista in companionable silence.

Turning to face Bernard, Dora looked at him speculatively. "I'll bet you've kissed lots of girls."

His guard instantly went up. "A few, I guess. Not so many."

"Tell me about your first kiss... what was it like?"

"Oh... *that*..." Bernard grinned wickedly. "It was one of those impulsive moments... you know... when something comes over you and you act before thinking. Her name was Mary Sue and she sure was cute. It was a lot more exciting than I expected. She punched me in the face and later on her older brother beat me up and broke my nose. I think I was about eight at the time..."

Dora hooted and poked him in the arm. "That's not what I meant and you know it! I meant the first time you *really* kissed someone..."

Inadvertently, she'd led the conversation right back around to the subject Bernard been trying to find an appropriate way to broach. He hesitated a few moments...

"We'd known each other since we were kids. We were best friends and hung out together forever."

"Then what?"

"We grew up." Bernard shrugged. "I fell in love with her but never dared say anything... never asked her out on a date. Our friendship was too important to me to risk losing it by putting her in the embarrassing position of having to tell me she didn't feel the same way. She was so beautiful and I was... well, what you see is what you get."

"Then what happened?"

“One day she looked me right in the eye and said, ‘Time to put on your big boy briefs and man up, Boo.’ And then *she* kissed *me*.”

“You’re making that up!”

“Nope... that’s how it happened.”

“But... weren’t you worried you wouldn’t get it right?”

“I was stunned... petrified at first. I’d just turned seventeen and I’d never kissed *any* girl *that* way before. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do, but that was okay because she did. It was like... everything around us disappeared and there was only the two of us.”

“I’ve never been kissed... like that,” Dora admitted, adding, “But I want to be.”

“You’re kidding?” Bernard was incredulous. “You and Steve never...?”

“Not ever, by him or anyone.”

“Well, don’t worry about it, Dora. It sorta comes natural. You’ll see.”

“Does it?”

A long interval of silence ensured as they both looked out over the placid waters of the lake. Dora spoke without looking at Bernard.

“So... this girlfriend... are you still together.

There was a sharp intake of breath. “Yes. Yes, we are.” Bernard could practically hear the gears whirring as Dora stood perfectly still.

“You said... you’ve said several times... that you’re here to help me.”

“That is correct, yes.”

“It was never about the horses, was it? It’s about me and Steve, right?”

Bernard hemmed and hawed but admitted that that also was correct.

“You’ve been using psychology to get us both to think in new directions, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I have.” Bernard answered uncomfortably.

“I think... for the most part, it’s working. For instance, Steve suddenly becoming interested in going back to school... that’s a major step forward.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“And I’m beginning to understand about having to take responsibility myself as well... if he and I are to have any kind of future together.”

“Yep. Good breakthrough, there. I’m happy you’re seeing that.”

“So what you’re saying is, I need to make the first move on Steve?”

“It does look that way, doesn’t it? Back home we’d call that a preemptive strike.”

“Unfortunately, there are some significant gaps in my knowledge... some things I need to learn.”

“What kind of gaps?”

Bernard should have seen it coming right there and then... but he didn’t.

Dora turned and flung her arms around his neck. “And *you*... are going to teach me!”

“Whaaaaaat?” Bernard squeaked and tried to back away but she was a lot stronger than she looked.

“Your girlfriend is thousands of miles away... what she doesn’t know about won’t hurt her.”

“Dora, I...”

“Kiss me.” She pooched out her lips like a goldfish and screwed her eyes shut. When nothing happened she opened one eye cautiously. She could see that Bernard was stifling a laugh.

“What’s so funny? I’m trying to learn something here,” she pouted.

The smile left his face. “Are you’re serious?”

“Of course I am. Just... tell me what to do. If I’m to dive on Steve, I’ll need to know how to go about it.” She wrapped her arms tighter. “Can we make this a crash course? I don’t have that much time if, as you say, the deadline is Saturday. What about French kissing? Isn’t that supposed to be erotic? I don’t even know what that is.”

“Whoa! Time out! Back up!”

“Just tell me what to do.”

“Dora, this isn’t...”

“Please Bernard... don’t make me beg.”

“Uh... well... first of all... let go of my neck... you’re cutting off circulation.”

“Oh... sorry.” She let go. “Now what?”

“Um... let’s see... since we’re the same height, you *could* put your hands on my shoulders... but since Steve’s a little taller, this might be better...” He positioned her arms at either side of his torso beneath the unbuttoned shirt. Direct dermal contact with smooth warm skin was a new and quite pleasurable experience for Dora; her hands tightened involuntarily.

“Okay... that’s good except you’re not bulldogging a steer...”

“Oops... sorry again.” She loosened her grip. “How’s this? Better?”

“Better. Now, tilt your head a little to the side... yeah, like that... so you won’t bump noses. No... don’t close your eyes all the way... you want to see what you’re aiming at. Soft focus, Dora! Or your eyes will cross. Then you want to pucker up just a little... no, not like you’re sucking lemons... maybe a little more natural?”

“Like so? Shouldn’t we be standing closer together?”

“No... no... this is close enough. By now he’ll have figured out what’s coming... so he’s gonna do one of three things... either he’s just going to stand still and do nothing—in which case he’s probably gay and you might as well give up... or he’ll run off... or...”

“Oh! Do you think he might?”

“Only if he’s an idiot. Or... as I was saying... he’ll do something like this...” Bernard placed his hands on her bare shoulders so delicately that she hardly felt them there, and stroked gently to her elbows. “Or he might do like so...” Bernard gingerly cupped his hands on either side of her face. “That would be the normal response. You put your hands on me... on him, I mean, and I... he, that is, puts his hands on you.”

“Are we going to kiss or are we going to dance?” Dora demanded.

“Patience, Grasshopper!” Bernard chided. “Okay... So now you want to look deep into his eyes... no, Dora... not like you’re examining a bug under a microscope. Put some feeling into it. Think sexy.”

But what Dora was thinking was... *apples*... and, belatedly, *‘she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat’*... The air surrounding them was suffused with the winey scent of apple cider.

“Then you kiss him very gently, very softly at first... like a butterfly on a flower. Like this... barely touching.” Bernard tentatively put his lips to hers for only a fraction of a second before drawing back. “You understand?”

“Yes... I think so... but...”

“But what?”

“I thought it would be more... well, passionate.”

“You kinda have to work your way up to that, Dora.”

“How do you mean?”

“Uh... you want to start off with a few exploratory kisses... after the first couple of times you’ll be able to gauge distance to impact so you won’t be knocking out each other’s bridgework.”

“This is a lot more complicated than I imagined,” Dora complained.

Bernard sighed. “Let me put it another way then... you want to approach him just as you would a skittish horse for the first time. You don’t want to spook him so you move real easy, right?”

“Right.”

“Okay... so, butterfly kisses... it doesn’t have to be on the mouth... it can be temples, nose, jawline, neck, throat...”

Dora stood ramrod still as Bernard illustrated his narrative with a feather soft kiss at each of the points indicated.

“And every now and then...” He kissed her on the mouth again, a little more firmly. “How does that feel?”

“Good. Kind of tingly.”

“Feels good to me, too... I mean, it’ll feel good to him, too. By now he should be getting with the program and putting one arm around you—kinda like this—and the other hand at the back of your head, to sort of pull you closer.”

There was still a good four inches of open space between them, which Bernard was nervously trying to maintain.

“Can I try it now?” Dora whispered.

“Well... okay... but just remember... easy does it.”

She followed his instructions to the letter. “How was that?”

“Not bad at all for a beginner.”

“Is this when we do it?”

“Excuse me?”

“The passionate kiss... is this when we do it?”

“Geez, Dora... don’t be in such an all-fired rush. Give me... give Steve, I mean... a chance to take over the lead.”

“How do I know when to stop and let him kiss me back?”

“There’s no particular time limit here... a guy would have to be close to death to not be kissing you back by now.”

Bernard was starting to perspire and Dora was feeling unaccountably warm.

“So that’s all there is to it?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Okay... I think I’ve got that part. Now I want you to *show* me.”

“Show you?”

“The passionate kiss... I want to know what it really feels like, so I’ll know for sure when I get one.”

“Oh... er... I don’t think...”

She pressed up against him. “I want you to kiss me now... like you mean it.”

“Like... how do you mean?”

“Kiss me like I’m your girlfriend... like a woman you want to make love with.”

Whatever else he was, Bernard was a healthy, young—for the present, anyway—human male confronted with irresistible temptation, as prone to weakness under duress as any other. “*Hic sunt dracones*,” he murmured... and did as she asked.

Bernard tasted of apples... deliciously tart and yet intoxicatingly sweet. Yes, this was exactly what she meant and she felt it right down to her toes, just as thrilling as promised in the prurient

forbidden novels. Unconsciously she melded her body to his, clearly understanding what was meant by wanting to tear someone's clothes off. A whole new world of desire presented itself to her and... for a single blazing moment... she forgot about Steve.

Never in her life had Dora experienced such close body contact with a male, other than her father when she was a little girl and he'd taken her into his lap for a cuddle. As she grew up, however, he'd become markedly less physical... especially after her mother had voiced the opinion that such embraces were acceptable only upon greeting or leavetaking. Somehow she'd envisioned the feeling of being held closely as something akin to the many instances when Slugger had given her a brief hug of consolation or celebration... or the rare occasions Steve or even Ron had lain an arm across her shoulders and dispensed a restrained squeeze for the same reasons. But this... this was nothing at all like that. She couldn't bring herself to disengage.

A buzzing in her ears resolved itself into Bernard's alarmed voice as he arched his body away to minimize contact and frantically attempted to disentangle himself from her embrace all at the same time. He succeeded in holding her back at arm's length. Both were trembling and breathing hard.

"We'd better stop... remember, this is just a demo, not the real thing."

"I want you..." she whispered. "I want to know about the next part, too... the making love part."

Bernard rolled his eyes and tried to look stern. "Look Dora, I can get you out of the starting gate but I'm not about to take you over the finish line as well."

"You're not attracted to me, is that it?" she asked plaintively.

"No... I mean, yes. You're more than attractive..."

"But you don't find me desirable? I'm too gauche for you, aren't I?" She withdrew her arms and took a step back uncertainly, eyes brimming.

Bernard reached out and placed a finger on her lips. "Oh no, no! Dora... listen to me, please. You're desirable in every way... in *every* way, you know what I'm saying? Really, I'm honored that you chose me as your tutor and under other circumstances..."

"What other circumstances? What's wrong with *me*. I *want* to. Don't you?"

"I can't do that, Dora. I can't... and there's this ethical issue... I'm just the coach, not... um... something else. And, for another thing, this isn't the best place. Anyone can see us." He nodded toward the farmhouse.

"So? I don't care," she said stubbornly. "We'll go some other place... somewhere private."

"Well I care. And it's not really me you want. It's Steve, the man you love, remember? Think Dora... think. You're doing this for Steve... because you want him to love you... you want to please him..."

Her face cleared as rationality returned and desire ebbed. "Yes," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I'm making a spectacle of myself and putting you in an untenable position."

Bernard was smiling again. "Not at all. You're a quick study and a born kisser... born to be kissed as well. Now that you know how it's done, just go ahead and do it. Don't wait for him to take the initiative because you might be waiting a long time."

"And will he... will that happen?" Her eyes dipped downwards the involuntary physiological response which had quite impressively made itself evident.

"Most likely," he continued, embarrassed now, "We have a saying' where I come from: 'Once you got 'em by the ba... gonads, their hearts and minds will follow'."

Dora considered this and smiled back. "Might I have just one more, then? For practice?"

Bernard smoothed her hair away from her face. "Just one more... for luck."

The second kiss was brief but tender... with a judicious amount of open space between them.

“Thank you.”

“The pleasure was all mine.”

Equanimity and humor restored, they started back toward the farm track.

“I can’t believe I did what I just did... or that I’ll be able to do it again with *him*.”

“Sure you will. If you want to get his complete, undivided attention, that’ll do it. It’s called using the element of surprise to gain the advantage. Getting him to admit how much he needs you is going to take a lot more work.”

“I’m not sure that he feels that way... that he needs me.”

“Of course he does... desperately... but he’s frightened of commitment and equally afraid of losing you. That’s sort of like wanting to have your cake and eat it, too. And he’s got no self-confidence whatsoever. It’s up to you to show him the way. You’ll need a game plan.”

“And you’re going to give me one?”

“Nope. Not me. The next part of your strategy needs to come from another woman and Elayne is just the right one to help you out with that.”

“But... I thought you didn’t like her?”

“I don’t... but we understand and acknowledge what each other represents.”

“She said something like that about you, too.”

“Elayne is... she has experience and insight I don’t have.”

“Because she’s a woman... or because she’s a witch?”

“Yeah... that too.”

DARTING FROM TREE TO TREE, RON HAD TRACKED THE PAIR as they moved from the pond to the bigger lake, where the lack of thick undergrowth proved problematic. He’d had to settle for concealment in a clump of hazelnut bushes which afforded a view of the couple but was too far away to overhear their conversation. At the pond, he’d been able to hear almost everything but see very little. But what Ron Stryker wasn’t able to see or hear was compensated for by his fertile imagination. As he hotfooted back the way he’d originally come, taking care—he thought—to stay out of sight, his mind was already concocting a lurid tale to be passed along at an appropriate moment.

Earlier, Dottie had summoned Slugger upstairs to help move the wardrobe in Dora’s room so that she could Hoover the carpet underneath. While waiting for her to finish so that they could move it back, Slugger was looking out at the lake from one of the south-facing windows as Bernard and Dora exited the treeline onto the south bank. He must have made some sort of noise that got Dottie’s attention, down on her knees and running the wand underneath the bed. She clicked off the machine.

“What’s so interesting?”

“Bernard and Dora... they’ve just come out of the woods and are standin’ by the lake.”

“And so? What are they doing?”

“Just standin’... talkin’. Wonder what they’re talkin’ about?”

“Our little problem, is what one hopes.” Dottie got to her feet and joined him at the window just in time to witness Dora advancing on Bernard.

“Bugger!” Slugger swore. “What’s going on? Your eyesight’s better than mine... what *are* they doing? Are they snoggin’?” he squawked.

“It looks like they’re just cuddling... oh wait... no... now she’s got her arms around his chest... oh no... now he’s...”

“He’d better not be kissing her!” Slugger growled ominously.

Dottie’s voice rose in pitch as she continued relaying the play-by-play like a commentator at a football match.

“Looks like he’s... damn!... can’t see anything with all that hair in the way... he’s got her by the back of the head... now she’s... they’re... oh my word!!!” Dottie’s eyes grew huge and she was fanning herself vigorously with a feather duster.

“Now *that’s* what I call a kiss!” she declared with unabashed admiration before letting slip a *very* bad word.

“Dorothy!”

They had looked at each other with dismay... either the plan had gone terribly awry in some way... or Bernard had lied to them. Worse... they knew they weren’t the only witnesses. Visible to them but not to Dora and Bernard, a carrot-topped figure scurried along a dip in the west pasture, obviously having come from the treeline and making for the backside of the hay barn.

DORA’S HEART WAS STILL PALPITATING AND HER HEAD WHIRLING WITH DISPARATE CHUNKS OF INFORMATION as she and Bernard slowly made their way toward the house. At least she now had the answer to one of her concerns: a passionate kiss could indeed knock your personal planet right off its axis. In the back of her mind a plot was already hatching: how and when to corner Steve alone. By the time they arrived at the stone gatepost at the corner of the yard the sun was setting and the western sky lit with a golden glow.

The LandRover pulled up as they went into the house to change into working clothes. Both were too preoccupied to notice the strained, worried looks on Slugger’s and Dottie’s faces or, as they went about evening chores, that Ron was being uncharacteristically quiet and Steve managing to appear mad and sad at the same time.

Dottie had laid on roasted chicken with wild rice and steamed vegetables for supper, which was consumed with an unusual lack of camaraderie among the crew. Dora and Bernard volunteered to get started on the washing up. Steve and Ron adjourned to the family room to read and let their meals settle. Slugger escorted Dottie out to her car, where she stood on her tiptoes and whispered conspiratorially in his ear. He nodded affirmatively.

When Slugger reentered the scullery, Dora looked up brightly. “We’ll take care of this. You go and relax.” Instead, Slugger directed a penetrating and unmistakably hostile glare in Bernard’s direction before gesturing toward the door and offering his arm to Dora. “Walk with me, girl, would you? Bernard can finish up.”

SLUGGER AND DORA STROLLED ARM-IN-ARM DOWN TO THE LAKE and sat together on the wooden bench on the dock. Dora lifted her face to the not-quite-full moon that was just peeking over the tops of the hills, waiting for Slugger to speak though she already had a pretty good idea of what was coming.

“Girl... Dora...” he commenced quietly without looking at her. “You know I care for you... all of you... like you was my own flesh and blood...”

“Yes, Slugger. We do know that... and we feel the same way.” She took his hand and squeezed it gently. “We know you love us... and we love you back.”

Slugger cleared his throat. “I allus hoped I’d have a daughter of me own someday. You won’t take it wrong if I speak as if you was?”

“I’d be honored if you did, Slugger. My own father can’t be bothered. He wouldn’t really know how anyway.”

Dora sighed deeply and fell silent. They sat without words for a few more minutes.

“I have to ask... did anything... er... happen, out there in the woods today?”

“Anything... like what?”

They turned their heads toward each other. Slugger couldn't read her expression.

“Between you and him... did he?... did you?... you know...” He couldn't get the words out.

“Slugger! No, of course not! We went swimming in the lake. It was Bernard's idea. I don't know why no one ever suggested doing that before. It was lovely. I wish Steve had gone with but he decided he had better things to do.”

“Because he don't know how to swim, girl, and don't like to admit it.”

“Oh. I never knew that.”

“Just swimming, was it?”

“Just swimming. Why do you ask?”

“That's okay, then.”

Another few minutes ticked by.

“We saw the both of you kissin' out there, me and Dottie.”

There was a long considered pause before Dora spoke. “It wasn't what you think, Slugger.”

“I may be old but I ain't dead yet,” Slugger rebutted.

“I've never been kissed before. Not like that... not... with passion.”

“And what made it that Bernard's business to change that, I'd like to know?”

“I asked him—I wanted to learn, to know how it felt—he showed me. That's all.”

“Looked like more'n that to me.”

“I *am* of age to kiss whomever I like, you know,” Dora reminded him gently but firmly. “Kissing isn't a sin far as I know, if both parties are willing.”

“It should have been Steve, not that Bernard.”

“Yes, it should have been,” she agreed. “But Steve won't come around so don't blame Bernard. He really didn't want to, but he just did as I asked.”

Slugger hunched.

“Somethin's changed this week... ever since that American showed up, ain't been nothin' but trouble. Just you bein' you... an' him bein'... whatever.” Slugger waved a hand around helplessly. “You and Steve been havin' a enough hard time just gettin' to know and understand each other. That Bernard's like a... a fox in the henhouse. Got you all riled up. I always hoped you two... Steve and you... would eventually come to an understandin'. I don't usually go interferin' with young folks' business, but I can't stand by and see that Bernard hurt you... either one a you... him turnin' your head with his foreign ways. It would break both yer hearts if you lost each other.”

He had run down. “Just don't want to see either of you hurt,” he concluded gruffly.

“Please don't worry so, Slugger. No one's turning my head or anything else. Bernard's been a perfect gentleman. I needed some help making up my mind about Steve and Bernard offered good advice. At least, I hope it's good advice. I won't know until I try. Since Steve won't kiss me first, then I'll have to be the one to do it. Except I didn't know how. I asked Bernard to show me the proper moves and he did. That's all there is to it.”

“So he was just schoolin' you, so to speak?” Slugger said.

Dora chuckled, “If you want to put it that way. It was like... learning how to dance, where to put your hands and all. I just hope I remember everything he said and can get it right when the time comes.”

“And when d'ya think that might be?”

“Oh... soon... very soon.”

“Well... all right. I just hope you know what you’re doin’.”

Dora was overwhelmingly grateful for this kind-hearted man’s devotion to her welfare—more than her own biological parents had ever shown—and she loved him for that. Too, she loved him for his concern for the two young males he had also taken under his wing, aggravating though they were at times. She was acutely aware that concealed under the bumbling, inept exterior was a very smart man who took his responsibilities seriously and did his utmost to help guide his charges through the snares and pitfalls of youth. On the other hand, she also knew that Slugger had his own demons, fear of the unknown being one of them. And because of that, she decided it would be prudent not present any of the claims Bernard had made earlier. She also forewent describing that fleeting moment when all thoughts of Steve had been supplanted by a pair gooseberry-green eyes glittering like liquid crystals... and a kiss sweeter than apple wine.

They walked back toward the house as the moon cleared the hilltops, illuminating the farm in its clear lambent light.

Outside the door, Dora stopped and took Slugger’s hands in hers. “Promise you won’t say anything to Bernard tonight... please? He’s embarrassed enough as it is and it’s all my fault. I know you’re displeased with us... with me. Can we talk about this tomorrow when Dottie’s here and Steve and Ron are busy somewhere else?”

Although he promised to keep schtum, Slugger couldn’t trust himself to hold to it if he had to face Bernard again tonight. Keeping his counsel during dinner had taken every ounce of self-control he could muster. He agreed to take his newspaper and repair to his new domain in the family room where Steve and Ron were still taking their ease and reading. Dora turned into the scullery, saying she’d join them later.

Bernard had finished drying dishes and was waiting for her to show him where they were kept when not in use.

“Read you the riot act, did he?”

“Not really. He’s just concerned for my welfare. I explained that I was the one who started it but I’m afraid that didn’t make him any happier.”

Bernard sighed. “I take my share of the blame. I should have stopped it before it got that far.”

Dora made him turn around to face her. “No. I’m glad it happened. You’re the one who’s given me the courage to do what I have to do. No one else could have. I’m not sorry at all. Are you?”

Bernard gave her a grin. “No... not yet. But I have a feeling I will be.”

“I’m going to make coffee and take it in to the others... will you come and join us?”

“No, sweetie. I think I’d better just brush my teeth and get on up to bed, if you don’t mind. This may be the last peaceful evening we’re gonna see around here for a while.”

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## FIELD JOURNAL: THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 1974 • 11:57 PM

**Immediate location:** *Bedroom*

**Results:** *You would think—after all these years of staunchly practicing passive resistance against nubile coeds offering to barter personal services for passing grades—that I would have developed a more substantial immunity to a young woman’s charms. You would think! Granted, Dora’s needs didn’t exactly fall into that category, but the parallel was close*

enough. I was totally unprepared for what happened. I am totally shocked at how easily and quickly a straightforward lesson in human relations can go so far awry. I am totally appalled at close we came—could have come—to crossing the line.

