

## 1. GOOD NIGHT, LADIES



Evelyn was an insomniac so when they say she died in her sleep, you have to question that. Probably she was sitting propped up in bed reading and heard the brush of wings and smelled the cold clean air and the angel appeared like a deer in the bedroom and Evelyn said, “Not yet. I have to finish this book.” And the angel shook his golden locks, which made a skittery sound like dry seed pods, and he laughed a long silent laugh and took her pale hand in his. He’d heard that line, “Not yet,” before. He was always interrupting people who were engrossed in their work or getting ready for a night at the opera or about to set off on a trip. Evelyn’s brother died after his wife sprayed the house with a rose-scented room freshener that made Frank sneeze so hard he had a coronary, but he made it to the phone and called the office and told them he’d be late, and then lay down and died. The angel took Evelyn’s hand gently in his cool hand and off she went with him, leaving behind the book, her bed and the blue knit coverlet, her stucco bungalow in Lake Wobegon redolent of coffee and fresh-picked strawberries, her bedside radio, her subscription to the *New Yorker* paid through the end of the year. It had been a

good wet summer, plenty of rain, and as she drifted out her back door she noted how green the grass was. A cat announced itself from the shadows. The smell of burning charcoal hung in the air. A red ball lay by the walk. She wanted to pick it up and throw it but the angel rose and she with him and, hand in hand, they flew up into the sequined sky, the little town arranged below, all shushed and dozy, the double row of streetlights on Main Street, the red light blinking on the water tower, the dark fastness of the lake, the pinpricks of lights from houses where they all slept, the cranks, the stoics, the meek, the ragtag dreamers, the drunks, the martyred wives, and she saw a woman's pale face at a window looking for evildoers and the single pair of headlights threading the serpentine county road, and after that she did not look down. She flew up through a meringue cloud into the mind of God and the embrace of her sainted ancestors all gathered at her grandfather Crandall's farmhouse on a summer morn, the patient horses standing in the shade of a red oak tree, white chickens pecking for bugs under the lilacs, Grandma whistling in the milk house, holding a pan of cream. The windbreak of pine and red oak, the weathered sheds and barn, the hayfields of heaven.

It was a green summer day like what a child would draw, a crayon day with a few white cumulus children's clouds, and the sun with yellow radiance lines sticking out. It was a day when after breakfast Dad did not go out to do chores but sat down at the upright piano and played by heart *O dusky maiden of the moors, my heart you do beguile—O do not hasten to your chores but stay with me awhile*. There was one day when he did that and this is that day again. The day after she was begotten.

Evelyn was a whistler, she learned it from him. The rest of the family was disposed to gloom, dark Lutherans who pitch down

PONTOON

the rocky slope of melancholy and lie there for days, sighing, moaning, waiting for someone, usually Evelyn, to rope them in and haul them back up and comfort them with dessert. A people waiting for the other shoe to drop. Phlegmatists. Stoics. Good eaters who went for recipes that start out *Brown a pound of ground beef and six strips of bacon and in a separate pan melt a pound of butter.*

She was a finicky eater, a forager in the vegetable crisper. She'd whomp up a big feast and wait on table and have a smidgen of goose, a single stalk of asparagus, a crumb of cornbread, and that was enough for her. She was the only insomniac in a family of very good sleepers, folks who climbed into bed gladly and lay in their cottony caves and slept like stones unless awakened by heartburn. At night, she lay awake and listened to *The Bob Roberts Show* on WLT and when Bob's callers got cranking on the evils of taxation and the treachery of the media and the shiftlessness of the young, she drifted off to sleep, and if not, she switched on the bedside lamp and reached for a book and read about the Saracens and the Crusaders, about the tortured lives of great artists, Van Gogh and his prostitutes, Chopin coughing at the piano, Keats expiring in Rome, Shelley sailing in the storm, Melville languishing at the customs house, Twain and his bankruptcy and Dickens's unhappy marriage and his romances with actresses. She adored Dickens. Especially *Little Dorrit*. The weary worker trudging home from the blacking factory, the yellow glow of London street lamps, the night fog, the newshawk on the corner, the flower girl, the streetwalker in the doorway, the cabbie dozing on his hack parked by the curb, the horse's head drooping—she dozed off too. Or she got up and fixed herself a toddy and put on a recording of the Stuttgart Male Chorus singing romantic songs

about moonlight and longing and the maiden who opened my heart to love and in the morning she was gone and now I can never love again, alas—that one was guaranteed to put her right out. And if not, she put on her robe and fixed breakfast.

“It’s the radio and the dang books and the crazy CD player that are keeping you awake,” said her sister Florence. “Turn off the radio and take a pill. You look like death on a biscuit.”

Actually she looked great right up to the day she died, a Friday night in July. She had a long neck and a prominent nose and high cheekbones; after she kicked Uncle Jack out she looked even better, happier, looser, jangler, jaunty. She was tall and wiry and stayed limber by hiking everywhere and doing her Daily Dozen. She was the outspoken aunt in a family of murmurers. Other people said No. 1 or No. 2 and she said *pee* and *take a crap*. She also said *hell* and *damn* and *son of a bitch*. She had soft green eyes and gray hair like a winter sky in the morning. She cut it short. “You look like a man,” said Florence. “What’s got into you?” “Piss and vinegar,” she said.

She was found dead on a Saturday morning, having gone out to supper Friday night with her buddies Gladys and Margaret at the Moonlite Bay supper club where she enjoyed the deep-fried walleye and a slab of banana cream pie, along with a mai tai and a Pinot Grigio. Three old Lutheran ladies, stalwarts of the Altar Guild and the quilting circle, who had put in their thirty years teaching Sunday school, and now in their dotage were having a little fun. Every second Wednesday they drove off to the Big Moccasin casino in Widjiwagan to play blackjack and take advantage of the \$6.95 Blue Light buffet and catch the 6 p.m. show of Richie Dee and the Radiators and once, they entered the Twist contest (*wotthell*) and won a night at the Romeo Motel (*hot*



PONTOON

*damn*) and went and stayed, the three of them, turned out the lights, lay in the hot tub, looked up at the ceiling mirror, and drank champagne from their shoes.