And I have to ask myself this... if she knew the truth about the real me—the 2010 version—would she be shocked, disgusted, repelled... or would she have still found a temporary mentor in an older, experienced tutor? And if I'd been the actual 1974 version of me—with no attendant agenda—would I have allowed events to evolve to their natural conclusion? I would like to believe I'm more honorable than that... but... sometimes a man's his own worst enemy. (Viz. Steve Ross) And I'm only human (mostly).

I was clinging to the remote possibility that we weren't seen but that hope went in the toilet the minute Slugger gave me the hairy eyeball after supper when Dora and I were clearing up. So far this hasn't been my lucky week. I fear I may have sautéed my own goose. Most likely I won't be needing Captain Doctor to get me back to the next century—Slugger or Steve will dropkick me there.

This incident has either resolved or exacerbated the situation depending on what Dora does with her newly acquired knowledge. If she feels she's now equipped to opt for the preemptive strike, I'm reasonably confident Steve will reciprocate in kind. Would be helpful if she first goes to Elayne for additional coaching in the horizontal aspects of romance... as one so often leads to the other.

**Technical issues:** This was less an out-of-control event than an out-of-body experience—probably the closest I'll ever come to having one. I was aware of what was happening the entire time... and at the same time standing on the sideline being mortified, thinking "What am I doing?!" Apparently pheromones and hormones are not rendered as ineffective by age as I had assumed.

**Plan:** As Plan B has already been activated, though not in a manner I would have envisioned, Steve's going to hear about this... no doubt about that. If that doesn't incite him to some kind of admission or declaration, preferably public, nothing will. I expect all I have to do now is wait.

**Note to self:** I'm fairly sure this wasn't what SHE had in mind when she said "go thou and educate the girl". Throwing a liplock on the fair Dora wasn't even remotely on my to-do list. Can one trust that forty years of fidelity override a few minutes of minor transgression a humanitarian cause? A more important question is, was it right or wrong to comply with Dora's request? Not my call to make. I foresee much creative gravelling and praying for leniency in my future... unless SHE already knew what would transpire and is prepared to make allowances.

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# Friday

## *“It is not love that is blind, but jealousy”*

• LAWRENCE DURRELL

DORA HAD SLEPT FITFULLY AND WOKE UP WELL BEFORE THE ALARM WENT OFF. She quietly slipped from her room, pulling her dressing gown over her nightdress, and tiptoed down the stairs to encounter Slugger emerging from his bedroom as well. The sky outside the kitchen window was still dark as they waited for the kettle to boil and discussed trivial matters in lowered tones, carefully avoiding touchy subjects. Her feisty determinations of the day before had somehow waned during the night, leaving just a faint aura of boldness... but enough to be readily apparent that the old compliant Dora had checked out. The new Dora possessed an edge.

They were still sitting there when they heard a car approaching and the crunch of gravel as it stopped outside the mudroom door. Slugger glanced at the mantel clock and frowned—too early for the housekeeper. Dora stood up and turned around to peer out the window.

“Omgosh! It’s Hazel!” She flew out the door and Slugger looked out just in time to see a slender young woman with pony-tailed hair handing notes to the driver of the taxi and turning around to receive Dora’s welcoming hug. He wouldn’t have recognized her in the grayness of early dawn.

When the two came through the door, the younger one dropped her rucksack and several carrier bags and ran to Slugger, grinning from ear to ear and enveloping him in a great hug which he returned.

“Here, girl. Let me look at you! What are you doin’ back so soon?”

“Are you kidding? And miss Dora’s party! Ron wrote it’s gonna be the shindig of the season!”

“Where were you?” Dora asked, fetching a third mug.

“Majorca. I took the redeye to Leeds, the train to Tockwith and was lucky enough to find an all-night taxi to get me home.”

“How long are you staying?”

Hazel made a moue. “You know, I might just not leave. Traveling is okay, I guess, but I think I’ve seen enough sights for a while and I was starting to get homesick. Besides, I think my man might be getting a bit restless and tempted to stray.”

“Oh? And how would you know, cavorting on the beach all day with all those handsome Latin boys?” Dora joked.

“He’s been writing regularly and keeping me posted... but his lies were getting a bit too elaborate, you know?” Hazel said wryly. “I can always tell when he’s glossing the truth or trying to put one over.”

Three months away had wrought an amazing transformation in the pale, lank-haired girl they’d seen off at the end of May. The Mediterranean sun had brought out a sprinkling of freckles and Hazel, never especially cheerful in nature, now seemed to have blossomed with an assurance that Dora envied.

Hazel swilled down half her tea in one go and hoisted her rucksack. “I’m just going to dump my stuff and hop in the shower. I’m that grubby from traveling all night.”

She was halfway up the staircase when the same realization hit Dora and Slugger at once... Bernard, upstairs and asleep in Hazel's bed. They stood and stared at each other fearfully—waiting for a howl of indignation, the slam of a door, loud voices... anything. And they continued waiting... and waiting. Nothing.

They cautiously made their way up the stairs and along the hallway until they were able to see past the partially opened door to Hazel's room.

HAZEL WAS SITTING AT THE FOOT OF THE BED WITH ONE LEG TUCKED UNDERNEATH. Bernard was reclining against the headboard with his arms crossed against his chest and the bedclothes discreetly tucked up around his waist, looking neither particularly surprised nor embarrassed. They were chatting away like old pals.

As Dora and Slugger eased their heads around the door, Hazel turned her chipmunk smile on them and fluttered her eyelashes ostentatiously.

"You darlings! So sweet of you to arrange a welcome-home gift! He's adorable. Can I keep him?"

"I can explain..." Dora offered weakly.

"No need," Hazel chirped. "He already did when we introduced ourselves."

Slugger felt a need to intercede. "Um... Hazel... why don't you go with Dora while she gets dressed and I get Bernard moved to her old bedroom."

Hazel pouted. "But we were just getting to know each other..."

"Hazel! Out. Now," Slugger commanded.

She jumped off the bed and moved toward the door, stopping for a parting shot to Bernard. "Nice meeting you. Perhaps I'll get to see *more* of you later."

This time it was Dora who flushed, reminded of her recent adventure... and that she hadn't told Slugger quite *everything*.

In her room behind the closed door, Dora slipped out of her nightdress and pulled underwear from a drawer while Hazel flopped on her bed, grubby clothes and all. Neither girl was shy about undressing in front of each other, given their institutional backgrounds—Dora's boarding school and Hazel's orphanage.

"So... what's up with this new bloke? Boyfriend in training or what?"

"Nothing's up, nothing at all... why would you even think such a thing?" Dora carefully kept her face averted as she buttoned up her blouse.

"Oh... I don't know... maybe it was the look on both your faces when you walked into the room? Betcha anything he was starkers under that sheet and both of you knew it! Have you tried it yet? Any good? I certainly wouldn't mind..."

"You incorrigible girl!"

Hazel rolled over onto her back and raised her legs straight up, wiggling her toes suggestively. "Good old Dora... tight-arsed as ever!"

"You're embarrassing me." Dora wiggled into a pair of tan chinos.

"Somebody ought to. You know, I've always thought it would be fun to learn to surf, so before Majorca I was in Mundaka checking out the surfing scene there—it's said to be the best surf spot in Spain. Anyway, the season's just getting underway there and it was simply heaving with American boys... and let me you, those California boys have absolutely no inhibitions at all! Your Bernard looks like one of those California surfers... all that lovely blonde hair and what a gorgeous tan! I'll bet he's tan *all over*..."

Dora sat on the edge of the bed to pull on her socks and trainers. “Let’s change the subject, shall we? I’m terribly glad you’re home and will be here for my party...”

“Oh... let’s not. This is far more interesting. And if there’s nothing going on, why are you not looking me in the eye? Why no sisterly sharing of naughty confidences?”

Dora risked a darting glance, speaking with what she hoped conveyed firmness. “There’s nothing to share... nothing... naughty or otherwise!”

“*‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks’*,” Hazel quoted.

“Oh no... not you too! Bernard’s forever quoting things to illustrate points... it drives me mad! And you... I’m not too sure I want to hear all the salacious details of your dalliances on the beaches... you’re meant to be engaged, if you recall.”

Hazel held up her left hand and wagged its naked fingers. “Merely engaged to be engaged, as I recall. Not officially official yet. And you know what they say...”

Dora stood up and fixed an exasperated look on her companion. “No, I don’t know. What *do* they say?”

Hazel shot a wicked grin up. “When in Rome, do all the Romans you can!”

Throwing her hands up in mock resignation, Dora turned to the wardrobe and removed a mini sundress which she hung from a hook on the back of the door.

“Going somewhere?” Hazel asked, instantly sidetracked. Dora seldom wore dresses.

“Elayne’s invited me to her place for lunch and then we’re going to get our nails done. I’m sure you’d be most welcome to come along if you’d like.”

“I’ll think about it. In the meantime, I’d better grab the lav before those other lugs wake up and hog it.” Hazel rolled off the bed, scooped Dora’s discarded dressing gown off the floor and swooped out the door.

A variation on the musical chairs game ensued as, at the lavatory door, Hazel collided with Bernard who was just coming out of his ‘new’ bedroom with his clothes tucked under his arm.

“Ladies first,” he conceded graciously and turned toward the stairs. “I’ll use the downstairs one.”

Having quickly dressed, Slugger hustled back to the kitchen at the same time as Dora, in concert with Dottie’s arrival. Slugger refilled the kettle while Dora quickly apprised the housekeeper of the latest development. Steve and Ron came pounding down the stairs, racing for the lav and elbowing each other out of the way only to find the door locked.

“Wait your turn,” Bernard yelled as Steve beat on the door in vain.

Ron looked around and counted noses. “If everyone’s down here, who’s in the upstairs lav?” he groaned, hopping urgently from foot to foot.

“Hazel’s home,” Dora sang out.

“Hazel?!”

“T’were me, rather than stand there and suffer like a fool I’d just go outside the back door,” Dottie advised sagely, adding in an aside to Slugger: “Four boys, one bath. You can imagine.”

Steve and Ron made a mad dash through the scullery for the door to the kitchen garden. Slugger snorted into his tea, trying not to laugh.

Dottie pushed her chair back. “This crowd gets any bigger, we’ll have to have breakfast in shifts. Come on, old man, we’d better get started.” She crooked her finger at Slugger to follow.

Steve and Ron had wanted to hang around the kitchen to give Hazel a proper welcome home but were overruled. It was decided—or rather, dictated by Dottie—that the boys and Dora

should go ahead and get started on morning chores. Bernard, too, had been routed outside by the time Hazel appeared downstairs, showered and scantily dressed in hip-hugger short shorts and a crop tank top, only to be intercepted by Dottie.

“Where do you think you’re going, dressed like that?”

“What? This is what all the girls’re wearing on the beach these days.”

“Yes. Well. You’re not at the seaside now, young lady.”

Hazel ignored her and skipped outside to join the others.

SLICING BACON AND HAM FOR THE PAN, Slugger related to Dottie his evening conversation with Dora. “She wouldn’t have lied to me, you don’t think?” he asked anxiously.

Dottie was whipping up an enormous batch of soda biscuits and didn’t immediately answer. “Probably something *did* happen there in the pool... but not what you’re afraid of, Edward, or I would have seen it in her face. What it might have been, I couldn’t say... but I have a feeling it was a good thing.”

“But they kissed. You saw them. I thought you said he wouldn’t...”

Dottie sighed in exasperation, putting down the wooden spoon with which she’d been beating the biscuit batter. Wiping her hands on her pinny, she marched over to Slugger, grabbed him by his shirt collar, pulled him down and planted a big one square on the mouth. Then stepped back and put both hands on her hips.

“Now then. Do you feel any different? Do you feel you’ve defiled Tiny’s memory? Are you afraid a horde of Christian Decency Leaguers is going to rush over and paint scarlet letters on our foreheads? A kiss is just a kiss, Edward. It’s not a binding contract and doesn’t ruin you for life. You don’t have to love someone to enjoy a kiss although liking them probably helps. And if you’re Cosa Nostra, you don’t even have to like ‘em. What have you to say about *that*?”

Though thoroughly stunned, Slugger couldn’t help the smile that began at the corners of his mouth and worked its way toward the middle. “Actually...” he began shyly, “Actually, Dottie, I liked it. I liked it a lot. I’d like to try it again.” And it was Dottie’s turn to blush. They moved apart, each to his and her own drainboard on either side of the sink where they’d been working. Neither spoke for a few minutes. Slugger kept shooting her surreptitious glances. “Dottie?”

“Yes?”

“Would you consider... would you maybe...?”

“Spit it out, old man.”

“Would you like to go out with me sometime, go to dinner and maybe take in a pitcher show?”

There was a long pause before she answered without looking up from the biscuit bowl. “Yes, I would, Edward. I’d very much like that.”

“Oh... er... well then... when would be convenient?”

“Tonight would be good. Or tomorrow night. In fact, any night would be splendid.”

Another stretch of silence. “Dottie?”

“Yes?”

“Would you mind awfully doing that again?”

A few minutes later Bernard, having been sent in to see how long until breakfast, poked his head into the scullery and furiously backpedaled, not realizing Hazel had come up behind him.

“*OW!*” she yelped, startling him so that he tripped over his own feet to sprawl at hers in a supplicating position.

She looked down. "Oh dear. I'm honored. Truly I am. But I'm already spoken for," she quipped. "On the other hand, I haven't been bought and paid for yet."

By the time he'd struggled to his feet, what he had observed in the scullery was over with and both parties were industriously attending to food preparation with very red faces.

"What's going on in there?" Hazel asked curiously, attempting to look around him.

"Nothing little girls need to see," Bernard said, grabbing her by the wrist and propelling her back outside.

"Unhand me, varlet," she demanded, "or I'll have to summon my betrothed to defend my honor. He will file you with his Swiss army knife, forsooth."

"Sorry, sorry!" Bernard let go of her wrist and they both laughed.

"You were certainly in a swivet. Were they doing the deed or what?"

Bernard found he was very much liking this brash and irreverent teenager, so completely different from decorous Dora. "If you gotta know, they were swapping spit."

"Kissing?" Hazel was incredulous. "Slugger and Mrs. Doyle? No way!"

"Yeah. For a minute I thought I'd stepped onto the set of 'Love Boat' by accident."

"What's that?"

"Old American television show, still real popular on satellite channels."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"Ah... never mind. Maybe it just hasn't been picked up here yet."

"So what's going on with you and Dora?" Hazel segued smoothly without turning a hair.

"Nothing... nothing at all... what makes you think there is?"

Hazel tapped the side of her nose. "The nose knows. Something's going on around here. If not you, then who? She's definitely not the same as when I left and she looks guilty as sin. So do you, for that matter."

"It ain't me, babe."

Hazel sniffed. "I'll find out anyway. Might as well confess."

"Good luck with that then. And are you really engaged to Ron? I don't see a ring on your finger."

"Semi-engaged. What you don't see is the collar around his neck and the other end of the lead in my hand."

"You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Not any more than you are... babe."

They laughed again and were interrupted by Ron's hurried arrival. Giving Bernard a distinctly dirty look, he made a point of wrapping an arm around Hazel's waist and kissing her lightly on the lips. She was an inch or so taller than he was.

Bernard pointed to the girl's bare feet and then his own, saying. "A girl after my own heart."

"Better not be!" Ron gritted back, "She's already got mine and one's all she needs. Ain't that right, luv?"

"Yep. One's enough," she agreed. But she was still looking at Bernard with more than just passing interest and subconsciously wondering why he smelt of bananas. Hazel loved bananas and was always pestering Slugger to add them to his grocery list. She didn't remember having seen any in the fruit bowl on the kitchen table.

Bernard ambled away to return to watering the donkeys. Ron made Hazel go back into the mudroom to slip on some boots and then led her away from the house toward the lower pasture.

“Come look at this new pony we got last week and you can tell me all about your adventures... and have I got some news for you...!”

BREAKFAST WAS GOT THROUGH WITH MUCH TALK AND LAUGHTER at Hazel’s anecdotes about learning to surf, after which Steve and Ron departed with the horsebox and an older but rehabilitated and still useful pony that was being donated to a riding centre for the disabled not too far away. Hazel went back upstairs to unpack and sort out her soiled laundry and Dora figured she could work in two or boarders before going to her lunch date.

Coming in to use the lav, Bernard knew that his reprieve from yesterday’s imbroglia would be short-lived. Although nothing had been said during yesterday’s dinner nor breakfast this morning, the hail of accusatory glances that had been flung his way had left no doubt that he would be called to account at the first convenient moment. And that moment was now...

“Sit!” Slugger ordered, and Bernard sat. “If I’da known this plan of yours included fooling around with Dora...”

“I can explain about that...” Bernard countered. “That had nothing to do with...”

“Shut up!” Slugger roared. “Dottie and me weren’t the only ones what seen you two yesterday... that sneaky Ron followed yer yesterday and no doubt seen... whatever there was to see. D’ya have a death wish, lad? The fat’s in the fire now. When Steve hears about this, he’ll go berserk. He will *hurt* you, son, do you understand what I’m saying? He’s gone to prison once already for almost killing a man...”

“I can take care of myself,” Bernard cut in defensively.

“Izzat so? Like you did Sunday night? He almost had you then... would have, if I hadn’t stopped him.”

“Maybe. But this time I’ll be prepared.”

Dottie intervened. “Edward, stop berating the boy. What’s done is done and can’t be undone. And in any case, kissing Dora was *not* part of his plan, if she’s to be believed... and I think we should give her... both of them... the benefit of the doubt. These things happen. You were young once... surely you remember how it is?”

Slugger was still breathing fire but Dottie’s cooler head prevailed. To Bernard she said, “I suppose there’s no point in further discussion of Plan A since the end result of Plan B has already been achieved... firing Steve up, that is.”

Bernard regarded her glumly. “Yeah, all I have to do now is wait for him to come after me.”

The trio drank their tea and considered in silence the battle to come.

“I told you that was a bad idea,” Slugger finally said, “Do you even know how to defend yourself properly? I could show you a few moves...”

“Slugger,” Bernard said wearily, “Six older sisters, remember? I had to learn martial arts just to get into the bathroom. Besides, I have no intention of slugging it out with Steve... no pun intended. He’s gonna have to *catch* me first.”

“What I don’t unnerstand,” Slugger said, “is why Ron ain’t tattled already. He’s a good boy at heart, but he’s a right ol’ gossipmonger and don’t know when to keep his piehole shut.”

“Because he’s a cunning little imp and knows to keep a good tale to himself until the time when the telling of it will do the most damage,” Dottie declared. “I expect he’s waiting until Steve is close enough to Bernard he can get his hands on him... with Dora around to witness.”

“Is there a chance he won’t...?” Bernard started to say.

“There’s no way on earth he’s not going to tell... and you can be sure he’ll embellish for all he’s worth,” Dottie surmised.

“I know,” Slugger said. “He gets sort of shifty-eyed when he’s about to start trouble and he was that way last night and this morning, too.”

“I noticed that,” Dottie said. “He’s been that way since he was a tyke. Used to come over and stir up my boys then stand back and giggle when they’d fight with each other, wretched little weasel.”

“I wish he’d go ahead, then. This has to be over with before Sunday, one way or the other,” Bernard said gloomily.

“But... why Sunday?” Slugger asked.

“Bernard’s right... he may to force the issue. There’s no more time,” Dottie said emphatically. “Think, Edward, about what’s going to happen on Sunday...”

“Er... what? What’s gonna happen? It’s just a birthday party.”

Dottie rolled her eyes and patiently explained the problem to Slugger.

“When Dora first came to live here, she was just another pretty face... and unimportant. No one knew or cared who she was. But now, everyone in the district knows *Miss Maddocks*, heiress to Hollin Hall and confidante of Lady Butler. Elayne’s invited everyone and their second cousin twice removed to come and help celebrate Dora’s twenty-first. Every mother with great expectations and an unmarried son from here to Grimsby will be trotting him out for inspection like a racehorse at Tattersall’s, not to mention third sons of impoverished Scottish lairds and every other penniless bachelor hoping to win the lottery.”

It occurred to Slugger that Dottie, too, had an unwed son—her youngest, currently serving as a constable in The City. He mentioned it.

“Too right I do!” Dottie retorted. “My Raymond’s as good as any and smarter than most, and he’s been sweet on Dora since they first met. She likes him, too.”

Slugger couldn’t help but give her a sly grin. “So will you be putting Ray through his paces at this horse and pony show as well?”

Dottie tittered. “As much as I’d like to see that boy take up with a girl such as Dora, he’s not yet ready to settle. Has his mind set on being a secret agent or super hero some day. Comes of watching too much telly as a young ‘un, I reckon. ‘Danger Man’ was his favorite.”

“Or Danger Mouse,” Bernard murmured, to Slugger and Dottie’s puzzlement. “Never mind... after your time. But seriously, I have it on good authority that there’ll be someone at that party on Sunday who’ll sweep her off her feet unless Steve seals the deal first.”

“How good of an authority?” Dottie demanded.

Bernard gave her a level look. “The best. My wife. The one who sent me here.” He paused to let that tidbit settle in and was surprised that neither of them showed any reaction when he was expecting shock and disapproval.

Slugger was marvelling that Dottie had been right on target with her speculation about Bernard’s domestic status. Dottie was congratulating herself at her own perspicacity in linking Bernard with the elegant Solange. She had, of course, immediately recognized the other woman as a sister under the skin. However, she remained baffled as to why one of such a superior ranking within the order would ally herself with an Other at the bottom band of the spectrum. Although witches did occasionally select mates from outside their tribes—even Normals, as Dottie herself had done—Bernard was a puzzlement. She decided there must have been some powerfully overriding unseen factor that merited such a union, but that there was no reason to not go on treating him as she had been.

“I see,” Dottie said slowly. “That reminds me... no more kissing. Are we clear on that? And you a married man! You should be ashamed of yourself!”

Bernard ground his teeth but had the good grace to look a bit shame-faced. "That... was... not... my... fault! It was an accident, sort of."

"See that it doesn't happen again!"

"Don't worry... it won't. Let's just hope that whatever Elayne says to Dora sinks in... and that Steve reacts the way I think he will. In the meantime, I think I'll go for a walk."

"Oh no you're not," Slugger declared. "We don't need a repeat of Wednesday! There's plenty enough to be done around here, starting with the washing up. You and me'll do it that while Mrs. Doyle gets on with her other work."

Bernard grumbled but, after a bathroom break, dutifully followed Slugger into the scullery where a depressingly large stack of breakfast crockery awaited.

In desperate need of attention to her raggedy toenails and chewed cuticles, Hazel decided to accompany Dora to the luncheon-and-spa date at Butler Hall; Dora's hands and feet weren't much better. The girls washed up and changed clothes before departing in the new estate wagon as the others were sitting down to lunch.

Directly after eating, Ron and Steve took the LandRover to attend their orientation class that started at one o'clock and lasted until four-thirty at the community college. Slugger co-opted Bernard to help dig potatoes in the kitchen garden and gather windfall apples and pears in the modest orchard while Dottie went on a cobweb eradication campaign with a damp rag tied around the business end of a broom. A peaceful afternoon seemed in the offing.

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## FIELD JOURNAL: FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 1974 • 12:30PM

**Location:** *Downstairs bathroom.*

**Interim notes:** *An interesting start to my day... having a gamine little creature tickling me awake. Hazel is as attractive as Dora but in a completely different way. Probably has no idea she's a third-generation Elf... an alpha female if ever there was one. Poor Ron has no idea what he's in for. What am I saying, "Poor Ron"? He's getting what he deserves and then some. Hazel is wise beyond her years... if it were Hazel and Steve having the problem, there wouldn't be one. She would have settled his hash long ago and I wouldn't be here. Must remember to ask: Are Imps and/or Goblins genetically compatible with Elves? Don't see why not, if Witches and Shapeshifters can crossbreed.*

*There's nothing more I can do or say. A confrontation of some sort is inevitable. Perhaps not an optimum solution but what choice do I have? What makes me anxious is not knowing when it will happen or what form it will take. A dignified exchange of opinions and accusations would be preferable to fisticuffs but the latter is more likely. Assuming there will be a modicum of bloodshed and no long-term damage as SHE wouldn't have sent me if that possibility existed. At least, that's what I'd like to think. It looks like Slugger plans to keep me under his thumb all day so I might as well just go and do whatever he wants done until whatever is going to happen happens. As they say, *qué será, será.**

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***“It is not enough to conquer; one must also know how to seduce”*** • VOLTAIRE

AT AGE THIRTY-SIX, ELAYNE BUTLER’S FAVORITE ADAGE—attributed to the Duchess of Windsor—was that one ‘can never be too rich or too thin’ and she lived by both. Her marriage to the widower Lord Hughes Butler a decade ago had occasioned horror among the snooty wives of other peers of the realm and acute discomfort on the part of his three grown daughters, who were loathe to accept this tacky and unrefined American woman into the family. Elayne didn’t give a rat’s patootie what anyone thought. Her husband loved her dearly and he was generous with his very deep pockets. Unlike other members of the upper class who found themselves struggling to maintain decaying estates amid escalating costs and dwindling incomes, Huey Butler had done very well for himself in the stock market and not only managed to hang on to the family nest egg but increase its worth. Too, Elayne had brought to the union her own considerable wealth, legacies of previous husbands either deceased or archived.

Although having been well-educated at a prestigious New Orleans seminary, Elayne made no pretensions about her lowly origins in the bayou country of lower Louisiana and preferred to retain her ‘good ole gal’ aura, chiefly because it so irritated Huey’s stuffy relatives and most of his stuck-up friends. She could discourse in perfectly respectable uninflected English when it suited her, which wasn’t often.

As Dora and Hazel pulled into the circle drive at the front entrance, a valet trotted up to open the doors and whisk the Cortina away to a parking area sheltered from the sun. Hardison, the Butler’s majordomo, greeted them at the door with his customary gravitas and personally conducted them across the immense central entrance hall to the solarium where Elayne was waiting by an elegant safari-style mahogany folding table set up on the tiled floor. Two maids were briskly snapping on a snowy white linen cloth, while two more stood at attention with a rolling cart laden with silver-lidded dishes. A pair of nice-looking young lads were bringing in chairs. A Japanese horticulturist pattered silently on the periphery of the enormous room, dispensing water from an atomizer on orchids and other tropical rarities.

Elayne believed in supporting the local economy by providing as many positions as there were applicants wanting to come and work for her. Her largesse was known far and wide and her staff were intensely loyal. Her only requirement was that they be cheerful. Life was too short to be depressed by exposure to unhappy people, according to her. She treated each and every one exactly alike, as if they were favorite neighbors living just down the dirt road in a shanty identical to the one in which she grew up.

“Splendid! Right on time, girls!” Elayne trilled. “And how lovely you’re home and could join us, Hazel Marie. Dora rang and gave me a heads up. Love the hair. And what a fetching frock... suits you to a ‘T’.” At the very last minute Hazel had been persuaded to exchange her shorts and tank top for a gauzy sundress similar to the one Dora had chosen. The three broke out in girlish giggles as they took their places and dishes were brought to the table. Elayne reverted to her usual manner of speech as she questioned Hazel about her travels.

When they had finished eating, Elayne led the way to her salon—gal territory, she called it—where her personal beauty maintenance manager had already set up a hairdressing station, a massage table and three chairs with foot spas facing each other close enough for comfortable conversation. Adjacent to the salon was a full spa facility containing a shower, steam room, sauna, cold plunge, jacuzzi and a small lap pool. Next to that, a fully equipped personal gymnasium. Elayne was indeed ultra high maintenance, no expenses spared.

“Raoul honey, where’s them grape squeezin’s?” Elayne called to a tall, dark and outrageously handsome young man whose body had obviously never missed a daily workout at the gym. Raoul gestured to another very pretty boy identified as Pepe who waited attendance by the wet bar. Pepe immediately sprang into action and filled three goblets with sangria. A pleasant-faced but somewhat butchy girl with purple hair called Connie stood by clutching an armload of soft terry spa robes and turbans.

The men withdrew while Connie assisted the three women as they changed into their robes and settled into their chairs with their wine glasses. Raoul and Pepe magically reappeared without being summoned.

Elayne pulled out a gold Dunhill lighter and a pack of Benson & Hedges filtertips, firing one up and blowing a smoke ring as Pepe minced over with a standing ash tray. “Baby Huey don’t like for me to smoke in front of his friends. Says it’s low-class. Makes you wonder why he married me, don’t it?” And, without waiting for a response, “So, you and Boo still workin’ out okay?”

“How do you mean?” Hazel’s ears perked up, detecting a note of desperation.

“Well, is he doin’ what you need him to do or ain’t he?”

Dora blushed and glanced away meaningfully at the trio mixing up potions and powders at a side table.

“Oh hell, sugar. Don’t you worry about them... they all play for the other team. Absolutely reliable... just like them three wise monkey... ‘See no gossip, hear no gossip, speak no gossip.’ Nothin’ you say leaves this room. Pretend they ain’t there. Ain’t that right, y’all?” Elaine flung over her shoulder. There was no indication whatsoever that anyone had heard anything. “Go on, honey. I’m listenin’.”

Hazel was paying rapt attention although it took a world of concentration to not dwell on the conversation she’d had earlier with Ron. First Dora had lied to her, then Bernard. The question was why? Why had Dora fallen out of love with Steve? Or he with her? She knew she was about to hear some real news and could hardly contain herself.

Dora began hesitantly. “Elle, I know I’m not as worldly as you and I’m inexperienced compared to other girls my age, but I’m not *that* slow. I know there’s something odd... different... about Bernard...”

“Awwwww, honey... you didn’t go and *kiss* him, did you?” the older woman interjected. “After I *told* you not to!”

Dora nodded dumbly.

Elayne was silent for a moment. “That little varmint shoulda knowed better,” she growled.

“It wasn’t his fault... I made him do it.”

Elayne humphed. “And that was it? Just a kiss? You sure nothing *else* happened?”

“Elayne! But... something *could* have happened... something came over me... I... I *wanted* it to happen.”

“And?”

“He turned me down. Was it me? Was it something about me that turned him off?”

“Nah. Warn’t you. I’ll explain some other time. Tell me... what was y’all doin’ just before that?”

Dora told her everything... Bernard’s confession about his mission, her disbelief, swimming in the small lake *au naturel*, her initiation of the kiss, her physical response—and his, her desire to experience more and his polite refusal to reciprocate. Elayne listened with as grave a face as Dora had ever seen on her. Hazel’s eyebrows had shot up to her hairline and her ears were

literally quivering. Did this mean that *Ron* had lied to her... or had he just improvised the worst scenario he could think of to impress her.

In the meantime, Raoul and Pepe had started working on feet.

“Umhmnn... hold on a minute... Hazel Marie, you gotta swear you ain’t gonna repeat nothin’ you hear today...”

Hazel, eyes wide, made the universal closed-zipper sign across her mouth and crossed her heart with her forefinger.

Dora continued. “When I was floating in the pool, I felt so... I felt like Wonder Woman. Like I could do anything I wanted... and that’s what I wanted to do. So I did it. I don’t know what came over me.”

“That wacky water is what come over you, honey. Don’t know why Dot didn’t warn you about it. She should’ve,” Elayne mused.

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“When you get home, you ask her about the clootie well. Tell I said so. And don’t go there no more... not with Bernard, anyway. If you gotta go, go with Steve.”

“Steve can’t swim.”

“Aw, shoot! Well, anyways, go on with your story. On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate that kiss?”

“Oh... a twelve. Definitely a twelve! I felt it all the way down to my...” Dora halted and shot a questioning look at Hazel. Elayne hooted.

“I ‘spect Hazel Marie ain’t hearin’ nothin’ she don’t already know about.”

“I thought we were going to discuss my party tomorrow?” Dora said evasively.

“Subterfuge, darlin’. I had sumpin’ else I wanted to go over with you. But looks like you and Boo done beat me to the subject.”

“What are you talking about?”

“About you not makin’ any progress with Steve and thinkin’ about dumpin’ him and goin’ trollin’ somewheres else.”

“How would you know that?” Dora gasped. “That’s exactly what I’ve been thinking about.”

“A little birdie tweeted in mah ear. I don’t think you wanna give up just yet.”

“No? And why not? I’m not getting any younger here, you know!”

“Yeah, she wants to get married and have babies before her eggs reach their sell-by date,” Hazel piped up, thoroughly confused by now. It was beginning to sound like this whole deal between Dora and Bernard was a sting operation... a set-up... a procedure she’d learned about from one of her Mundaka one-night stands whose day job back in Malibu was working vice squad on the police force there. Pepe, bent over her left foot, suppressed a snicker.

“Honey, after what you said, my direct advice to you is get that boy off by hisself and just lay one on him. Take him by surprise, so to speak.”

“Bernard said exactly the same thing after we... afterwards... but...” Dora hung her head, her clasped hands fidgeting in her lap. “I just don’t know that I can do it. I suppose I’m afraid of making a fool of myself... in case, you know... he’s simply not interested. And I was afraid of getting it wrong. Now I’m afraid of getting it *too* right and he’ll know why. And not only that, I think Ron saw us... Bernard and me. He’ll tell Steve for sure and then what? I don’t know how I’m going to explain it to him. Or even that he deserves an explanation.”

“What you do or don’t tell him is up to you,” Elayne said, “But here’s what Slugger told Dot and she told me. Steve has an idea you might be lookin’ to move on and he’s et up with worry.

That in itself might be enough to spur him into action but I wouldn't count on it. It's only needs just a tad more encouragement on your part to tip the scales in your favor."

"Have you been talking to Bernard? He told me that, too."

"Toldja he was a smart little booger."

Conversation was suspended as Raoul and Pepe deftly and silently whisked away the foot spas and replaced them with footstools while Connie passed around baskets of nail varnish from which the women made their color choices. Chair backs were reclined, thin slices of cucumber applied to eyelids, warm damp cloths artfully draped on faces.

Elayne's voice emanated from beneath the cloth, slightly muffled.

"What I really got y'all over here for, Dora, is a good old-fashioned cheerleadin' pep talk. Rah rah sis boom bah... go team! Plan A's gone just about as far it can go and it looks like Plan B is about to kick off, so today's topic is Plan C... an' I'm tellin' you, gal, this is your last best chance to hook him."

"But Elle, I don't want to have to *hook* him... or *trap* him... if he doesn't want me for *me*, then there's no point in any of this."

"Suit yourself. But let's talk about Plan C anyway."

Underneath her own drape, Dora sighed, knowing she was about to receive instruction on yet some other endeavor alien to her nature.

"First of all, missy, let's examine this here intimacy problem. You been brought up kinda sheltered from the evils of society and don't know a whole hell of a lot about menfolk and their ways. Now you done got ahold of a man with morals, scruples and ethics. Them kind's scarce as hen's teeth, I'll have you know. The thing about most men, though, is they don't never wanna discuss their feelin's on account of they think that's unmanly."

"Steve did," Dora objected, "Just the once, though. He said how much he valued my friendship... how it was like a treasure he would remember his whole life. He said he knew how much I hated change and that love changes everything and he didn't want to risk ruining our relationship that way. He said we came from two different worlds; I'm rich, he's poor and it would never work. Maybe he's right but it doesn't change the way I feel about him."

"Lemme tell you what I think about your Steve. His heart's in the right place but it's done been kicked around and stomped on so much that he's too scairt to let anyone have another crack at hurtin' it again. He wants to love and be loved, but he just can't bring himself to let anyone get close enough. So you got a psychostalemate here... what we call a 'Mexican standoff'. Oh... he might trust you enough to nibble some oats outta your hand every once in a while but just you try to throwin' a saddle on 'im! Now, Dora, ah know you know 'zackly how to go about dealin' with that. You do it every day with your abused horses. Gentleness, kindness, consistent attention and—most of all—perseverance. Men ain't all that different."

"But Elaine, I *have* been doing those things all along and it's getting me nowhere. I'm growing older by the second. What more can I do?"

"About the class thing ah cain't offer you much advice there, bein' as ah ain't got much class my own self. But ah do come from old money and lots of it, so that's always greased the wheels, so to speak. Havin' enough money to make ends meet is important. Not havin' enough is one a the things young couples fight about most often. But you already got that covered. A lotta men don't got a problem with livin' off a woman's money, but there's others flat out see that as loss of face or some damn thing. I 'spect Steve's one a them kind and that's a stumblin' block you'll have to work on. As for bein' from different worlds, a big part of marriage is

respectin' each others beliefs and understandin' where the other one's comin' from. Ya gotta learn to compromise. It's a real big part, too, bigger than love even.

Now, to get back to how you're gonna get your man in forward gear, there's two time-honored ways a gettin' a man to marry you... one of 'em is, you don't turn loose a the keys to the gold mine 'til you got the rock on your finger."

"And the other one?" Simultaneously all three lifted up the corners of their drapes in order to see each other.

"Give 'im the gold mine... you unnerstand what ah'm sayin', sugah? An honorable man will do the right thing. Especially if..." Here Elaine made the universal gesture over her stomach that signified a bun in the oven. "And I'm thinkin' your Steve must be one hell of an honorable man or your virginal little self wouldn't be sittin' here right now."

Dora's hands flew to her mouth and she felt her face flame. "I couldn't possibly... I wouldn't know..." she squeaked.

"Oh please!" Elaine fixed her with a stern look. "You cain't possibly be *that* naive! It ain't that hard, Dora. Y'all live in the same house, doncha? You already got all the right equipment. You got motive, you got opportunity, you got a game plan... an' now you got the knowledge to implement it. All you need is some gumption and a sexy nightie. If you ain't got one, ah'll give you one. Ah gots tons of 'em ah ain't ever worn. A gal's gotta do what a gal's gotta do. He's a man. You're a woman. Nature will take its course, honey, ah promise!"

When the manicures and pedicures were done, the rest of the afternoon was given over to the sybaritic pleasures of being saunaed, steamed, massaged, pummeled, waxed and facialed, all interspersed with nuggets of wisdom and raunchy advice from Elayne. Raoul and his crew departed as Elayne walked her two guests, relaxed and limp as wet noodles, out to the front entrance where the valet was bringing around the estate wagon.

Elayne sighed with satisfaction, examining her fingers. "Them fairies sure do a nice job, don't they?"

"Isn't it kind of rude to refer to them that way? Don't they mind?" Dora ventured.

Elayne cocked her head questioningly. "No, why should they? That's what they are." Then she caught on.

"Oh! They're *real* fairies, too, hon... as in fairy tale fairies. Tinker Belles. Fey *and* gay."

Dora and Hazel looked at each other and broke out in gales of laughter. Elayne didn't.

"You don't believe in fairies? In magic?"

"No... I don't think so... I'm not sure..." Dora words trailed off uncertainly. "That is, Bernard had me *almost* believing in it..."

Elayne hesitated a fraction of a section. "Boo's been telling tales out of school, has he? Did he have anything to say about me?"

"He called you a witch, Elle, and said you had powers that you could use to help people. Oh, I feel silly just talking about it."

"Well, if you don't believe, can you accept that there are some folks with special abilities that can be turned to either good or evil?"

"I suppose so."

"Boo and me, we're them kinda folks... the good 'uns. Let's leave it at that. But sugah, you cain't tell anybody, not ever. Can you promise me that? It's important."

Elayne turned to face Hazel. "That goes for you, too, Hazel Marie. I need your solemn word."

“You got it, Lady B.” Hazel bobbed her head up and down earnestly. “But before we go, there’s something I need to tell you... that Ron told me... I guess I should have mentioned it earlier but...”

Elayne and Dora listened, aghast, as Hazel repeated Ron’s version of events.

“That’s that, then,” the older woman said. “It’s gonna hit the fan any time now and it’s gonna be a big ole fuss. You gals keep yer powder dry and stay outta the line of fire.”

They thanked Elayne for their wonderful day and her hospitality, climbed into the estate wagon and headed for home, subdued and fearful.

ALSO ON THEIR WAY HOME WERE STEVE AND RON, having yanked off their neckties and loosened restrictive collar buttons. They discussed what they’d observed and learned at the Adult Education Centre, where neither one had ever previously set foot or even given any thought to prior to Bernard’s intrusion into their lives. A most helpful assistant called Naomi had greeted them and personally escorted them on a tour of the facilities before settling them in a conference room with tea and biscuits and stacks of informational material about available courses of study. Each had been interviewed privately by a counselor who explored various areas of interest and offered suggestions about class choices.

Both young men had been gratified to find that they were far from the oldest adults seeking to better their employment potential through higher education. They were amazed at the number of senior citizen students who viewed going back to school as life-enhancing opportunities to expand their minds and widen their horizons. Steve mused that attending school because you wanted to was far different from enduring school because you had to. The seminar itself was more of a practical nature outlining rules, requirements and financing options.

Two sets of approved applications lay on the bench seat between them as the LandRover grumbled its way over the unpaved county road. Steve was in such high—and rare—good humor that it was more than Ron could stand, and he concluded the time was ripe to publicize the results of his voyeurism. He lit a cigarette and scrunched down in his seat, putting his shoes up on the dash.

“By the way, mate,” he began casually, “there’s sumpin’ you oughter know about...”

The tale was more or less correct except that Ron left out the part about the couple’s having been fully dressed and having already removed to the bank of the larger lake before engaging in The Kiss. He failed to point out that at no time while Dora was in the water *au naturel* did Bernard come anywhere near her but had in fact kept a respectable distance between them. And he didn’t bother to mention that it was Dora who had dived on Bernard, not the other way around, or that in fact it actually appeared as if Bernard were attempting to fend her off.

As icing on the cake, Ron opined that no doubt Bernard and Dora would in future have ample opportunity to cozy up every evening with Steve off toiling in the halls of academe.

Jealousy enveloped Steve as a thick fog and his fingers clamped around the steering wheel in white-knuckled fury. His foot stomped the accelerator and he pushed the elderly LandRover as hard as it could go. After a few near misses involving perambulating sheep and other drivers on the narrow road, Ron began to question whether the thrill of being the first to impart prime gossip was worth his life or limbs. But he couldn’t, of course, take it back or try to pass it off as a joke. Steve was no longer listening, having heard only half of what Ron said and understanding even less than that. There was, figuratively speaking, blood in his eye and a red mist rising.

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## FIELD JOURNAL: FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 1974 • 5:00PM

**Location:** Feedroom (for a change)

Mrs. D. served tomato soup and cheese sandwiches for lunch and then I got to dig up spuds and hoe weeds. Was that fun or what?

Sluggo had about a million other chores for me to do and tried again to get me to milk that cow. Fat chance. When pigs fly and so on.

It was agreed during our morning strategy meeting that my action plan must be executed no later than noon tomorrow if Ron hasn't spilled the beans and started the ball rolling by then. I'm betting Ron's gonna talk while he and Steve are alone together today, in which case it'll go down sooner rather than later.

Since Steve can't be cajoled, convinced or otherwise led to make a declaration on his own—and so far it appears that isn't going to happen—then the cattle prod approach is the only alternative. I'm counting on his jealous temperament to take over common sense.

The possibility exists that either I might unintentionally hurt Steve or he might intentionally hurt me. Will do my level best to avoid that but accidents do happen. I suppose SHE has already taken that into account.

Knowing Elaine and her history with men, she's going to lay it on the line for Dora and will no doubt be shockingly graphic about it. Don't know if American tactics will work for a sheltered English girl. Or are women's ways the same the world over? How would I know?

Wish Mrs. D would take that accursed cow home with her and leave it there. That animal won't rest until it's hooked a horn in my guts. In case I haven't mentioned it earlier, I HATE COWS!

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# ***“History is a race between education and catastrophe”*** • H.G. WELLS

THE SCENE WAS STAGED FOR HIGH DRAMA as if by a diabolical set designer, with human emotion its choreographer.

Advancing toward the blue Hillman, Slugger and Dottie were awkwardly holding hands and exchanging shyly tender endearments prior to her departure for the evening.

The white Cortina bearing Dora and Hazel arrived and coasted into its parking space next to the housekeeper’s vehicle. The two young women, who should have been glowing with good cheer and the aftereffects of a blissful day spent doing happy girl stuff, approached the older couple with grave expressions.

The olive LandRover containing Steve and Ron barrelled in two minutes later, sloughing to a halt next to the Cortina amid a great cloud of dust and a spray of gravel. It emitted a death rattle as its doors flung open, tumbling Ron out one side and slingshotting Steve out the other.

In the stableyard Bernard’s bare feet were carrying his oblivious self and a bucket of water from the trough to the donkey pen.

The gods were laughing.

Spotting Bernard, Steve crashed the yard gate and charged toward toward his nemesis with deadly intent, roaring “*I TOLD YOU TO LEAVE HER ALONE!*” The gate teetered as it broke free of its hinges and slammed to the ground with a crump.

“Cat’s out of the bag, looks like,” Slugger muttered.

“It’s showtime,” Dottie agreed unnecessarily.

“Noooooooooooo!!!” Dora’s hands flew to her mouth.

“Oh wow!” Hazel’s eyes were round as dinner plates.

“You’re in big trouble,” Slugger mouthed at Ron.

“Who, me?” Ron pantomimed back.

Caught unaware, Bernard dropped the bucket on his left foot. “*Yow!!!*” Hopping on the other one, he overbalanced and toppled over just as Steve took a swing at him and hit Dora’s pet arboreal project—her Lightning Tree—instead. Yelping with pain, Steve lurched at Bernard and went to kick him in the head, only to bark his shin on the bottom rail under which Bernard had frantically rolled, scuttling on his hands and knees into the pen.

“Far out!” Hazel whooped excitedly, avidly anticipated the mayhem to come. “They’re fighting over you!”

Slugger reached for Dora’s elbow solicitously while searching a vest pocket for one of his ever-present handkerchiefs in the expectation that she’d burst into tears any second now. To his surprise, not only was she *not* crying, she had a look of pure disgust fixed on her face. Dottie merely folded her arms together and shook her head.

“*YOU LITTLE BASTARD!*” Steve cursed, starting to climb over the top rail. A bawl of indignation attended a squawk of distress from the depths of the shed. Bernard had forgotten about Queen Maude in her temporary accommodation. Making an end run around the rumps of the startled donkeys, he shinnied up the Lightning Tree to perch on one of the upper branches.

Dottie noticed for the first time that Bernard had prehensile toes and considered if there might be an ape or two in his family tree, along with horses and—as she suspected—cats.

Steve was attempting to scale the tree, not an easy task with the slick-soled dress shoes he'd worn to class.

*"COME DOWN HERE AND FIGHT LIKE A MAN!"* he shouted.

"Not on your sweet bippy," Bernard declared, squirreling up a notch.

Dora's mouth was pinched together tightly. Hazel chewed on a twist of hair. Suddenly realizing the possibility of being held accountable for a death by misadventure, Ron looked around for a convenient place to hide.

Despite his sartorial handicap, Steve was making progress and Bernard looking distinctly nervous when suddenly his branch gave way. Steve made a grab for him and was left clutching half a tee shirt as Bernard plummeted past, hitting the packed dirt with a thud and laying there stunned.

Slugger tensed at the possibility of broken bones. Dottie let out a muffled squeal of maternal dismay. Dora squeaked in alarm. Hazel chewed a newly varnished nail.

Steve lost his purchase on the tree trunk and fell backwards into the pen. Bobbing up instantly and attempting to push past the bucking and braying donkeys, he was ejected through the pen's flimsy gate by eight hundred pounds of irate cow. Agitated donkeys spewed in all directions while Queen Maude lowered her head and zeroed in on the object of her disapprobation who, having mostly regained his senses, was listing to port as he scurried away at top speed in the general direction of the watering trough. With a bellow of outrage she lit out after him.

Alarmed at the close proximity of Maude's sharp horns bearing down on him with Steve's contorted face right behind her, Bernard accelerated into a banking curve around the trough, the tattered remains of his tee shirt flapping from his neck like a flag. He fled toward the hay barn and slipped through the narrow opening where one of the blue doors wasn't completely closed. Steve cut to the left of the trough and the cow to the right, losing ground. Not quite as slender as Bernard, Steve sacrificed several seconds in working the door open a few more inches to permit him to squeeze through, though ripping his shirt. Maude poked her head inside the gap, mooing in frustration when she was unable to follow.

Members of the audience looked at each other in consternation but didn't have long to wait until the action came around again. Bernard had escaped out the back door of the hay barn and pelted around the north side of the old stables. He gave them a thumbs up and a wink as he hared by and broadjumped the fallen gate, where he paused for a moment to catch his breath.

Bernard's respite was all too brief; Steve's longer legs had enabled him to catch up. As he, too, made to leap over the flattened gate a shower of pebbles struck him from behind and he stumbled. He clutched at Bernard's ankle as he went down and the latter managed to retreat only a few paces with one hundred sixty pounds of determined predator latched onto his foot. It looked like Steve had him.

"Get 'im! Get 'im!" Hazel was cheering.

"Who's side are you on, anyway?" Ron queried.

"Either one. Both. Does it matter?" Hazel responded with unabashed glee. "This is more fun than footie!"

“Should we turn the hosepipe on them?” Dottie was inquiring of Slugger.

“Nah, not yet,” Slugger responded. “Bernard seems to be holding his own.”

“I say let the stupid gits kill each other,” Dora ground her teeth.

*Who are you and what have you done with my gentle Dora,* Slugger wondered.

A second volley of rocks stung both of them and Bernard broke free, once again streaking for the trough.

Slugger was shaking his head with a no-no expression at Hazel, who shrugged and dropped her third handful.

Once again Steve caught up to Bernard and they circled the water trough like a pair of hyenas squaring off over an antelope carcass.

Steve was yelling. *“I TOLD YOU TO STAY AWAY!”*

“I heard you the first time, you jerk,” Bernard yelled back.

*“YOU CALLING ME A JERK?”* Steve shouted.

“If the shoe fits...” Bernard taunted.

Steve tried to jump over the trough and fell in. Bernard seized the momentary advantage by sprinting for the breezeway and scaling the gate while Steve extricated himself and yanked off his shoes in disgust, pitching first one and then the other at Bernard before resuming hot pursuit. The second missile hit Bernard in the back of the head and knocked him off the top of the gate. Both young men then disappeared down the breezeway with eight highly curious heads regarding them over stall doors.

The spectators held their collective breaths as the action continued outside of their line of sight on the other side of the wall, where the heavy farm equipment had been removed when the new stables were built. They could still hear, however, as the two combatants continued exchanging threats and insults throughout the veritable obstacle course of wagons, spreaders, cultivators, balers and other machinery, employing creative expressions and strong language such as Slugger hadn’t heard since his national service days.

Presently Bernard attained the top of the stone wall where he stood for a moment pumping his right fist into the air triumphantly before hopping back down into the yard. They caught a brief glimpse of Steve’s face, shoulders and arms as he made an abortive attempt to leap the wall as well. Seconds later he careened around the cornerpost and past the reviewing stand again, blundering straight into Maude’s backside. She’d been circling the yard with the obvious intention of reacquainting her original target. This new indignity caused her to sunfish like a rodeo bronc and she chased Steve into the lower stable where he simply darted out the door at the other end and left her in the dark.

Bernard was waiting for him on the other side of the fallen gate. When Steve lit out toward him, Bernard pivoted and headed toward the lake.

As one, the spectators moved into the driveway and shuffled forward enough to be able to view the action on the shoreline. Instead of diving off the dock where he’d be safe from non-swimmer Steve, Bernard darted toward the reed bed and made a spectacular bellyflop into the shallow water, rotating swiftly onto his back and backstroking out to deeper water. Steve made the mistake of leaping feet-first into the reeds where he instantly became mired in knee-deep mud. Bernard side-stroked his way around the dock to a reed-free stretch of bank and scrambled up on dry land. There he stood, bent over with his hands on his knees, apparently lobbing inflammatory remarks to his adversary.

After falling over a few times while trying to extricate himself from the sucking mud, Steve fought his way free and took up the chase. This time Bernard's route took him around the front of the farmhouse. The audience as a group sidled back to the relative safety of the mudroom stoop and all heads swiveled to the right where, as anticipated, Bernard came barreling around the northwest corner of the building with Steve at his heels. At first it appeared they had both been mysteriously bloodied from the neck down when Slugger suddenly realized they'd come through the kitchen garden.

"My tomatoes!" he moaned piteously.

"Looks like they made a detour through the orchard as well," Dottie chuckled as Steve hurled first one then another hard round red object at Bernard, the second apple catching him square between the shoulder blades. Bernard screeched to a halt, turned and chucked a similar round red object at Steve. His missile of choice was huge ripe tomato which hit Steve in the forehead with a most satisfactory splat, temporarily blinding him.

Bernard was almost even with the spectators now, not looking where he was going but over his shoulder as he jeered. "See ya... wouldn't wanna be ya!" When he did look around it was to find himself facing off with Queen Maude, head lowered, horns in the *en garde* position and ominously pawing the gravel of the driveway. Bernard sheered off to the right and fetched up near the donkey shed.

It had been clear to both Slugger and Dottie that Bernard's strategy had been to keep moving until Steve either tired or gave up, but they observed that the corner in which Bernard had taken refuge now proved to be his undoing: he was trapped between the stone wall at his back, the donkey shed and pen to the left, the short portion of wall paralleling the driveway and the cornerpost to the right... and the manure heap, around which Maude was advancing from one side and Steve from the other.

When Bernard paused to examine his now limited escape options, Steve made a flying tackle and they both went down in the muck. They grappled fiercely in the ordure until both were uniformly coated with dung and bits of straw from head to toe and it was almost impossible to tell one from the other. Maude paced the periphery, uncertain of her chosen victim.

Scared and more than a little angry, Dora was the only not appreciating the comic elements of the chase. Ron, born instigator that he was, was thoroughly enjoying the dust-up—as long as any physical involvement on his part wasn't required. Hazel was entranced with the romantic aspect of having two men going *mano e mano* over a woman they both desired—the stuff of bodice-ripper novels.

Slugger and Dottie hadn't been overly concerned with the outcome of the fight; so far it had just been all *sturm und drang* with no serious injury. They assumed that once every last ounce of adrenalin had been expended by both parties, the match would degenerate to words only. They were more interested in the outcome: would their plan work... or not? No one was prepared for what next transpired.

Bernard had managed to squirm free and put some space between himself and his antagonist, but was still trapped in the corner with his back against the wall. Steve had snatched up a manure fork that Ron had neglected to put away and was advancing on his quarry. Sunlight glinted off the sharpened tines and a collective gasp went up from the gallery. Whatever sense of fun there had been had fled in the presence of real danger.

Bernard abruptly stopped moving and pressed his back against the wall.

“You don’t wanna go there, man,” he said softly.

“You think I won’t?” Steve’s face was a frozen mask.

“You think it’s that easy to kill someone? Go ahead and try. Let’s see if you’ve got the guts.”

Steve had stopped his forward motion, breathing heavily. His eyes dropped to the fork in his hands as if seeing it for the first time and wondering how it had got there. He threw it aside and lunged toward Bernard with a cry of rage, fists swinging. Bernard easily stepped aside and Steve slammed up against the wall. Steve collected himself and came at him again. Bernard made no effort to run away but every time Steve attempted to connect, his fists met thin air or unforgiving stone... and then he was distracted by Dora’s plaintive cry.

“Steve! Stop... please stop!” As Steve turned his head in her direction, Bernard darted around behind him and took him in a headlock with his right arm, using his left to twist Steve’s left arm behind his back and rendering him immobile. The harder Steve struggled to get away, the tighter Bernard choked him and the more pressure he applied on the twisted arm.

In addition to exhibiting unexpected physical strength for one of such small stature, Bernard now demonstrated a remarkably resonant voice presence as well. Every word he spoke was clearly audible—if initially incomprehensible—to the assemblage transfixed not thirty feet away.

“Please choose one of the following options.”

“Arrggghhh...” Steve gargled.

“To continue fighting, press one.”

“Grmpphhh...” Steve gasped.

“To surrender, press two.”

“Gedddofff...” Steve croaked.

“To apologize, press three.”

“Legggggggooooo...” Steve honked.

“To return to the main menu, press the pound sign.”

“Errrgfffff...” Steve wheezed.

Bernard moved his arm away from Steve’s throat.

“Or perhaps you’d like to explain to Dora why you think killing me will solve your problems.”

“Because...” Steve whispered.

“Because why...” Bernard encouraged.

“Because... *she’s mine.*”

“I don’t think so, Steve. You can own a horse. You can own a dog. You can’t own another person. You’ll have to do better than that.”

“Because I love her.”

“Better. Much better. But don’t tell me... tell *her.*” He relaxed his grip.

“*BECAUSE I LOVE HER!*”

Bernard let him loose and gave him a shove. “That’s more like it, bubba. Tell her like you mean it.”

Steve turned toward Dora and threw his head back.

“*BECAUSE I LOVE YOU, DORA. I LOVE YOU!!!*”

The words echoed off the stone walls of the outbuildings and... just like that... the fight was over. Steve stood there splay-legged, defeated and yet victorious. He'd finally been able to say what he'd been wanting to say for three years.

IN THE ASTOUNDED SILENCE THAT FOLLOWED everyone looked at one another before turning their attention on Dora. She wasn't crying. She wasn't smiling or laughing. She merely stared at Steve with a completely blank expression.

Slugger was the first to speak, rounding on Ron. "You just had to go and blab, didn't ya.... ya blabbermouth!"

"I might have mentioned something..." Ron answered evasively.

Swiveling her eyes around to the redhead, Dora spoke tersely. "How could you, Ron? I thought we were friends."

"He woulda found out sooner or later," Ron whined defensively.

The girl regarded Ron as if he were something especially noxious she'd just discovered on the bottom of her shoe. Enunciating clearly and coldly through clenched teeth, she said, "Get out of my sight, Ron Stryker. I mean it. Go. I can't speak to you right now. I can't even look at you."

Slugger didn't waste his breath with a lengthy remonstrance. "Were I you, boy, I'd find some other place to be this evening. I'm that ashamed of you, I am."

Ron looked to Hazel for sympathy but finding none there, either, slunk away to his motorcycle and roared off under a dense cloud of disgrace.

Dora turned on her heel and went into the house followed by Dottie and Hazel, leaving Slugger with the pair of highly odoriferous gladiators. Steve was still standing with his head hanging in dejection. Bernard had hunkered down a prudent distance away with his arms wrapped around his knees. In addition to the liberal application of mud and manure, both were streaked with snot, saliva, tomatoes and real blood. Taking a firm hold on Queen Maude's halter, Slugger pointed wordlessly to the hose coiled up neatly on its hanger by the watering trough and Steve trudged toward it. Behind his back, Bernard flashed Slugger the universal okay sign with thumb and forefinger.

Slugger coaxed Maude into one of the stable boxes and locked her in before joining the other two at the water trough. After turning on the hose and sluicing most of the nasty off, Slugger left them wet and shivering on either side of the trough with instructions to stay right where they were while he fetched towels and blankets from the house. "No talkin'. No fightin'. No nothin'. I'll be right back."

In the kitchen, the three women had convened at the table. Dottie had abandoned her intention to go home and instead was boiling water for tea, sensing her presence was needed here more. Slugger explained that he was about to bring through his two miscreants minus their remaining clothing and suggested the younger ladies repair to the family room where their delicate sensibilities would be protected from unwholesome sights, not to mention offensive smells. Dottie supported the proposition and chivvied the girls down the hall, shutting the door firmly behind them and returning to the kitchen.

The entire fight had begun and ended within a twenty minute span although to all concerned it seemed like hours had passed. The three men filed into the mudroom, where Slugger instructed Steve to proceed immediately to the upstairs bath. He then shut the door to the hall leading to the family room and ushered Bernard just inside the kitchen where Dottie waited, closing the door between it and the mudroom as well.

They waited for the sound of the upstairs lavatory door being closed. With that and three closed doors between them and the girls, they had relatively privacy in which to engage in a brief conference.

SLUGGER TURNED ON BERNARD WITH AN ANGRY GLARE. “Was it necessary to humiliate him in front of Dora?”

Wrapped in a old striped blanket with his flat gray eyes and wet hair plastered to his head, Bernard resembled a drowned rat. A very annoyed rat.

“What do *you* think?” he snapped back. “What should I have done instead? You could see he wasn’t going to let up otherwise. And the objective was obtained, so what’s your beef?”

“You took away his pride!” Slugger argued. “That’s a hard thing, for a man to lose his pride!”

“Yeah... well, he’ll have to get over it, won’t it. The thing is, Slugger, it could have been worse, much worse if I hadn’t stopped him right then and there. You should already know, as a former fighter yourself, that any fight you can walk away from is a good one. Maybe when you get to be my age you’ll appreciate it more.”

“What comes next?” Dottie interrupted softly, trying not to appear too dismayed at the muddy runnels forming on her clean floor. Slugger wanted to pursue his complaint but she held a finger up to silence him. “Let Bernard speak his piece—we only have a few minutes.”

With his fresh crop of bruises and scrapes Bernard was managing to appear both younger and older at the same time, but exhibiting the command presence of a headmaster. “All in all, that went pretty well. We got him to make a declaration... in public, no less... with witnesses! But we can’t just leave it at that... he has to say it again, to her face... in the right way and at the right time. He has to be made to understand that, agreed?”

Slugger and Dottie nodded in concert.

“But first, we have a few bumps to get past. Someone has to convince Steve that nothing happened down at the lake no matter what Ron had to say. Obviously, that someone isn’t me. Otherwise he’s gonna hold that grudge against Dora forever.”

“Well... you *did* kiss...” Dottie interjected with gentle disapproval.

“So we did. And you have my word that’s *all* we did. So what? I saw you guys kissing, too, but that’s not the same as if I’d caught you with Slugger getting a leg over on the kitchen table.”

Both Slugger and Dottie turned beet red and she suddenly broke out in a great peal of laughter before clamping a hand over her mouth. The three of them were, after all, meant to be meeting in secret.

Slugger voiced his opinion. “I think Dottie is the right man—woman, I mean—for the job. She’s got the most experience calming down angry young lads and soothing their broken hearts.”

“Amen to that!” Dottie rolled her eyes.

“So how about if you have a go at him next... before he’s had too much time to think,” Bernard said. “The other thing is, you also have to convince him he’s got to make a decision within the next thirty hours. This is where the female perspective comes in handy... making him understand why Dora can’t wait any longer. Can you handle it?”

“I can. I will!” Dottie said with confidence.

“Slugger, you take on Dora. She’s confused and upset right now and doesn’t know which way to turn. She doesn’t really appreciate what a breakthrough it was for Steve to admit that he loves her... how difficult it was to say the words. You’ve got to get her to agree to listen to whatever he has to say for himself after Dottie gets done with him. It’d be great if you could convince her to not say anything at all about the fight, but to stay on track and dwell on the future. It’s up to her if she wants to explain to him what really went down at the lake.”

Dottie, the ultimate multi-tasker, had busied herself with tea preparation as they had been collaborating. She now took over as *charge d’affaires*, rubbing her palms together briskly. “Alright then. Let’s regroup. Here’s what we’re going to do... Edward, you’ll take a tray into the family room—I love that term by the way... much cozier than parlor—and have *your* talk with Dora in there. Send Hazel back out here to me—supper is already prepared and she can be in charge of warming it up and also serve as lookout. When Steve comes back downstairs—it’ll be sundown soon—I’ll go help him bring the horses in and we’ll have *our* talk outside. Bernard, you go to the downstairs bath and stay there until you get the all clear from Hazel, then it would be best if you retired to your bedroom for the remainder of the evening and stayed out of sight. Hazel will bring you up a tray. Assuming our lovebirds can be talked into civil behavior toward each other, the five of us will sit down to supper. Then, we’re going to insist that those two retreat to the family room to discuss these new developments and *stay there* until they work out a truce. Everyone in agreement? Yes? Good. Let’s get to work.”

“Do you really believe any of this’ll do any good?” Slugger asked.

“Think positive,” Bernard encouraged, his now-green eyes glowing luminescent. “It’ll all work out. We’re almost there. Trust me!”

Slugger disappeared down the hallway with the tea tray, exchanging places with Hazel who then received her instructions from Dottie. Inasmuch as she wasn’t the most biddable young woman, Hazel had the prescience to realize that much depended on her keeping to her post in the kitchen so that supper could be presented as normally as possible under the circumstances. All she had to do was watch over the food in the warming oven to ensure nothing was burnt. Meanwhile, she debated calling around to try to locate Ron and fix a place where they could meet away from the farm. Now that the excitement of the fight was over, she realized that Ron—despite his faults—was eminently more suitable a match for her than fiery-tempered Steve could ever have been. And to think she had envied Dora all this time!

When an exhausted and very subdued Steve finally made an appearance and Dottie informed him she would be the one helping bring in the horses, he made no comment. She stepped into a pair of wellies nearest her size—Dora’s, but still too big—and confiscated Slugger’s windcheater. Tying a scarf firmly under her chin, she marched out the door.

Hazel went to tap on the bathroom door, whispering that the coast was clear. Bernard, wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist, thanked her and headed for the stairs and the sanctuary of his bedroom.

The house was quiet.

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## FIELD JOURNAL: FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 1974 • 6:00PM

**Location:** Bedroom (where banished after bath)

As expected, Steve went ballistic over what he perceives as my (our?) treachery. I was fairly sure he would take his rage out on me, not on her. Leading him on a merry chase was fun for a while, but he had more stamina than I allowed for. It got really scary there at the end. Stupid of me to let myself get boxed in. If the others hadn't been there to witness, I might've gotten skewered by a manure fork. What an ignominious way to go!

Here's a thought: If I'd gotten myself killed today, there wouldn't be a future for my favorite grandson to be born into—unless he turns out to be one of Terry or Frankie's boys. But wait... they don't have any children yet so I don't have a favorite grandson yet. (Time travel can mess up your head something awful!)

Presumably She Who Knows Everything already considered that and also knew that today wasn't my day to cross over. (She could have mentioned that and saved me some anxiety.) On the other hand, I don't believe Steve has it in him to kill, not on purpose anyway although he might by accident. He really needs anger management counseling. Perhaps I should suggest that. Has it even been invented yet?

Ron's big mouth saved me the trouble of having to kick things off. He must have told a whopper to get Steve fired up that hot. I guess the end justified the means as the right words were said loud and clear. That's half the battle. The other half is follow-up. I wasn't expecting her to walk away like that. Thought she would be happy. What is it with women? Damned if you don't ("say" "I love you") and damned if you do. It's up to Slugger and Dottie now.

Wish there'd been an opportunity to find out what Elaine had to say today. Maybe I can wheedle it out of Hazel later. Would it paint me as a voyeur if I say I hope I get to be around long enough to see Dora employ the Ultimate Weapon in her quest?

Sure hope this whole enterprise doesn't turn out to be a case of too little, too late. Keeping fingers crossed that (a) Steve has the fortitude to go to her tonight or tomorrow and (b) she has the sense to listen.

**Note to self:** I have this to say about having a near-death experience--and coming THAT close to being shish kebabbed by a maniac certainly qualifies: I thought I was gonna have a heart attack when he came at me with the fork and as shaky as I'm feeling now it might well still happen.

I'm not much of a drinker but one or two stiff ones in lieu of supper would be welcome. I don't suppose this household keeps a decent liquor cabinet though.

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# “*Faint heart never won fair lady*”

• MIGUEL DE CERVANTES

WHILE THE GIRLS HAD BEEN SEGREGATED IN THE FAMILY ROOM, Hazel had listened somewhat impatiently while Dora soliloquized on the lovely afternoon at Elayne’s, Elayne’s titillating advice on matters of the heart, the clash between Steve and Bernard—ostensibly on her behalf, and Steve’s dramatic revelation. How long she’d waited to hear those words... and now that they’d been said, how desolate she felt! Hazel felt guiltily relieved when Slugger came to take her place.

Slugger had half expected to find Dora shedding copious tears, surrounded by wads of damp tissue, but she was merely sitting primly at one end of the sofa, her face composed and thoughtful and her hands folded neatly in her lap. He planted himself heavily at the other end.. The fact that she *wasn’t* crying made him all the more nervous.

She started talking in a low monotone before he could say anything. “I was going to tell him myself, Slugs... tonight, after supper. I was going to explain everything. But then Ron went and spoil it. Steve won’t listen to any explanation now; you know how he is. And he’ll hate that it took a beating to make him say what he did. It will turn him against us and he’ll leave me... us.”

“Maybe not,” Slugger disagreed. “Dottie’s talking with him right this minute. She’s got plenty of experience dealing with young men’s woes, what with her boys and all. What’s more important is, what do *you* want to do?”

Dora blinked. “Me? What does it matter? It’s all over with. We can’t go back to the way we were even if we wanted to.”

“No, of course not... but you can move forward. Ask yerself this, girl... in spite of everythin’, do you still love him?”

“You know I do. With all my heart. But that doesn’t seem to be enough, does it?” A deep sigh escaped her. “I can’t take any more of this, Slugger. I’m at wits end and I’ve come to the conclusion that it probably would be best all around if he did leave. Follyfoot can’t survive... I can’t survive... if we can’t live in peace. It’s all just too confusing. But I can’t be the one to tell him to go... not again. You’ll have to do it for me.”

“Don’t let the sun go down on your anger, girl. Not good for you, for anyone.”

Dora managed a weak smile. “I was very angry, yes... because he couldn’t even keep his promise from Sunday that he wouldn’t act like this again. But I got over it, just as I always do. I’m so tired, Slugger... of the grief, of the uncertainty.”

“What is it you want for him, then?”

“I want him to be happy, Slugs. I want him to be able to see the good in the world, not just the bad. Poor Steve. He’s never had his day in the sun. I want him to have that, to be truly happy and to feel loved and wanted. I want him to experience affection... and be able to return it. Is that so much to ask?”

“It is if you ain’t never learned it. You could bring him to the light, though, if you’d only give him one more chance...”

“If only he’d let me!”

“If Steve was to come to you tonight, or tomorrow... and open his heart to you, would you listen?”

“Yes. Of course. But I’m not counting on that happening.”

“But you *would* listen with an open mind, yes?” Slugger persisted.

“Yes.”

Sluggler hemmed and hawed, searching for the right words. “You do unnerstan’ that even if you was to marry, it’d not make the road any easier. You can’t mold him into the man you’d like for him to be. You might can smooth out the rough spots a bit but you can’t change the way he is deep down. No, you’ll have to be the strong, steady one... the rock and the peacemaker.”

“It almost sounds like you’re trying to put me off him, Sluggler.” Dora forced an almost imperceptible grin.

“Not at all. I jus’ don’t want to see you going into a marriage with yer expectations too high and then being let down the first time you get into a fuss.”

“What makes you think he’s going to propose now... after all this time?”

“I... er... don’t know that he will, but just in case he does we... Dottie and me... we want to be sure you unnerstan’ what yer gettin’ yerself into. We consider ourselves sur... shur...”

“Surrogate parents?”

“That’s us... surrow-gate mum and dad, if you don’t mind us takin’ the liberty.”

Dora stood up and bent over to put her arms around Sluggler. “I do love you both. I couldn’t wish for better parents. No wait... I did wish for better parents... and I got them! And I do understand, believe me.”

Sluggler stood also, visibly relieved.

“Supper should be ready soon. I want you to come to table as usual.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Sluggler put on his fake stern face. “That wasn’t a suggestion, young lady. You go upstairs and change clothes and wash yer face. You’ll come to table if I have to carry you!”

“If I must, I must!” Dora threw up her hands in mock resignation.

Sluggler smiled to himself as he watched her walk away, satisfied that he’d accomplished his task as best he could. It remained to be seen how well Dottie had done with the other half of this equation.

STEVE HAD AUTOMATICALLY GONE ABOUT EVENING STABLE CHORES IN A SORT OF DAZE, alternating between self-loathing over the enormity of what he’d almost done and self-pity because he could discern nothing but dark storm clouds in the days ahead. The only conversation that passed between himself and Dottie was strictly business-related until they’d shut up the last animal into its box and she put herself between him and the house. “Come... let’s have a talk,” she said, nodding in the direction of the lake. It didn’t occur to Steve to object.

He had no intention of discussing anything with Dottie but followed her to the bench on the dock out of respect for an elder’s request. And now she sat beside him in her scarf and Sluggler’s old windcheater and the too-big wellies, looking out over the waters of the lake, pewter in the twilight. He knew all four of Dorothy Doyle’s sons, of course—the youngest of them, Ray, was his own age—and he had always envied them their solid home life under the care of a strict but loving parent. Not once had any one of them voiced anything but praise and love and admiration for their diminutive mother. How different would his life have been if his mother had been anything at all like Dottie Doyle?

“About this afternoon...” Dottie started.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Steve cut her off, but not too sharply. “I really don’t.”

Dottie shrugged. “Then don’t. I’ll do the talking and I’d very much appreciate it if you could at least pay attention. I reckon I’m near about the age of your own mother, and as well you know I’ve raised four boys not much older than you, mostly without their father’s help.

“Each and every one of them has gone through the same emotional turmoils over a woman as you. Jeremy has been sweet on that nice Sarah since grade school and here he is nearly thirty before settling down. Gerard courted Angeline five years before proposing. John thought he had all the time in the world to marry the love of his life, and just like that she got tired of waiting and married someone else. He felt his world had come to an end. Raymond just hasn’t met the right one yet.

“I know you’re thinking—but are too much the gentleman to say so—what’s the point of my telling you all this. Well, my point is that it isn’t all about *you* and what *you* want. It’s equally about Dora and what *she* wants. And what she wants is a home with the man she loves in it as her husband and the father of her children. This is what young people do when they grow up, Steven. It’s what life is all about. Just because you say you love her isn’t enough. Actions speak louder than words. You have to show her.

“Now, if you’re absolutely sure you’re unable to give her those things, if you’re absolutely sure you don’t want these things for yourself, then the best and kindest thing you can do is walk away. Are you prepared to pack up and go away and never see Dora again?”

Dottie had not looked at Steve once while delivering this address and now sat silent, awaiting an answer she wasn’t entirely sure was going to come.

“I’m not good enough for her,” he said, hardly above a whisper.

“Nonsense,” Dottie exclaimed. “Dora’s not the least impressed with class or rank or social standing. She’s given her heart to Follyfoot and this is where she wants to be. This is where she’s happy. Weren’t you happy here as well?”

“Yes... well... I was...”

“So I’ll ask again... do you walk away or do you love Dora enough to make a commitment?”

“I don’t want to leave.”

“Then only one choice remains and you have to make it before Sunday... before the birthday party.”

“But... why?”

Dottie sighed. “You just don’t get it. Dora has a greater strength of character than either one of you realize. She’s already come to the realization that love without commitment isn’t worth squat, and that if she can’t have that from you, she can and will look for it in someone else. No one will blame her if she does. If that someone else happens to be introduced to her at the party and she takes up with him, you will never, ever have another chance. I can’t make it any plainer than that.” They turned to face each other at the same time.

“What should I do? Will she even talk to me, do you think?”

Steve looked so hopeless, so forlorn that Dottie found herself wanting to put her arms around him and cuddle him as she had her sons when they were little boys. *Be stern*, she reprimanded herself. *Don’t give in now.*

“She’ll listen,” Dottie stated, “and if she hears the right words, she’ll come around. After supper tonight would be an excellent time for the two of you to speak privately and clear the air... and that can be arranged. What you don’t want is for her to go to bed with a sorrowful heart.”

“I don’t think I can face her at the supper table... or she me.”

“Of course you both will... and you’ll act as if nothing has happened.”

“But what about... *him*...?”

“I’m glad you brought that up. Bernard is not—I repeat, NOT—your problem. I’m going to tell you what Dora told Edward and he told me... and what I personally saw. Neither one of us

has any reason to believe she misrepresented the facts: Nothing happened. They shared a kiss. That is all. Dora is not a liar... but Ron is—plus... he twists things around so that they sound worse than they are. He was out to stir the pot and he certainly made a dog's dinner of it. You reacted exactly as he wanted you to. You should know better than to believe everything... or even anything... young Master Stryker says."

Steve had nothing to say to that.

"Your bigger worry should be *why* she would choose to kiss someone other than you, and my suggestion on that matter is that you ask her directly."

"Can I do that?"

"You can and should. Believe it or not, Bernard isn't what you think he is and he has your and Dora's best interests at heart."

"I find that hard to believe," Steve admitted grudgingly.

"You'll think differently after you and Dora have had a chat. But for right now, we're going back to the house and having supper as usual.

"I'm not hungry."

The supper bell rang as Dottie wagged a finger under Steve's nose. "No excuses. Be a *mensch*. Pull yourself together."

"Yes m'am."

ALONE IN THE KITCHEN AFTER RECEIVING HER INSTRUCTIONS and a hurried outline of the plans for the evening, Hazel contemplated the various scenarios that could attend the remainder of the day—none of which included her. How dreary! Then she had a brilliant idea. Darting into the utility room off the scullery, she retrieved a carryall and scuttled through the narrow half-height door leading to the root cellar where Slugger had always maintained a substantial supply of wine, sent down from the big house for those days when the Colonel, when he was still alive, wished to spend the day in his study in the farmhouse. It was still well-stocked and Hazel liberated four dusty and cobwebbed bottles, depositing them in the carryall to which she added two jam jars and a corkscrew from the scullery. A quick trip up the stairs to the second floor and the carryall was secreted in the linen cupboard across the hall from Bernard's closed door.

Back in the kitchen, Hazel again thought about trying to call Ron but considered that the only telephone was in the office adjacent to the family room—no privacy. She repeatedly checked the warming oven until it occurred to her that she was letting more cool air in than keeping food warm. She kept boredom at bay by laying the table, watering the geraniums on the windowsill, and rearranging the knickknacks on the mantelpiece. At length there was nothing else to do but sit in Slugger's old rocker by the stove and thumb through one of Dora's home decor magazines until everyone else got done with whatever they were doing and decided it was time to eat.

DORA WORE WHAT SHE HOPED WAS HER INSCRUTABLE FACE as she took her usual seat. Steve, too, was making an effort to preserve a calm exterior.

"Something smells good," he commented with studied nonchalance, avoiding meeting Dora's eyes.

"How was orientation?" Dora ventured, somewhat timidly.

"Good. I'm looking forward to my first class on Monday," Steve replied politely.

Slugger and Dottie glanced at each other and tried not to laugh at this overly theatrical display of cordiality and good manners. The meal progressed peaceably enough with only a faint overtone of tension. Hazel kept quiet but looked up occasionally with burning curiosity.

Eventually supper was over and Dottie and Dora cleared the table while Hazel prepared a supper tray for Bernard and took it upstairs. No one noticed when she didn't immediately return.

Slugger went to the family room to get a fire started and turn on some lamps, having sent Steve to bring in additional firewood. Dottie brewed a fresh pot of coffee and put a carafe on a serving tray along with mugs, cream and sugar and handed it to Dora.

"Take this along to the family room, would you? You and Steve have some matters to discuss, I believe. Oh... and would you mind closing the door so your conversation won't disturb Slugger while he reads the paper? I'll be off myself shortly... soon as I've done cleaning up."

The scene was so contrived it was almost funny, but Dora dutifully went down the hall with Steve trailing behind, looking more than a little intimidated. He peeked back over his shoulder and got a thumbs-up and a wink from Dottie before closing the door.

Some time later Dottie fidgeted with her carryall at the table and Slugger, who'd been semi-dozing after the exhausting day, cracked one eye open.

"I'd dearly love to hang around but I have to go home sometime," Dottie complained.

"You could always stay the night, you know," Slugger mumbled, then jerked awake when he thought about how that sounded. "I meant..."

"Edward Jones! The very idea!" Dottie sputtered in mock indignation. "With children underfoot? We'd be the scandal of the county!"

"What I meant was..." Slugger continued lamely. "You could sleep in my bed and I could use Ron's."

Dottie snickered. "As attractive as the idea is, I'm going home anyway so I can be here bright and early tomorrow morning. I've put Queen Maude back in with the donkeys. She's not altogether pleased but she'll have to make do. Sweet dreams, Edward." And then she was gone and Slugger heard the Hillman crank up and depart before he drifted off again.

WHEN A SOFT RAP ON BERNARD'S DOOR HAD BROUGHT NO RESPONSE, Hazel had eased it open. The bedside lamp was still on and Bernard sprawled face-down on the counterpane, asleep in his pajama bottoms and teeshirt. She set the tray down on the small desk and stood silently for several minutes with her hands on her hips, trying to decide how much she wanted to believe of the extravagant claims she'd heard at Elayne's. Then, for the second time that day, she reached over and gently tickled Bernard awake.

"Oh... it's you again," he murmured, rolling over and sitting up cross-legged.

"Yup, it's me again... with your supper." She started to reach for the tray but he waved her off.

"I thought I'd be hungry but... sorry. No... please take it away."

"You should eat something to get your strength back, after all those calisthenics!" Hazel chided. He was looking rather peaked and raggedy, she thought.

"I'd drown my sorrows... if I had anything to drown them with."

Hazel grinned. "Funny you should mention that! I've got just the thing... don't go away!" She scooted out the door and returned immediately with one of the bottles, firmly closing the door behind her. In short order, she uncorked the bottle and filled the jam jars, handing one over to Bernard before claiming the foot of the bed for herself.

"Here's to the meeting of the mindless downstairs," she toasted.

"Is that what's going on?"

"Oh yeah. In the parlor, whatever you call it now... just the two of 'em."

“It’s not lookin’ good, is it?” Bernard sighed.

“Oh... I wouldn’t say that. Dora’s pretty set on what she wants and looks to me like the ball’s in her court for a change.”

“But she turned and walked away... even after he said he loved her, in front of everybody...”

“A woman is entitled to her pride, too, you know...” Hazel said rather sharply. “Look, I can see what’s going on here, even though I’ve only been home five minutes. Steve’s been maneuvered into a situation where he has to put up or shut up. Dora’s gone all ‘I am woman, hear me roar’. Ron’s turned into Mr. Bean and Slugger’s playing Sergeant Major Grout. Lady Elayne and Dottie Doyle are Macbeth’s witches...”

“Um... aren’t there supposed to be *three* witches?”

“Two... three... who cares? And then there’s you... the instigator... and not even a proper human being... what exactly *are* you, by the way.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Bernard blustered.

Hazel leaned forward conspiratorially. “Oh *come on*, Boo! I’ll show you mine if you show me yours...”

“Excuse me?”

“You tell me *what* you are and *why* you’re here... and I’ll tell you everything that was said at Elayne’s today. She made swear not to talk about it but I figure since you’re one of *them*, you don’t count. How about it? Do we have a deal? I’m absolutely willing to accept whatever you tell me you are.”

Bernard considered her offer and decided that, in the light of imminent failure, any further pretense of secrecy regarding either his mission or his persona was moot. “Okay,” he finally said, “but we’ll need more wine.”

He embarked on an highly editorialized version of where he’d originated, why he’d been sent, what he’d hoped to achieve, and what had happened so far. After collecting and opening the second bottle, Hazel rebutted with a condensed recitation of Elayne’s advice to Dora. They were careful to keep their voices down in case any interesting noises came up from down below, but so far there hadn’t been anything other than the Hillman puttering away.

At one point Hazel, calling for a break, slithered off the bed and out the door. “Give me ten minutes!” Actually, she made it back in six minutes with another bottle and a situation report: Slugger was asleep in the rocker by the stove. Who knew where Ron was? It seemed he wasn’t coming home tonight. Steve and Dora were still closeted in the family room with the door closed—she had crept close enough to hear the murmur of voices but not what was being said. “And get this, they weren’t even yelling at each other!”

Hazel burped delicately and managed to uncork the third bottle after some difficulty working the corkscrew. “I can’t even imagine Dora doing what Elayne said. She’s so square... so... repressed... but then... what *she* said... about kissing you...” Hazel fixed a penetrating and crafty look at Bernard. “Hmmmmnnnn...”

Bernard’s eyes widened in alarm as he suddenly registered that the girl had, while out on patrol, changed into babydoll nighties gauzy enough to display all her assets—and was looking absolutely delicious. He recoiled, holding up one hand with palm turned outward as if to ward her off. “Stay away. I’m in enough trouble already. In fact, I think you should leave.”

“Make me!”

“I would,” he hiccupped, “except I don’t think I can stand up. You fillies are gonna get me slaughtered!”

“Us *what?*”

“You... Folly fillies... you’re dangerous... both of y’all.”

Hazel tried to look indignant. “For your information, I do not look like a horse... and I’m not leaving until I hear your side of the story! What *really* happened out there in the woods, eh? Come on... you can tell me...”

“Nothin’... none of your bish... business!” Bernard was turning maudlin. “That wash a mistake. The whole idea... big, big mistake. Should neber have come here.”

The third empty bottle rolled off the bed onto the carpet with a thunk. Hazel lurched over to the carryall she’d brought in with her and extracted the fourth and last bottle.

“So are you, like... a wizard? Can y’do wizardy things?” she inquired earnestly, listing slightly to port.

“Nope. I’m jus’ an ordinary shaftshipper... shiftshaper... um, shapeshifter.”

Hazel snickered and pronounced her words with studied precision. “An ‘ordinary shapeshifter.’ That must be the ultimate oxymoron.”

They both tittered.

“D’ya turn into somethin’ really neat... like a wolf or a weagle... an eagle, I mean?”

“‘Fraid not. Jus’ a horse... not even a good ‘un. Never been that good at it.”

“Ooooooooooh! Brilliant! Could ya do one for me now?”

“Shertainly not. S’not a pretty sight. Give you nightmares. No pun intended.” Bernard laughed and belched at the same time. “‘Scuse me. Next question?”

“Are you really from the future?”

“Yep. Sure am. Two thousand an’ ten. Long, long time from now.”

Hazel squinted one eye shut and performed basic subtraction in the air with a forefinger.

“I’ll be, lessee... fifty-four by then. I’ll be an old crone!” she wailed. “And you’ll be dead.”

“No I won’t! I’ll be... I *am*... I was... almost sixty!” Bernard said defensively, “But right now I’m not.”

“No kiddin’!?” Hazel goggled. “Eeeyeeew! Dora kissed somebody’s granddad! ‘Course, you look pretty good for an old fart.”

“Thanks... I think.”

Hazel’s mirth subsided. “What will it be like, then? Will it be very different from now?”

“Very different,” Bernard agreed, more or less soberly. It took them several minutes to get the fourth bottle open.

IT SEEMED TO SLUGGER LIKE HE’D SLEPT ONLY FIVE MINUTES before a hand gently shook him awake. It was Dora’s.

“Eh? What? What is it? Something wrong?”

“Not at all. Sorry to disturb you, but can you come to us for a minute or two?”

Slugger lumbered out of his rocker and glanced at the mantel clock to see that it was nearing midnight. He shambled after Dora to the family room where Steve was standing near the fireplace. Dora bade Slugger sit in the new rocker and went to stand beside Steve, but didn’t take his hand. Slugger looked from one to the other warily but was unable to read their expressions.

“You wanted to tell me something?” he finally prodded.

Dora spoke first, slowly and firmly without any hesitation.

“Steve has asked me to marry him, although I can’t imagine why he thinks I would want to, given what’s happened,” she said.

A sense of caution descended on Slugger. “Oh?” he asked, with the unspoken question.

“I have reservations. I told him I’d have to think about it and that I’d give him an answer tomorrow. I want to know if you think that’s fair.”

Slugger contemplated this and turned the question back onto Steve. “That’s for you to say, not me.”

Steve shrugged and looked away. “I suppose it is, yes. I can hardly expect Dora to jump for joy... especially after the way I’ve been acting... not just today but for years. So, yeah... it’s fair.”

“The second thing I want to know... and I want the truth from you... look me in the eyes and promise you and Dottie and Bernard didn’t push him into this... that he acted on his own without being coerced.”

Slugger had to think very, very carefully about this. If he said no, would that not be an outright lie? If he said yes, would he be responsible for sundering this tenuous affiliation between the two young people he loved best before it had a chance to take root? Dora appeared determined and Steve desperate.

“I think...” Slugger began slowly, “Steve had this in mind all along, but it’s a hard thing for a man to face and even harder to ask. You can’t imagine how hard. We men are weak vessels as it is, Dora. The more we love someone, the more we’re unwilling to risk rejection. So, yes... you could say we sort of all pitched in to encourage Steve to be brave and courageous and take that risk... but no, he made the decision by himself. I hope that answers your question to your satisfaction.”

Dora was nodding her head thoughtfully. “Yes. Yes it does. Thank you, Slugger. Good night.” Then she turned and left the room.

Steve slumped to the couch at the end nearest Slugger’s rocker and put his head in his hands. When he raised it, Slugger was alarmed to see tears on his face.

“She’s going to say no, Slugs. I just know it. I left it too late and I have no one to blame but myself. I’ll have to leave her... and Follyfoot and everything.”

“Now, now,” Slugger soothed, “Don’t go putting the cart before the horse. Get a good night’s rest and tomorrow, after chores, you and Dora go on a nice long hack—just the two of you. Spend some time alone together and talk it over. Take all day if you need. The rest of us can cope. Go on up to bed now. I’m wore out myself.”

“You’re right, Slugs. You always are.”

CAUTION HAD LONG SINCE FLOWN OUT THE WINDOW. The talking and laughing in the small bedroom upstairs had got progressively louder as the clock ticked on toward midnight. Bernard and Hazel didn’t hear footsteps coming down the hall until interrupted by a sharp rap on the door.

“What’s going on in there?” It was Dora.

“Nothing!” they sang out in unison. The door swung open and there stood Dora. Her mouth hung open at the sight of the two of them ensconced on Bernard’s bed amidst three empty wine bottles, with a fourth on the floor.

“Uh oh!” Hazel said. “Matron!”

“Busted!” Bernard said.

They looked at each other and belched simultaneously before collapsing in fits of giggles.

Dora was torn between mortification, disgust and an urge to break out in hysterical laughter herself. She struggled to speak with a stern voice. “You’re drunk as a pair of boiled owls, the pair of you!”

“Yes m’am... drunk as a skunk,” Bernard admitted.

“Pissed as a newt,” Hazel offered.

“Stewed to the gills,” Bernard averred.

“Ploughed,” Hazel added.

“Hazel, you’ve had quite enough. Time you went to your own room,” Dora said, trying to keep a straight face. As both were still dressed, it appeared that nothing onward had been going on... but one never knew, did one?

“Yessum,” Hazel snorted and slid off the bed onto the floor. “Ooopsie!”

Dora grabbed her upper arm and hauled her up.

“G’night, Bernard... it’s been fun..”

“G’night, Hazel, and schlep... schleep well.”

“Out!” Dora ordered, giving Hazel a push.

She wobbled unsteadily past Dora and off to her own bedroom.

“As for you...” Dora turned her attention to Bernard.

“We weren’t doing anythin’,” he protested.

“Neither were we and look where that got us,” Dora retorted crisply. “Haven’t you had enough beatings for one week? Go to bed.”

“Guess what? I’m already there... heh heh heh...”

“Then go to sleep.”

“About today... shorry, Dorrie...”

“No you’re not. You were having a fine old time, the both of you. You could have got away any time you pleased yet you kept leading him on. I’m so mad at both of you I could just spit. And now he’s asked me to marry him!”

Bernard’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline. “He did? Why... thass great news! Congratzu... congatchu... whatever.” He attempted to lean over to shake her hand and fell over on the bed, looking up at her with a silly grin.

“Go to sleep, Bernard,” she repeated crossly, slamming the door as she left the room.

Dora peeked in Hazel’s room on the way to her own to find the girl already asleep... or passed out... on the bed. She sighed and threw a light blanket over her. In her own bed, unable to get to sleep, she listened for Steve’s footfalls coming up the stairs and the slight sounds of Slugger closing down the house for the night.

She honestly had no idea what answer she would give to Steve’s proposal. Her head told her one thing but her heart told her another.

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**No journal entries for Friday night.**

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# Saturday

***“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams”*** • ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

IN THE HOUR JUST BEFORE DAWN Slugger dreamed of an endless procession of horses filing nose to tail through the yard gate and into the barn—and only himself left alone for all eternity to look after them. The dream receded as he segued from sleep to near consciousness and rolled over to face the partially opened bedroom window, where faint moonlight penetrated the new chintz curtains. Seconds passed before neural pathways made the connection between between dreamstate and reality. Conditioned to responding to noises in the night other than the normal creaks and groans of the old farmhouse, Slugger got out of bed to peer through the curtains. And though there was nothing to be seen moving in the spectral light of the waning moon, he felt compelled to investigate.

Slapping on his knit cap and easing open the door to his room, Slugger made his way to the mudroom and slipped bare feet into wellies. Pulling a barncoat over his nightshirt and retrieving a torch off the shelf, he quietly opened the outside door. The broken yard gate, which had been propped up against the stone pillars, had been moved aside slightly. He immediately identified as unshod hooves on cobbles the muffled thwocks emanating from the rear of the yard. Somehow he knew exactly what he was going to find and broke out in goosebumps.

Slugger flicked on the torch. The feeble cone of light reflected from a green eye and disclosed the shadowy outlines of a light-colored horse standing near the trough.

“Oh, it’s only you,” he grumbled. “What are you doin’ roamin’ around this time o’ night?”

So this was the celebrated and mysterious Squirrel. Certainly wasn’t much to look at, Slugger mused, wondering at his own lack of fear. Small, ugly and misshapen... looking in fact like what you’d expect to find in a knacker’s yard... shaking and weaving as if about to keel over.

“You’re supposed to be tucked up in bed, not running around looking for more mischief to get into.” Not that the animal appeared capable of running anywhere at the moment. It just regarded him dolefully with a long twist of slobber hanging off its lower lip.

“Hello? Are you... er... in there?” Slugger whispered, feeling incredibly silly.

“Are you... uh... stuck or something? Can’t you... er... change back?” Not that Slugger really wanted to see anything like that with his own eyes.

The yellow horse didn’t say anything.

Slugger shrieked and dropped the torch at the feel of a hand on his shoulder. He spun around with fists at the ready.

“Slugger! It’s just me... Steve! What are you doing out here?”

“What are *you* doing out here?” Slugger hissed back.

“I asked first.”

“I heard a strange noise.”

Steve’s face was dubious. “I wasn’t asleep. I saw the light from the torch.” He bent down to pick it up and handed it back. “Didn’t mean to give you a fright. Where did *he* come from?” He inclined his head toward the horse. “I was hoping we’d seen the last of him.”

“Dunno... I just come out here and here he was,” Slugger hedged.

“Slugger... are you alright? I mean... out here in the middle of the night... talking to a horse?”

“Was talkin’ to meself, weren’t I,” Slugger said defensively.

But Steve was shaking his head. “No you weren’t. I was standing right behind you. You were definitely talking to that horse. And where’s Bernard? I noticed his door was open when I came down and he’s not in his room.”

“How would I know where he’s got hisself off to? I ain’t his minder.”

Steve shivered. “Slugger, there’s something off about him. He’s not normal. Nothing’s been the same since he got here. Everything’s gone wrong and we haven’t been ourselves, either. I wish he’d never come here.”

“I feel the same way, son,” Slugger replied fervently. *And you don’t know the half of it!*

“Slugger... you haven’t done anything... foolish, have you?” Steve’s voice was hesitant and Slugger almost chuckled.

“What? Me? You mean like knock him in the head and chuck him in the lake? What you take me for, lad?”

They looked at each for a few seconds and Steve shrugged, glancing at the horse whose nose was now almost touching the ground.

“I suppose we’d better shut this one up...” Steve reached for a lead someone—probably Ron—had forgotten to put away and had left hanging on the fence by the door.

“Ooooh... p’raps we orter just let him go?” Slugger countered uneasily.

“Well, he’s here, isn’t he? Might as well put him in that empty box in the corner.”

Steve expected to encounter some resistance when he looped the lead around the animal’s neck but it seemed willing to let itself be coaxed the short distance to the box, stumbling along the way. There was a water bucket still in the stall which Steve handed out to Slugger to fill.

“I’m not going to bother with a tie-down,” Steve said, securing the bucket in its nook and firmly latching both lower and upper doors. “He’s too lame to run off. I’ll have a look in the morning. We’d better go in. If Dora looked out her window right now she’d think we’ve both lost our minds.”

Slugger followed without comment, having been unable to come up with a single good reason for not imprisoning the yellow horse.

IT WAS ALREADY FULL DAYLIGHT when Slugger was awakened the second time by furious pounding on his bedroom door. “Rise and shine!” It was Ron, arrived early after a covert early morning phone call from Hazel instructing him to come home and act as if nothing had happened. As the older man struggled into his clothes, his senses were assailed with the odors of frying eggs and bacon and a babble of unidentifiable voices amongst the familiar. After hasty ablutions in the lav, he entered the kitchen to find Ron entertaining Elayne’s twin grand-nieces and two unknown young men under Hazel’s bleary-eyed surveillance. Steve was ferrying plates and flatware between the kitchen and the scullery. Dora was pouring coffee from a battered enamelware percolator. Both were managing to avoid eye contact with each other and had false smiles plastered to their faces.

With a bread-dough encrusted hand Dottie regally beckoned Slugger into the scullery where another dark-haired female had her back to him, up to her elbows in hot soapy water in the sink. It was the lovely older niece called... what? Solange, that was it. What in heaven’s name was going on and how had he managed to sleep so late through all that commotion? Returning to her kneading, Dottie provided the explanation over her shoulder.

“Lady Elayne’s nieces—the younger ones, anyway—have volunteered to come watch over the farm so that we all of us can attend the birthday party. And Elayne’s sent two of her young men as well.”

“Well... er... but that’s tomorrow. Why are they here today, then?”

“As you’ve given Steve and Dora the day off to settle their business, Ron and Hazel are going to take Elayne’s four around and show them what needs to be done. After lunch they’re going to the cinema. That should keep them busy and out from underfoot for the rest of the day. I’ve noted a few items that need attention around the house and then you and I are going shopping later.” From a pocket of her duster Dottie produced a frighteningly lengthy list of bullet-pointed chores and an equally daunting inventory of household items to be procured. “Right now we’re going to sit and have our own breakfast. I’ll do the washing up afterward while you show Solange around the place before she goes back to Butler Hall.” Confounded at being upstaged and ordered around in his own domain, Slugger found himself tongue-tied.

As if reading his mind, Solange spoke up. “Not to worry. The twins and Elayne’s grooms have been around horses all their lives and they will take very good care of yours.”

On second thought, Slugger thought, it wasn’t so bad after all having his day organized by someone else and being the served instead of the server for a change. Dottie shooed them out the door when they were done eating.

With an enticing smile, Solange slipped her arm through his. “And now, Slugger... or should I call you Edward? I should like a brief tour of your little farm.”

“Wouldn’t the young ladies rather be goin’ to the party?” Slugger asked as they walked.

“Not at all. They are exchange students at Hog... at an academy up north, you see—and this counts as part of a service trip they are doing, after which they will write up a report.”

“Oh.” *Must be some snooty girls’ school*, Slugger thought, having never heard of it.

With the morning feed done, horses, ponies and donkeys began congregating in the yard, waiting to be turned out to pasture and Slugger pointed out various animals and their names and approximate ages.

“What a wonderful thing you are doing here for these old ones!” Solange exclaimed as Ron and one of the twins guided the little herd out the yard gate and down the lane toward the pasture. Dora was issuing directives to the other twin and Elayne’s two young men, already equipped with barrows and forks. Steve and Hazel were busy administering to one of the older donkeys that had gone off its feed.

Solange admired Queen Maude impatiently awaiting her turn to be conducted to the west pasture and turfed out for the day, pronouncing her *‘une vache très belle.’*

“I would like to see this American mustang Elayne tells me you are keeping here... I didn’t see him with the others?” she said ingenuously.

Slugger nodded and headed toward the only box which still had closed doors. “He’s up here.”

“You keep him locked up in the dark?” The question didn’t quite mask a strong note of disapproval. “He doesn’t run with the others? You should not do this. He should be free.”

“He only showed up last night,” Slugger answered defensively. “He were runnin’ loose up until then. Steve must’ve kept him back on account of he’s gone lame.”

“Lame? In what way, lame?” The lovely Solange was obviously concerned or displeased and that made Slugger even more anxious.

Before he could answer her question, they had arrived at the box at the far end of the block. Slugger fumbled open the latch to the upper door... only to find an empty stall. The woman gave him an enigmatic sideways glance and his mind went blank.

“Someone musta turned him out earlier this morning,” Slugger offered as an excuse.

“Or perhaps the little *écureuil* let himself out?”

“Eh? Eckoo wot?” Slugger was nonplussed.

“An *écureuil*... is, how you say?...a squirrel. Inventive little creatures, are they not? Always getting into and out of places they shouldn’t be.

Slugger agreed vehemently. They strolled back to where Solange had parked the sparkling new LandRover that had conveyed herself and the four youngsters from Butler Hall, beside which Follyfoot’s decrepit vehicle looked even shabbier than usual.

“And what of your young American himself... my kinsman? Is he recovered today?”

“Oh... er... yes. Right as rain. Up early this morning... very early. Probably gone for a walk or something.”

“I see. It’s been a pleasure, Monsieur Slugger. We will see you at tomorrow’s fête, I presume?”

“Oh yes m’am. Wouldn’t miss it for the world. Dora’s like a daughter to me.”

“I’m sure she is. *Adieu*, then!”

Solange bestowed a chaste kiss on Slugger’s cheek, pressed his hand lightly, climbed into the Rover and motored away.

As Slugger watched her recede in the distance, his thoughts tumbled over one another like puppies in a box. Breakfast before chores twice in one week. Phenomena of which he dared not speak. Lovely ladies who would rather shovel horse manure than go to a party. One young man who couldn’t keep his counsel and another who kept his heart shuttered. Yet another who might be nothing more than an illusion. Or was the horse the illusion? A young woman with a heart so full of love it threatened to consume her. The promise of a long-awaited and long-overdue union of souls. The intrusion of otherworldly designs into the insular, well-ordered universe that was Follyfoot. He felt as if he’d been walking through a dream all week, one that must end soon after which all would be back to normal. Sighing and consulting his ‘honeydew’ list—at the top, oiling all the hinges on all the doors—he went to fetch a can of oil.

Dottie had been watching through the window and shaking her head ruefully. *Men... so easily distracted by a pretty face!* Not that she was at all perturbed about the one that had just left. No, that particular one, no matter how lovely, was unattainable—she already belonged to someone else... and Dottie was sure she knew who that someone was.

Lunch was a jolly affair with much good-natured ribbing and peals of laughter and high praises for Dottie’s culinary efforts. On the surface Steve and Dora appeared to be joining in but the strain on both their faces belied their true states of mind and they seemed to have very little to say to each other. Slugger and Dottie caught each other’s eye from time to time, wordlessly communicating their apprehensions. Their offers of washing-up assistance having been turned down, Ron and Hazel and the four Butler people piled into the Rover.

Slugger watched them drive away before remembering that he’d meant to ask who had let the yellow horse out of its box. There was no way the animal could have let itself out—but it simply wasn’t there anymore. He returned to the house and Dottie’s comforting presence.

As soon as Slugger reentered the kitchen, Dottie was right there, quivering with indignation, worry lines creasing her forehead. “Quick, man! Now we’re alone for a minute, what on earth happened here after I left. I go upstairs to strip the beds and what do I find... Hazel’s sicked in her wastebasket, Bernard’s room smelling like an Eyetalian bordello... empty wine bottles everywhere... and what happened with Steve and Dora? Did he pop the question?”

Slugger held up a weary hand. “If I could get a word in edgewise...”

“And have you seen Bernard since we sent him upstairs? He’s nowhere to be found. And there’s Hazel looking like the morning after the night before and when I asked Dora she got all upset. Hmmpphh! Turn my back for five minutes and the entire household is in an uproar...”

“Woman, please!” Slugger interjected loudly. Dottie stopped in mid-tirade, her mouth hanging open. “I’ll tell you what I know, which isn’t much.

“Yes? Go on...”

Slugger filled her in on the result of Steve and Dora’s private conference, his own later participation, Dora’s discovery when she went upstairs, and today’s plan for Steve and Dora to go off riding on their own.

“My goodness, he’s certainly an energetic little rascal!” Dottie commented.

“I wouldn’t be so hasty to blame Bernard... Hazel is too wise beyond her years, if you know what I mean. Let Ron deal with Hazel. I’m too tired to think about it.”

“Poor dear... you do look like you could use a nap,” Dottie declared sympathetically.

“I believe I just could,” he replied wearily, the missed hours of sleep having caught up with him.

STEVE SHOT THROUGH ON HIS WAY TO THE LOO JUST AS SLUGGER WAS HEADING TOWARD HIS ROCKER. Slugger waited for him in the hall, listening with alternating concern and amusement to the sounds of energetic vomiting on the other side of the door. He recalled that he, too, had been reduced to nausea on the occasion of his proposal to Tiny all those years ago.

“A word in private, lad, if you don’t mind,” Slugger said when Steve emerged white-faced, pointing to his own bedroom door which he closed behind them after they had entered.

Steve watched curiously as Slugger delved into the depths of his top bureau drawer and came up with a small blue velvet jeweler’s box which he then presented to Steve.

“What’s this, then?” Steve asked.

“Look inside and you’ll see.”

Steve opened the box to reveal an exquisite smoky topaz ring with tiny diamonds set within a delicate tracery of celtic design at either side. As Steve held it up to the light of Slugger’s bedside lamp, the oval stone caught and reflected gold and amber rays like the corona of a setting sun.

“It’s beautiful. Where does this come from, Slugger?”

“This was Dora’s grandmother’s engagement ring. It came down to the Colonel for when he married, to present to his bride... but of course he never did. The Colonel held it in trust for Dora, for when she married. He intended to give it to her young man to give to her. The Colonel said Dora was very close to her Grandmother Maddocks and always loved this ring, and knew it were supposed to come to her eventually, but she probably ain’t thought of it in years.”

“But... how did you come by it?”

“When the Colonel knew he was dying, he give it to me with my promise to give it to her young man when the time come. I reckon now’s the time. When you’re out riding today, when you find just the right place, you stop and give her the ring and ask her *again* will she have you. Tell her how much you love her. Go on now, keep it somewhere safe so’s you don’t lose it.”

Steve contemplated the ring as if it embodied some magical power that would ensure Dora’s accession to his request. Carefully he closed the box and stowed it in the zippered chest pocket of his windcheater. He understood that his petition of the previous evening might have come across as an insincere appeasement of Dora’s wrath. He realized he would have to approach her again—the right way—the formal and romantic way and in an appropriate setting. Once

again, Slugger had accurately identified a prime opportunity. Dora was never happier than when outdoors on a fine day, on horseback and surrounded by splendid countryside.

Dottie joined Slugger at the window, watching as Steve walked over to where Dora waited with their horses, then as they spoke briefly, mounted and rode away.

“Did you give him the ring?”

“In his pocket.”

“That’s that, then,” Dottie sighed. “Now, old man, you just set yourself down and I’ll bring you a nice cuppa.”

As Slugger drifted off with the newspaper over his face, he reflected that it been a long time since a woman had made a fuss over him. A very long time. And he liked it, he most certainly did like it.

IT WAS JUST LIKE THE EARLY DAYS, DORA ON COPPER SETTING THE PACE and the path and Steve keeping Alex a half-length behind. Instead of turning south toward the lakes and their usual trail, Dora went north along the driveway and crossed over the two-lane county road. He figured she was heading toward the River Wharfe, a mile and a half north of Follyfoot as the crow flies, and was pleased. They hadn’t ridden in that direction in many months and it was one their favorite destinations, with a secluded tree-shaded path that meandered along the river’s course. The only drawback was that except for occasional short increments, the path necessitated traveling single file.

It had been a lonely and confusing morning for Steve in spite of the bustle created by four extra people. All morning long and throughout lunch Steve had contrived to remain in Dora’s immediate vicinity, anxiously seeking to interpret his fate from her guarded expression. She’d remained distant but not icily so. Ever so often she would catch him looking after her and a tiny furrow of what he took to be annoyance would form between her eyes before she turned away to carry on with whatever she was doing—at one point she’d actually said “for heaven’s sake, quit hovering!” and he’d respectfully backed off. She’d had smiles for everyone except him, it seemed like.

Although Steve felt no rancor toward Ron, the redhead had skillfully avoided him as did Hazel who at least had flashed him a sympathetic grin now and then. Slugger and Dottie had addressed him pleasantly but he could see in their eyes their full awareness of the fact that his future at Follyfoot depended on Dora’s decision. If she refused him, as he increasingly expected she would, then he would *have* to leave. A cold hard knot of dread had lodged under his breastbone and there it remained. He thought about the possibility of having to start over away from the people he’d grown to feel kinship with—and the woman he now realized he truly loved and wanted to be with forever. This feeling of attachment and the attendant fear of having it wrenched away was nothing new and unfamiliar—he had experienced it many times, but never before had it caused him such physical illness that he’d had to throw up.

He tried to marshal his thoughts toward a positive outcome. That Dora had agreed to go riding with him was encouraging although she’d hardly spoken throughout the morning. That Slugger had given him the ring indicated that Slugger, at least, was anticipating success. He patted the pocket of his jacket to reassure himself that the velvet box rode securely in place.

Immured as he was in these dour thoughts, Steve was unprepared when Copper pulled up sharply, causing Alex to blunder into him and setting both horses to snorting with indignation. Directly in front of them and blocking the way stood Bernard’s ugly yellow horse, looking no better than it had during the night. The animal whickered and turned away, advancing at a painfully uncoordinated gait along the path before stopping and turning its head to look at them.

Dora then turned her own head and met Steve's puzzled look with her own. "What's wrong with him? He's acting like he's got into some fermented apples."

"Looks like he wants us to follow him," Steve offered.

"Then I suppose we should. We were going in that direction anyway."

She clucked to Copper and they moved forward. It became obvious in short order that Squirrel was indeed leading them somewhere as he would periodically pause and look behind to see if they were still following.

They reached the Wharfe and crossed over at a shallows, where Dora reined Copper westward to follow the yellow horse along the path on the north side of the small river. Continuing on to the Harrogate Bridge, Squirrel paused and glanced left and right with eerily human attention, waiting for traffic to pass before traversing the bridge to the south side and attaining the portions of the Harewood Estate that were accessible to riders. Through undulating meadows, Squirrel unerringly led them to the summit of the highest tor in the area—one of the most favored scenic spots in the park, where groundskeepers had thoughtfully installed a wooden bench for footsore ramblers and a two-tiered fountain for the refreshment of horses and their riders. A trio of immense ancient oaks provided shade and the view from the bench was spectacular, overlooking thousands of acres of parkland and woods with the blue-gray hills of the Yorkshire Dales in the far background.

Long ago Dora and Steve had had the foresight to always carry long leads and leave halters on under bridles for the times they wanted to dismount and let the horses graze. These they now clipped to the halters and tied Copper and Alex where they, too, could enjoy the lush grass along with Squirrel while their human companions arrayed themselves on the bench and drank in the scenery.

With one booted foot tucked under her, Dora presented a three-quarters profile to Steve, who sat stiffly erect with both feet on the ground, his hands clenched nervously in his lap and his eyes firmly fixed on the horizon. He was afraid to move, to speak, to breathe. An eternity of minutes dragged by as he waited for her to say something. Finally... she did.

"Yes."

"Yes?" He wasn't sure he'd actually heard the word. Maybe he was just imagining it. But no, as he slowly turned to face her, he saw a ghost of the smile he'd been praying for.

"Yes, I'll marry you."

He felt the breath he'd been holding leak out of his lungs.

"You will?"

"Didn't I just say so."

Wordlessly Steve got up and moved to stand in front of her before sinking to his knees and laying his head in her lap with his arms wrapped around her waist. He felt her hand gently stroking his head. When he looked up, it was to find his old Dora's face—the one he hadn't seen in so long a time—smiling sweetly as tears glided down her cheeks. Then they were both on their feet and embracing. Neither one had noticed that Squirrel had been sidling ever closer until he was cropping grass practically at Steve's feet. Suddenly he raised his head and head-butted Steve in the rear.

"Hey! Do you mind? A little privacy here!" Steve yelped before turning to kiss Dora's forehead.

Dora pushed away and held him at arm's length, studying his face with mock perplexity.

"Didn't Wendy and Tina teach you any better than that?" she teased lightly.

“Wendy... Tina...? What...?” Steve was disconcerted by this unfamiliar boldness, when she didn’t lower her head in the old familiar way and peek disarmingly from under her lashes. Instead, Dora faced him steadily, placing one finger on his lips to shush him. Her voice, too, was steady and the tears evaporated.

“If you’re going to learn from tutors, go for the best you can get. This is what I learned from mine...”

When they came up for air a few minutes later, Steve murmured, “If this is what Bernard taught you, I’m thinking maybe I should be giving him a medal rather than beating him to a bloody pulp.”

“Yup. That’s what that was all about... a remedial course in kissing.”

He frowned at this oblique reference to the circumstance that had resulted in their being here today.

“Dora... I...”

“I can’t and won’t apologize for what happened between me and Bernard... which, by the way, was nothing more than a kiss. It was something I had to do, to prove something to myself. You’re the only man I’ve ever loved or ever will love. The question now is, do you love me back?”

Steve almost imperceptibly nodded his head. “I do. I have. From the first. I didn’t want to but I couldn’t help myself.”

“Then why couldn’t you say it?”

“I told you Dora, love changes things. Love hurts.”

“So you said. And you also said we couldn’t be together, that it would never work for us. And yet here we were, almost two years later, going neither backward nor forward. I’m ready to go forward now, and I want us to go together.”

“You were the one who didn’t want change.”

“Ah... that was then. This is now. I think I’ve grown up a little since then.”

“I just don’t see...”

“Steve, sometimes you just have to take things on faith, like Bernard said. Just because you can’t see something doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. Just because you haven’t experienced something wonderful doesn’t mean that something wonderful won’t happen to you some day... if you let it. That’s the key. I love you, Steven Ross, and there’s nothing you can do about it. We belong together for always.”

She cupped her hands on the sides of his face and he responded with the wealth of passion she had always suspected simmered just below the surface of this reserved insular man.

“I love you, Dora Maddocks,” he whispered in her ear, “and there’s absolutely nothing you can do about that.”

They kissed again as Copper, Alex and Squirrel looked on with great interest, as well as a pair of would-be lovebirds who’d been expecting to utilize the bench themselves and were disgruntled upon having to seek a suitable romantic spot elsewhere.

“I almost forgot... I have something for you...” Steve removed the velvet box from his pocket and opened it.

“Oh Steve!” Dora gasped. “Grandmother’s ring... how... where...?” Unmistakeable happiness radiated from her as he removed the ring and placed it on her finger with a brief accounting of its acquisition.

“This is just a token... I’ll get you a real engagement ring later... a diamond.”

“No, no! This is perfect... anyway, I wouldn’t be able to wear it—or anything other than a plain band—while I’m working... but oh, Steve!”

They didn’t even notice, as they caught up their mounts and prepared to return home, that the yellow horse had disappeared once again.

DUSK HAD DESCENDED BY THE TIME THEY REACHED HOME and put the horses away. At first they thought themselves alone as the Rover and the Cortina were both missing, but entering quietly through the mudroom door they could hear the piano being gently played in the family room. A note left on the kitchen table explained that Ron and Hazel had already finished evening chores and taken themselves off to town, as had Slugger and Dottie, but that they’d all be returning by bedtime. Supper had been set aside for them, sealed in aluminum foil and placed in the warming oven. Dora was the first to spot the backpack parked in readiness in the hall.

“Looks like Bernard is leaving us sooner rather than later.”

Steve made no comment.

“I’d like to speak to him alone, if you don’t mind...?” It wasn’t a question asked lightly, Steve understood. It was a test. A twinge of jealousy reared its ugly head and he immediately squelched it.

“Of course, love. I’ll just go check on the rest of the horses while you tell him the good news.” She would never know the effort it cost him to maintain that light-hearted tone as he retreated to the yard.

*Comfort me with apples*, Dora thought as the now-familiar scent accompanied her down the hallway to the family room where she silently opened the door. In semi-darkness with only one small lamp lit, Bernard was playing and singing softly to himself... or was it for her benefit?... in his pitch-perfect pure tenor. It was a tune she knew well: Carole King’s “Will You Love Me Tomorrow?”

She was sure he was aware of her entrance but he finished the piece before deliberately lowering the keyboard cover and sliding around on the bench.

“Will we still love each other tomorrow, do you think? Will we be happy?” She posed the question tentatively in a very small voice.

“You have to trust that you will, Dora.”

“Bernard... if you’re really from the future... wouldn’t you know... couldn’t you tell... what’s going to happen to us?”

Bernard stood up and walked over to her, shaking his head. “It doesn’t work that way. See, I didn’t know you... any of you... until I got here. And I won’t know what your future holds until I go back... if that makes any sense?”

“So there’s nothing at all you can tell me?”

“Well... I didn’t say *that*... exactly,” Bernard said carefully. “There is... something.”

Dora’s eyes widened with hope. “Will there be... children?”

“Yes.”

“Oh! ... and... grandchildren?”

“Yes... at least one, I’m pretty sure. But don’t quote me on that. I could be wrong.”

Dora fought back tears of happiness mixed with sorrow. She hated goodbyes; they had always brought her sadness. “Oh, Bernard! Must you go tonight? Can’t you stay for my birthday party?”

Bernard grinned his quirky grin and took her left hand, holding it up so that the ring was prominently displayed. "Mission accomplished. I have to go home—back to my own time and my own love. She'll be along to pick me up in a few minutes."

"I understand. I'm going to miss you, though. We all will, I think. Even Steve."

"And I'll miss you guys, too. It's been an interesting week, to say the least."

"Thank you, Bernard. I'll never really understand how you did it, but you've saved my life... and his."

Bernard shrugged. "I didn't really do anything at all... just talked and listened and put a few ideas in your pretty little heads... both of yours."

"Will we ever see you again?"

"Probably not... but then again, life is strange and you never know. Trust me. Be happy. Be good to each other, okay?"

"Okay." Dora's voice broke a little but she held firm. "Can I ask you a personal question before you go?"

"You can *ask*."

"Just for the record... what's your real name... your full name?"

"It's Bernardo Florentinus Di Camerata... but don't tell anyone."

"You don't look Italian."

"I'm not... it's a long story. My parents were Renaissance aficionados with delusions of grandeur. It's a bit embarrassing, to tell the truth."

"Can I ask another question... about the future?"

"If you just gotta," Bernard sighed.

"This other man... the one I would have ended up with if Steve hadn't... can you tell me who he was... is?"

"I shouldn't... because he wasn't the right one and it would have ended badly... but..." Bernard whispered a name in her ear and her jaw fell open in astonishment.

"You have to be joking!" she marveled.

"You'll say goodbye to everyone for me?"

"I will, yes. Can I make one last request before you go?"

"What's that?"

"Could I have a hug? Just a small one. How dangerous can that be?"

They hugged and swiftly broke apart at the sound of an approaching vehicle. Exiting the kitchen door, Bernard hoisted his backpack and went to meet it. He put the backpack in the boot before getting in on the passenger side. Although it was fully dark outside, Dora recognized the car as one of Elayne's although she couldn't make out who was driving. Steve materialized beside her and took her ringed hand as the car purred away.

"I'd be lying if I said I was sorry to see him go. But if it wasn't for him..."

BEFORE THEY COULD REENTER THE HOUSE the Cortina and the LandRover arrived simultaneously. The happy news was disseminated to the accompaniment of cheers and whoops of congratulations with vast relief on the part of Slugger and Dottie. Slugger hunted up a couple of bottles of brandy he'd been keeping back for just such a special occasion and toasts were made all around. The formal announcement would be made at the party tomorrow. Bernard's name wasn't brought up once; it was as if everyone understood—telepathically on some level—that he was gone from their lives and wouldn't be returning.

As it was too late for Dottie to drive home, she agreed to stay over the bedroom recently vacated by Bernard. The celebrants all tipsily bade each other goodnight and the old stone farmhouse grew still.

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## FIELD JOURNAL: SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 1974 • 9:00PM

**Location:** *Guest bedroom, Butler Hall*

*Honestly! The inconveniences those Normals cause the rest of us--they have NO idea! Four transformations in one twenty-four hour period just to get the job done!*

*Good thing Steve and Dora are both fairly adept at horse body language and followed right where I wanted them to go. That was the most romantic trysting place I could find on short notice, not being familiar with the area. Seems to have worked out alright. And wasn't that just the sweetest First Kiss ever! (For them, anyway.) Pretty good grass there, too.*

*Aside from having possibly the worst hangover of any of my lives, a satisfactory conclusion to the day, the week AND the mission.*

*Was it worth it? She Who Always Has The Last Word assures me that it was. And of course, it ain't over until it's over and that won't be until they're actually married. Fortunately for me, the terms of the agreement extended only to getting them together and if possible getting them engaged, which they now officially are--an enormous step forward for both of them.*

*Although couples counseling is not my forte and never has been, I've never in my career encountered two people more desperately deserving or in need of each other yet more pig-headedly determined to keep it from happening. Privately I have my reservations as to whether such a union can survive. They each still have a long way to go before they can truly understand and appreciate each other's perceptions. But they both have so much love in their hearts--maybe that will be enough to bind them together until they get there.*

*SHE and I agree that it would probably be best that I not put in an appearance at Dora's party but we've come up with a happy solution, so I'll still get to see what's going on and later on can get the details from Herself.*

**Note to self:** *Probably shouldn't have confided that other dude's name because for the next forty years, every time she and Steve have a falling out, she'll wonder if she wouldn't have been better off with so-and-so. On the other hand, speculation about roads not taken is what keeps life interesting. We make our choices and we take our chances!*

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# Sunday

***“All our dreams can come true if we have the courage to pursue them”*** • WALT DISNEY

Breakfast carried on amidst animated conversation among the reassembled cast—plus one—from the previous day’s meal, the four Butler youth having been once again delivered by the inestimable Solänge along with one of the young female staff of Butler Hall. Dottie had already made a fast trip home to retrieve her party clothes and was imparting instructions to Alice, their au pair for the day.

In the crowded kitchen, Solänge clapped her hands. “Attention please!”

“I have explicit instructions from Elayne. The ladies of the household are to have no contact with horses or housework this morning. They are to spend the next few hours preparing for Dora’s party—and nothing else. I am to ensure this. Sluggar, you will see to it that your two young men are scrubbed and presentably attired by noon. And yourself, of course.

“Terry, Frankie, Richard, Robert... you go now so Alice can clear the table. Dottie, Dora, Hazel... upstairs with you right now.”

“Right!” Sluggar chimed in, fixing a gimlet eye on his two charges. “Steve, into the bath with you. Ron, we’re investigatin’ your closet and you’d better have a suit and tie in there like I told you. An’ I know I told both you boys to get haircuts,” he scolded. “Well... too late now.”

He was diverted long enough to help Solänge bring in two large suitbags and a heavy carryall and get them upstairs before trotting to the other end of the long upstairs hall to Ron’s room.

Dora went to the shower first while back in her room Dottie and Hazel examined the contents of Solänge’s carryall as she emptied it on the bed... hair dryers, curling irons, jewelry cases and other mysterious accoutrements of feminine camouflage including a multi-compartmented makeup case which the others concluded must be Elayne’s as Solänge did not appear to be wearing any makeup at all. She hung the two suitbags over the wardrobe doors and unzipped it, revealing the garments inside.

“As you both missed out on the shopping trip last week, Elayne took the liberty of selecting a few items for you to choose from... she hopes you will accept these as gifts.”

Hazel’s eyes grew round as she removed one lovely sundress after another from the bag Solänge had indicated was hers. There were six altogether and she couldn’t imagine how she could make up her mind. Dottie’s bag contained four outfits and she had no difficulty at all in deciding on a simple cotton caftan in muted hues of blue and green. The staid dove gray twinset she’d brought from home now seemed positively dowdy in comparison.

Hazel dithered between two dresses until Dora emerged from the lav wrapped in a bath towel with a turbaned head.

“What dya think, Dora?” Hazel held up both frocks. “The coral or the beige?”

“Coral... definitely coral with your tan!” Solänge agreed with her choice so coral it was. Hazel tried it on briefly before taking her turn in the bath, as did Dottie with her choice. Both were amazed at how perfectly Elayne had estimated their sizes.

Solange leaped into action, insisting on rolling Dora's hair on oversize brush curlers and parking her under the hood hairdrayer even though Dora protested she wasn't the curly-haired type. Hazel was next, with the same complaint but allowing herself to be curled as well. Lastly, Dottie... whose naturally curly hair needed no assistance. Solange determined Dora was done and removed her to the makeup table, moving Hazel under the hood. While Dora began applying her face, Solange took charge of Dottie's mop of curls.

Assembled in the family room by a quarter past eleven, Slugger considered with satisfaction that they made a distinguished trio of gentlemen in their dress finery, even though it had taken a battle of wills between himself and Ron to get the redhead to forsake his beloved denims. In the end it had required dire threats from Steve to convince Ron he had to wear a necktie and assistance from Slugger in getting it tied properly. Slugger had examined both of them with the diligence of a governess in a nursery to ensure clean fingernails and spitshined shoes and found everything in order. Trying to avoid wrinkling their trousers and the backs of their blazers, they now perched on the edges of their chairs, waiting for the womenfolk to appear... as males have been genetically adapted to do ever since the first caveman asked the first cavewoman out on a date.

Solange was the first one down the stairs. Slugger was disappointed to see that she was still dressed as she'd arrived that morning in jeans and blouse.

"You're not going to be at the party?" he asked.

"I'll change when we get back to the Hall... fifteen minutes, tops. Then I shall be yours to command, monsieur... that is, if Madame Dorothy is generous enough to share you." She gestured toward the staircase as Dottie made her appearance, graciously transformed into a stylish matron with a loosely bouffant hairstyle that drew attention away from her plump little body and made her seem taller. Her naturally flawless complexion had been enhanced in some not immediately noticeable way that emphasized the bright blueness of her eyes, as did the floaty caftan.

Slugger was spellbound. He did notice, however, that the wedding ring she customarily wore had been replaced with a star sapphire and that she had allowed Solange to apply a quick coat of dusty pink nail enamel.

Hazel was next down in her A-line linen dress of vibrant coral that matched her nail polish and accentuated her all-over Mediterranean tan. A single strand of pearls glowed against the skin of her neck. Solange had decreed she wear her hair loose and it rippled in gentle waves down her back.

Ron couldn't think of a single word—for once in his life, completely speechless.

Steve's throat constricted in wonder when the birthday girl herself made her descent. Solange had done Dora's hair up with tendrils framing her face. Her simple sleeveless dress—a pale golden yellow cotton voile with a sweetheart neckline—was fitted at the waist, with a skirt that flared gently at the hips and brushed the tops of her knees. It was a woman's dress—not a young girl's gauzy, swishy, psychedelic minidress such as she had worn from time to time in the past. And Dora looked every inch the elegant woman in it. With it she wore a thin gold necklace and tiny gold studs in her ears. The topaz ring blazed with the brightness of the sun. The three men stared at her in fascination as she negotiated the staircase and favored them with a twirl. There was not a single thing to suggest this was a female who dealt with manure and worse every day of her life.

"You like?" she inquired demurely. The question was directed generally but meant for Steve, and she could see in his appreciative dark eyes that he did like, very much.

Slugger was grinning as proudly as if he had single-handedly been responsible for producing these magnificent birds of paradise from under a top hat. He bowed before each of them before taking Dottie's arm.

"Shall we, ladies?"

THE PARTY STARTED OFF UNREMARKABLY AS SUCH FÊTES USUALLY DO but soon gained momentum. Almost all of Dora's friends and acquaintances were in attendance with good wishes and presents, and many of Sir Hughes' associates and Elayne's cronies, not all of them known to Dora but equally celebratory. It seemed that anyone from the village and beyond who had ever come to know Dora over the past three years had been invited. Only a few tactless souls wondered out loud why the honoree's parents hadn't made an effort to attend their only child's coming-of-age party. Others were of the shocked opinion that they simply hadn't been invited. Caterers wove effortlessly throughout the throng and champagne flowed freely.

Steve's heart sank as he took in the crowd and at first could see only a throng of elite landed gentry. He didn't belong here. Only gradually did he begin to notice the ordinary people, his people, mingling among them—laborers, farmers, shopkeepers and their wives all in their Sunday best and all having an excellent time.

It had been Steve's intention to stick by Dora's side like a burr to a new saddleblanket but that proved to be impossible. He was constantly being jostled aside. Before the irritation could build into a thunderhead, however, he had a new problem with which to contend: he found himself inundated by middle-aged women from every walk of life, from housewives to titled matrons, intent on foisting off their unclaimed baggage in the form of unattractive, unhappy and unwilling daughters. Many of these were women who wouldn't otherwise have favored him with the time of day had they recognized him as that former jailbird Steve, that bad element their neighbor Colonel Maddocks had had the effrontery to bring into their community. Even when Steve gave his name, they still didn't make the connection.

No sooner than he extricated himself from one determined mother's grasp, another would appear... or a sadly hopeful spinster obviously some years his senior. Several extremely attractive young ladies who had arrived with other gentlemen contrived to pass phone numbers hastily scribbled on cocktail napkins. Two gaudily overdone divorcees made outright propositions which embarrassed him greatly.

He jumped into a self defensive posture when a throaty voice spoke up from behind. "There you are, darling! I've been looking all over for you." At first he didn't recognize the statuesque beauty resplendent in a silver brocade sheath, with her hair done up in a severe French twist and looking every inch the haute couture model. The pair of matchmaking cows currently competing for his attention took one look and retreated with alacrity under Solange's glacial glares. The onslaughts abruptly ceased.

"I've come to rescue you before they eat you alive," She murmured in his ear, steering him toward the perimeter of the parade grounds. "You'll be safe with me." They walked slowly and Steve was finally able to look around for the other members of his party. Slugger and Dottie blended in seamlessly with a gaggle of nattily dressed older couples hovering around the open bar.

Solange pointed toward another corner where the voracious hunter-mothers had regrouped and aligned their virtual spears on a stricken Ron, who could hardly be mistaken for anyone else. His flaming red hair seemed to be standing on end. Ron's reputation wasn't much better than Steve's... but he'd never been imprisoned and his father had buckets of money, which was good enough for them.

“Dora and Hazel are having entirely too much fun dashing the hopes of the adoring multitudes.” Solange gestured to the far side of the lawn where the two young women were holding court at the center of a circle of admirers. “You may have to wait a while to make your announcement.”

A revelation came to Steve as he strolled the grounds with this gorgeous woman whose only adornment was a plain gold wedding band. Men both envied and respected other men who had beautiful wives. Both single men and men with women attached to them approached Steve and Solange freely and introduced themselves. And as with the mothers, none of them identified him as the *same* Steve Ross who had been living in their community for years. Steve began to understand how appearance and comportment counted, and how if you looked and acted like a person of substance, people would assume you were and treat you accordingly.

Insights flowed thick and fast after that and Steve wondered where his head had been the last three years. There had never been any question in his mind as to his position on the social scale; he belonged solidly in the disadvantaged working classes—the “us”—whereas Dora was one of “them”... the overprivileged upper class. He now saw clearly that Dora had recused herself from that world long ago, didn’t seem to miss it or plan on rejoining it at some future time. She had recognized early on the emergence of a “middle class” and tried to explain to him on numerous occasions that this was a place in which anyone could thrive, where your value in society was based on what you made of yourself, not the circumstance of your birth... a totally alien concept to a miner’s son who, had his father lived, would probably have been expected to follow in his footsteps.

Dora hadn’t planned on becoming an heiress any more than he had envisioning marrying one and it had been incredibly stupid to continue punishing her due to an accident of birth and a twist of fate. It suddenly occurred to Steve that the very business they planned to build together—training horses for those who could afford to keep them for sport, recreation or entertainment—necessitated business and social involvement with the very class of people he’d been raised to despise... the affluent ones. He was going to have to undertake some major revisions of attitude to deal with this new direction in his life. And Bernard was right... higher education was going to be essential.

As the afternoon waned the crowd began thinning. The so-called “commoners”—the working people—had homes and farms they had to get back to, children to tend, livestock to feed or milk, shops to close up. The disappointed hunter-mothers dejectedly began gathering up their redundant progeny and departing. Party-minded singles realized they still had time to descend on other parties in the district or make the rounds of their favorite watering holes before closing time. There was still a fair number of “quality” folks milling around and Steve was able to study them more closely than he ever had before.

Solange had said very little as they walked, sensing that Steve seemed to be working through some issues, but now she slowed and directed his attention to the white rail fencing separating the house grounds from the nearest pasture. A cluster of curious horses had lined up along the partition, intrigued by the number of humans ambling aimlessly on the other side. Among them was the familiar stubby figure of Squirrel, looking straight at Solange with an almost humanly pleading expression of exasperation.

“Look who’s come to visit,” Solange commented needlessly. She glided over to the fence with Steve in tow and put her hand out to stroke the ugly horse’s muzzle.

“We’ll be home soon, cher,” she murmured and Steve puzzled over the meaning. She then perambulated in the general direction of a sizeable clump of guests gathered at a single round table while other smaller groups were scattered here and there across the lawn.

Sir Hughes Butler—nicknamed “Baby Huey” by Elayne after an iconic American comic book character—was regaling Slugger, Dottie and another elderly gentleman with anecdotes concerning a recent salmon fishing adventure. Two older couples, friends of the host and hostess, chatted companionably with several other pairs of younger people including Ron and Hazel... locals who, though not close friends of Steve and Dora, were known to them. They came to a halt alongside Elayne and Dora.

“I ‘spect it’s about time you two kids do your thing so some of these old folks can get on for home,” Elayne drawled and let out with an eardrum-shattering whistle. Conversation hushed immediately and all eyes were on Steve and Dora as they approached the big table hand in hand. The outlying groups gathered in as well.

“Listen up, y’all,” Elayne commanded. “Steve Ross and Dora Maddocks have an important announcement to make... take it away, Steve.”

Steve experienced a moment of panic when the words wouldn’t come to him although he’d rehearsed them often enough throughout the morning.

“I’ve... er... I’ve asked Dora to marry me... and I’m very happy to say, she’s consented to do so.” Cheers and politely restrained clapping broke out and various people rushed over to shake hands and offer congratulations. Another round of champagne was produced by the solicitous waitstaff and toasts made to the newly affianced couple. Inquiries were made as to the wedding date, which was as yet undecided.

The party ebbed fairly quickly after that and the remaining guests, other than the Follyfooters, took their leave. Praise and thankyou’s and the usual compliments were handed all around. Dora’s birthday presents were loaded into the new LandRover Solange had been driving and the keys handed over to Steve by Elayne. “Me and Huey’s engagement present to y’all. I’ll have the papers sent over tomorrow.”

Ron, Hazel and Dottie had already piled into the Cortina and Dora was still talking to Elayne. Slugger approached Steve out of Dora’s hearing and drew him aside.

“The Dairymen’s Association Annual Dance is tonight and Ron and me are takin’ our ladies. We’ll be out late... very, *very* late... if you get my drift.” He winked broadly and paused to make sure Steve *was* getting it. “You and Dora are welcome to come along if you like, but...” He left the idea hanging. It was already too dark to make out if the younger man was blushing but Slugger thought he might be.

“Thanks, Slugs... I’ll ask her what she wants to do but I think she’s tired now and so am I.”

THE FIFTEEN MINUTE DRIVE HOME WAS UNEXPECTEDLY AWKWARD AND QUIET. Another of Elayne’s young men followed along in the van that would collect the twins, the other two young men and Alice the au pair from their day’s assignment and whisk them back to Butler Hall. When they reached the farm, Steve did a quick walkaround with the twins and found all in good order. He did note that some of the older horses and ponies which had acquired the normal gauntness and rough coats and rheumy eyes of old age seemed unusually healthier and somehow sleeker, but this he attributed to his own fatigue and inadequate lighting in the older stables. In the meantime, Elayne’s young men quickly removed the many presents from the new LandRover and temporarily deposited them in the family room. Then the six Butler Hall people politely said goodnight and left.

Steve and Dora stood together in the drive, holding hands and curiously shy with each other as the moon rose beyond the hills.

“So... what now?” he finally asked.

Dora pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Well... I suppose... we should talk? Make plans?”

“Plans... er... yes, of course,” Steve fumbled and promptly tossed the ball back into her court. Planning weddings was strictly women’s business as far as he knew. “What would you like, Dora?”

“We could just go to the registrar’s office but that’s so impersonal... I’d like for us to be married in a church or at least a chapel... something nondenominational. A very small wedding... just close friends and family. You’ll have to choose who you want for your best man.”

“That’s easy... I want Slugger.”

“Oh no... you can’t have him... I need him to give me away!”

“But... what about your own father?”

Dora fixed him with a cool gaze. “You know I no longer have a relationship with my parents. If Uncle was still alive I’d have asked him before I’d ask Daddy. In fact, I have no intention of inviting my parents.”

Steve wanted to argue that this was a most uncharitable view until he stopped to picture his own mother and concluded he didn’t care one way or the other whether she was or wasn’t invited.

“But you know...” she continued thoughtfully, “Why couldn’t Slugger be both and Ron be a groomsman? After all, I’d like to have Dottie as matron of honor and Hazel as maid of honor and I don’t think that’s usually done, either.”

“If everyone’s in the bridal party, that would leave no one in the audience,” Steve observed drolly.

“Or we could just get married in the stableyard and the horses could be our witnesses,” Dora retorted.

Realizing the conversation was verging on the inane, they both laughed.

“Seriously...” Dora said, “Right now I’d love a long hot bubble bath... then I could make you some tea or coffee if you like... and we could take it into the family room while we talk...?”

“Sounds like a good way to spend the evening. Why don’t you go ahead upstairs? I’ll make the coffee and start the fire. On second thought, maybe I’ll have a bath myself and then make the coffee.”

They both went indoors and upstairs, exchanging a kiss at the landing before heading to their respective bedrooms to get their bath things.

As Dora shimmied out of her party dress and went to hang it in the wardrobe, her eye fell on Elayne’s special present to her, one that had been handed over secretly with instructions to open it only in the privacy of her bedroom. It now flaunted itself provocatively from its padded hanger: an original Kenzo Takada peignoir set in silky peach-colored satin—elegantly simple, devoid of ribbons, lace or other embellishments. Dora had never owned much less worn or ever considered wearing a garment with such a lasciviously implicit purpose. First time for everything, she challenged herself gamely, extracting from a dresser drawer a packet of Calgon bath oil beads she had purchased on a whim and never used. She considered presentation and removed every bit of makeup. Best he get used to seeing her without.

With no one else besides Steve on the premises, Dora left the bathroom door cracked open. She washed her hair first. Though flattering, the tendrily hairstyle just wasn’t her and she didn’t like the shellac-like feeling of hairspray. Luxuriating in drifts of scented foam, she recalled Elayne’s pithy and succinct opinions regarding management of the male of the species.

Dora had always assumed Steve possessed some practical experience in romance—it certainly wasn’t a subject they had ever discussed, so it was somewhat startling when the thought came to her... *what if he doesn’t? What if he’s just as innocent as I am?* After all, she’d

never personally observed him kissing someone else and wasn't positive he'd ever got up to anything with Tina or Wendy or anyone else, even though she suspected as much. So... *what if?* What a fearful muddle that would be! She tried to visualize the two of them in her double bed with not a clue between them as to where to start or what to do and found herself laughing out loud. She told herself to stop worrying about it and trust in what Bernard and Elayne had both assured her... that nature would take care of itself at the right time.

"Dora?" Steve's voice outside the door brought her out of her reverie. "Is everything all right? I heard you laughing..."

"Yes. I'll be out in a little while. Haven't you had your bath yet?"

"In a few minutes. Are you hungry? Would you like me to fix something for us?"

"Not really, no. Are you?"

"Me neither."

"Steve?"

"Yes?"

"Why are you shouting from the hallway?"

"Um... well... you're in the *bath*..."

"For heaven's sake come around where I can see you."

His head poked around the doorframe cautiously, with his eyes squinched shut.

"I'm covered in bubbles. You can't see anything." One eye eased open to ascertain she wasn't telling a story; then the other eye.

"Can I... er... can I get you anything?"

"A glass of wine would be nice."

"In the *bath*?" His voice was incredulous.

"Well why not? And you could do with one yourself. Oh... and bring the bottle!" she added, feeling quite daring. She recalled a time when she was a very small child and being taken upstairs to the nursery by Nanny. Her father had been approaching the door to the bath, carrying a bottle and two goblets. In the brief moment in passing Dora had glimpsed through the open door her father handing a glass to her mother in the bathtub, the bubbles cascading off her mother's arm as she reached up. Evidently this was something married people did so she felt a little practice was in order now.

But Steve was as scandalized as Nanny had been, refusing to sit on the commode lid and keep her company. Instead, he drained his wine at one go and excused himself. Presently she heard the sound of water running and knew that Steve was in the shower downstairs. Dora stepped from the tub and pulled the plug, quickly towel-drying her hair and wrapping herself in her voluminous terrycloth bathrobe. Darting into her room, she checked the alarm clock on the nightstand—it usually took Steve about five minutes to shower, so that was how long she had to prepare... time enough to blowdry her hair and apply subtly scented bath powder but barely anything else.

By the time the peach negligee fluttered over her head and into place, she was as ready as she'd ever be. She left on only a small bedside lamp and threw a chiffon scarf over it for ambiance. She turned the light off in the hall, leaving the door open, and positioned herself by the opened window where a slight breeze ruffled the curtains and moonlight pooled on the floor.

Finally Steve appeared, hovering in the doorway and looking comically endearing in his pajamas and dressing gown. "Are you ready to come down now? Should I start the coffee and the fire?"

He'd forgotten to comb his damp hair and it fell into his face and stuck out in tufts just like a small boy's. His face, too, put her in mind of a child's... hesitant and hopeful. Dora moved slowly toward him, mindful of the effect the muted lamplight and moonlight would have on the diaphanous material of her gown. Taking his hands in hers, she backed gracefully into the bedroom with Steve in tow.

"Actually, Steve... I'm not planning on going downstairs at all..."

Steve had the most mobile visage she had ever encountered and over the past three years Dora had learned to read it like a primer. She could interpret his emotions almost as quickly as he experienced them and what she saw there now was anxiety and a trace of panic, immediately followed by indecision and then enlightenment and joy. And that's when Dora knew she'd won his heart for good.

He took a halting step toward her. "Dora... are you sure about this?"

She nodded. "More sure than I've ever been in my life. Trust me."

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## **FIELD JOURNAL: SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 1974 • 6:00PM**

**Immediate location:** *In transit... and happy to be going home more or less intact! I'll say this for alternative transportation: sure beats hours on a plane or days on a cruise ship, even though I've spent ten of the fifteen minutes of time travel involved here in the bathroom throwing up. Figured as long as I was in here I might as well make one final entry in this journal.*

*I don't know what might have happened last night after I left or might be happening tonight, but I sure hope they've finally found the happiness they've both been searching for. I'm almost sorry I couldn't stick around for the finale.*

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# One Week Later

## ***EPILOGUE: Sometimes the fool who rushes in gets the job done”*** • AL BERNSTEIN

I was exhausted. Temporal displacement is energy-intensive at best, and having to maintain the outward appearance of a thirty-six years’ younger version of myself—not to mention the alterbeing—for an entire week had just about depleted my last reserves. It always takes a while for my mental processes to readjust to the present from whichever direction I’ve gone but I usually bounce back to one hundred percent reality within a day or two... reality being husband, father of eight, grandfather of many and great-grandfather of a multitude.

It was good to be home, in my own world, in my own time and surrounded by my own loved ones. It was good to once again have access to a laptop, especially since it’ll take months to get over the carpal tunnel syndrome reactivated by all that handwriting. It was good to have a home with all the modern conveniences including a refrigerator that dependably dispenses ice cubes on demand, a reliable cook who dependably caters to the needs of a finicky vegetarian, and a sublime wife who dependably attends to other needs... but we won’t go there.

Solange and I had been home for a week and were thoroughly enjoying our quiet quality time with each other, with emphasis on *quiet* as our first day back was consumed in a frenzy of welcome-home visitations. One would think we’d been away for years instead of a paltry eight days. I mean, we’re blessed to have children who seem to like us well enough to visit frequently and we enjoy their company... in moderation. Trouble is, when they arrive *en masse* with all *their* children, the din can be deafening, so it’s a blessing when they finally go home, too.

We spent subsequent evenings reading or conversing in our matching squashy-cushioned mission-style rockers positioned either side of the fieldstone fireplace. Sometimes I read to her while she sewed. Across a wide expanse of polished heart-of-pine plank floors, soaring thermopane windowwalls sealed out the chill of autumn and afforded a panoramic view of our land, beyond which the snowcapped peaks of Glacier National Park reached up to touch the new moon’s slender sickle. Snow already blanketed the lower slopes. In the distance clustered pinpoints of light spread out along the tableland marked the homes of some of our children. It was all very peaceful.

Firelight accentuated the strands of silver in Solange’s pewter-dark hair and reflected in her remarkable amber eyes, faded now to a lighter, smokier hue. My own hair—though still plentiful and I suppose I should be grateful for that—has gone completely silver although lacking the lustre of hers, and the gooseberry-green eyes of my younger years have long since transitioned to translucent jade. People still refer to us as a “handsome couple” and often remark how fit and youthful we both are “for our age.” Privately, I agree with them. And even after forty years of connubial bliss, I’m still pleased and proud to detect envy in the eyes of other men—many of them much younger than myself.

We had agreed, she and I, to hold off on any discussion of my recent mission until I’d had a chance to reread and polish my notes, which I had now done—not that these would ever be made public. It was, after all, a personal and informal journal.

Solange did mention a bit of mischief on the part of our twins on the day they were in charge of Follyfoot: they practiced a few rejuvenation and health restoration spells on the livestock and then wrote up the results for extra credit at end of term. It will be—or was—many months or years before the caretakers realize that the animals are living longer and healthier lives than could reasonably be expected. (Money well spent in my book! Tuition at that special school of theirs, I mean.)

One of the two conditions I had extracted in exchange for my role in this adventure was the promise that I would be apprised of the end result of my mission. I had just finished reading my journal to Solange and it was time to call in the chits.

The more potent her powers have become with age, the less inclined Solange is to invoke them... very rarely these days and then only for those within the family. But... I know she won't hesitate to delve into the past or the future on any subject of personal interest to her. She no longer requires the assistance of a crystal ball or scrying pool in summoning visions to remain two or three steps ahead of the game and a league ahead of me. She knew exactly what I was thinking about right that very moment.

I was owed the rest of the story and I'd get it, but only if I asked... and I wasn't so sure anymore that I really wanted to know.

Solange pretended to be focusing her attention on the bit of hardanger embroidery she was working in a small oval hoop, but I could tell she was amused by the way her mouth was twitching at the corners. I couldn't help myself. I really did want to know the outcome but first I needed to go fishing for some positive reinforcement.

"That was probably the hardest snow job I've ever taken on. I knew the minute I met those two I'd bitten off more than I could chew."

"You got them together, didn't you?" Trust Solange to take the pragmatic view.

"Getting together isn't necessarily followed by staying together."

"And you had some fun along the way... come on, now... you can at least admit to that."

"That wasn't my fault and you know it! Besides, it was *your* idea to send me back as a young buck."

Solange paused in her needlework.

"Oh Boo... don't tell me you went and fell in love with her, too!"

"Well... maybe... just a little..." I admitted. "I mean, what man wouldn't? They don't make innocents like that anymore."

"No, they don't," she agreed and resumed sewing. I knew we were thinking of the same thing—our five daughters and three sons, now all grown with families of their own, but once upon a time youngsters just like Steve and Dora... with the same fears and anxieties about life, love and the future.

I argued. "You can't tell that me that if the shoe were on the other foot—if *you* were the one propositioned by Steve—you wouldn't have been just the slightest bit tempted to fool around."

"Oh, *more* than just slightly, I'm sure. He certainly was a tasty morsel back then. Probably still is." She waggled her eyebrows salaciously. "But *I* wasn't the one playing kissy-face."

"Oh yeah?" I parried. "And just what was with that *Irma La Douce* routine you were pulling on Slugger?"

"Oh... that," she replied airily. "Merely a mild flirtation. That poor old man was having such a hard time coming to terms with things he couldn't fathom, I thought he deserved a harmless little *divertissement* that he *could* understand."

I attempted to look stern. “Well, you came close to giving that poor old man a heart attack! You vile temptress! *Seductress!*”

“*Cradlesnatcher!*” she merrily lobbed back.

“How many times am I going to have to apologize for that?” I complained.

“Just reminding how close *you* came to being turned into a lawn ornament.” Said not quite so merrily.

“I have the feeling I’m going to be paying for that the rest of my unnatural born days.”

“You betcha,” she said drolly.

“So okay... I admit it. It was kinda sorta fun being twenty-something again. But strenuous. One week was enough... all that passion and angst and raging hormones. I sometimes wonder how we survived the first time around.”

And I did wonder. Our relationship had met with obstacles in the beginning, too: Obduracy on the parts of both sets of parents. Accusations of miscenegation from our respective communities. Both of us below the age of consent and having to seek ever more creative ways of being together. But that was then; this is now. Time for the lateral maneuver.

“Do you think Slugger or Dottie might have guessed my real age?” I asked.

She raised her head and lifted one eyebrow. “She most likely did. That sort of situation requires delicacy and diplomatic handling of a nature you only acquire after a lifetime of experience. Once they outed you and then found out what you were there for, they would have realized they weren’t dealing with a novice. And they were smart enough to figure out you and they were on the same team. Besides, Elayne told Dottie. I’m sure you noticed the change in her attitude toward you.”

“Still... I’m having second thoughts about whether it was the *right* thing. What if Steve and Dora weren’t meant to be together? What if it was *wrong* for me to put ideas in their heads and they end... ended up miserably matched? I mean, the moral and ethical ramifications here...”

Solange rolled her eyes and secured the needle firmly in the embroidery piece, gently laying aside the hoop and lifting both hands in the universal sign of denial. “Oh for heaven’s sake, Boo. Why do you always have to overanalyze every little thing. I can see there’ll be no peace until you get it out. What’s the problem, Bernard? You don’t believe in predestination anyway.” She pretended exasperation but I knew she was truly concerned about my state of mind.

“And what if they *didn’t* stay together?” she continued. “What if it all fell apart after you left? Would you want to know that as well.” Solange is pretty shrewd and she knows me better than I know myself.

“Was that an option? No... I guess I wouldn’t want to know that all that effort went to waste.”

“It’s always an option,” she retorted gently. “People fall in and out of love all the time. It’s a vagary of human nature. It’s not like you were in charge of assigning free will to humankind. You simply removed the firewalls so they could identify their choices, as you were supposed to. Whatever choices they did make afterward aren’t your problem and you can’t be held accountable.”

“The thing is... I think I’d feel better if I knew they lived happily ever after... or whatever,” I concluded lamely.

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that. ‘Ever after’ is a very long time,” she responded drily.

“You’re going to make me beg, aren’t you?”

She nodded her head. “Begging is good. I like begging.”

“I’ll make it worth your while...” I gave her my most engaging leer.

“Oh, I’ll see to it that.”

“So they got married?” There, it was out.

“Yes, dear, they got married.”

“And they’re still together? Just to, you know, clarify things.”

“Yes, they’re still together.

“And are they happy?”

“As happy as any average couple can be after thirty-six years of marriage.”

“And is that it?”

“What do you mean, ‘is that it’? That’s all I agreed to tell you. You want more, go do your own research.”

My own research. The internet. Duh.

I then made the mistake of demanding to know exactly how a successful outcome to this mission had (or would have) a direct and beneficial connection to our family, and that she reveal who all would be involved and the nature of that involvement. Solange told me to get stuffed.

She did toss a conciliatory bone, though. I asked if I’d still be around to personally witness the event that would establish the relationship—whatever it was—to our family. She assured me that I would... we both would... in about four years’ time... and that it would be a mindblower.

Unfortunately, you can’t research the future on the internet.

“What about us, Solange... will we live happily ever after?”

She sighed and gave me her signature enigmatic smile. “Could be... you never know. Just when you least expect it, life gets more interesting. Trust me.”

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## FOOTNOTE TO FIELD JOURNAL:

*The rest is history... or was history, depending on which direction you're looking. At Solange's suggestion I'm adding this footnote for the benefit of whoever might be interested...*

*Steven Paul Ross and Dora Christine Maddocks were united in holy matrimony on a crisp November evening in a candle-lit stone chapel on the grounds of the Butler estate. Edward Arthur Jones gave away the bride, with Ronald James Stryker serving as best man. Hazel Marie Donnelly, soon to be Stryker, was maid of honor and Dorothy Treadwell Doyle was matron of honor.*

*The officiant was the Reverend Gerard Doyle, newly ordained and performing his very first wedding ceremony as his proud mother beamed from her position alongside the bride. Her three younger sons Jeremy, John and Raymond the constable occupied the first pew. Although few invitations were officially issued, word got around and the tiny building was filled to capacity with friends and well-wishers, with the overflow jostling for views through the doors and windows.*

*Steve was serene and steadfast, delivering his vows with conviction in his golden baritone voice. Dora was a vision of loveliness in her ethereal way, answering in the most confident affirmative ever heard and shedding not one single tear. As everyone's always interested in what the bride wore, her candlelight satin gown was stunningly elegant in its simplicity—long-sleeved, high-necked, floor-length. No frills, no furbelows, no veil, no train. A wreath of wildflowers adorned her hair and she carried a matching bouquet.*

*A joyful wedding reception followed, open to all and hosted by the bride's good friend Lady Elayne Butler at Lord Baby Huey Butler's ancestral pile.*

### **Some other things I learned...**

*That no one remarked on the absence of the bride's parents or the groom's mother (they weren't invited).*

*That the impending heirs to both the newly-minted Rosses and the future Strykers were a mere seven and six months away, respectively, from making their debuts (although neither couple were as yet aware of that fact).*

*That rumor had it that the widower more familiarly known as Slugger and the former butter-and-egg entrepreneur widow, who may or may not be an authentic witch, were stepping out with a view toward matrimony.*

## **You may be wondering how I'm able to fill in the details...**

*Solange went one better than just clueing me in: We were there... in mufti, you might say. This being a country church, open 24/7 and never locked up, no one paid attention to two itinerant cats sitting side by side, front row center, just under the pew near the aisle—a svelte and languid sealpoint Siamese and a scruffy marmalade tom with a perfectly matched pair of... green eyes. (Hah! I know what you were thinking!) That is, no one noticed except Elaine who smiled at Solange and deliberately trod on my tail as she passed by, and Dottie who flashed a knowing nod and a cheeky wink.*

*Dorothy Doyle was correct in her assessment that my family must have been terribly ashamed of me. They were... not that there's much I can do about it, then or now. My people are and always have been Cat... which explains the technical difficulties with Squirrel. Solange was the one who encouraged me to come out of the closet and face up to who and what I was. I will always be indebted to her for that. Her trust and faith in me have never wavered. Neither has her love. Maybe this is why, in the end, I empathized with Steve and Dora's plight in trying to reconcile their very divergent cultural inhibitions. Their road together was no doubt as bumpy and fraught with pitfalls as was ours. 'Hic sunt dracones'... Here be dragons! But we stuck together and soldiered on... and here we are all these years later—in the next century, no less!—still together, still in love, with the end not yet in sight.*

*In short, all's well that ends well... or so said Willie Shakespeare. And I know I'll always carry in my heart a fond memory of the short time I spent at that little farm in Yorkshire... and the friends who live there still... even if they'll never remember me.*

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# Finis