

Mince

He came over every Thursday at four. She could count on hearing of her “sinful, pagan ways” and the need for regular penance at *his* mass. Eunice Howling wasn’t easily swayed—living in close proximity to the rectory still didn’t convince her of the need for regular communion. The Reverend Amos Finch was kind enough, though, always agreeable to a cup of tea and letting her maintain her tenancy: she insisted on living in a converted *Imperial Breads* truck on the church property. It was, after all, the Christian thing to do. Among her other oddities, she kept a small pen of piglets she had won earlier that spring from the Sussex county fair for her minced meat pies. She had initially been surprised that the honorable Reverend didn’t put up a fuss. The smell, and she admitted it, was quite awful.

It was the squealing that woke her—cutting through the damp, early September morning. She raced outside, revolver at the ready, night cap askew. It was too late though, the pig had been taken. By the time she made it across the lawn to the rectory, the noise had stopped. Wiping dew from the stained-glass window, she pressed her face against it. She could see the young Reverend Finch, stripped to the waist, holding a pewter cup high in the air. Head bowed, he was mouthing something and rocking back and forth in place, before the Holy Communion altar. She watched, squinting, blurry and breathless as he tilted the cup, baptizing himself in its scarlet contents. He stood there—syrupy in it. Rubbing the heels of his hands violently into his eyes and raking his fingers through his now damp hair, he knelt, shaking. Through the glass, Eunice could see the thick residue of the cup falling over his slight physique and onto an inked, circular symbol on the small of his back. Having already imagined the worst, she had to do something. Anything.

The next day, they came. She could see them out the kitchen window—carefully making their way across the muddy field. The Fifth United Anglican women’s relief group really didn’t like rain, probably because it had the tendency to get their shoes dirty. There must have been a point to this venture though, because the likelihood of their being out of doors on a day like this would be just as common as finding a ring around any one of their bath tubs. Mrs. Abigail Broomwalter led the troupe past the parish of Reverend Finch, and onto the one eyesore of Sussex County.

Mrs. Broomwalter, a stout woman with a permanently furrowed brow and coordinating handbag, did the confronting, for the other women in the group were the embodiment of meekness. Holding her nose with one hand, her knock was answered with a defiant,

“No one’s home!”

Mrs. Broomwalter jimmied through the lock on the makeshift door with little effort. The look on her face upon entering the abode said that nothing in God’s blessed world could have prepared her for the stench inside.

Eunice was caught darning a rather hopeless looking sock as she sat in a lumpy, marmalade-colored rocker amidst hip-height back issues of *Life* magazine.

“I said, ‘no one’s home!’”

She said the last syllable with so much effort that her wizened lips concealed all suspicion of dental evidence and her crystalline eyes went wild inside their hollows.

“Miss Howling,” said Mrs. Broomwalter, eyes closed and breathing heavily, hands still calmly crossed in front, “this is no time for foolery! The Reverend Finch did not show up for Mass this morning and we are anxious for knowledge of his whereabouts—“

“Haven’t seen ‘im!”

“But—“

“I haven’t seen the little pisser, now get off m’ property!”

She threw the darning needle towards the group and gave a great heave to get up out of her misshapen chair—they left immediately, falling over each other as they descended the cement block staircase, happy to have an excuse to escape her world. Sure of their departure, Eunice shuffled over to a boiling pot on the stove, picking up the wooden ladle beside it. She stirred and smiled broadly to herself, “Father, forgive me.”

Tempered Perfection

Norah's hands slid carefully over the smooth surface of the manila envelope, her fingers stopping suddenly at the small, sharp object that lay at the bottom of it. The mahogany grandfather clock sat nearly 30 feet away and the deep, rusty buzz it gave told her heart to slow down. He would be here in five minutes to speak with her father. Her hands were shaking as they hovered the envelope above her creased, cornflower blue lap. With every twist of her wrists, the caramel paper gave a loud pop that dented its exterior. She studied what she had written on the outside the night before: *Private Hal Larkin, 2nd Company Milano, Italy*, followed by a series of numbers she couldn't begin to make sense of, but that had been pinned to her nightstand for nearly two months. "It'ly" she whispered as if it were some secret between herself and the envelope. Half a world away didn't seem quite as far now as it had two months earlier...

Hal had horrible table manners. Always did. So tonight at Mama's dinner (a *farewell dinner*, no less) wasn't any exception. He hadn't pressed his suit like she'd asked—he wanted it to look “lived in,” and “ready for action.” He'd been to dozens of suppers over the years and he still couldn't manage to keep his mouth closed when he chewed—no matter how hard she pursed her lips across the table at him. Being the only unmarried girl of her age in their town would've had its benefits, but Hal was the only one that paid Norah any mind.

“It's like I tol' Norah, Mist' Peterson—you can't keep pretending that them damned Germans ain't comin' for us!”

“I know it. I know it. You do us all proud, boy!” Mr. Peterson gave Hal a hearty smile and slapped his army-green back, reaching across a plate of Mama's corn and pea hash, famous in three counties, to do it.

Norah couldn't tell if it was the fact that her father had reached over the famous hash or if it was the subject of his conversation with Hal at the other end of the table, but she saw her mother's gaze shift heavenward for a split second as she muttered something under her breath.

Her father continued. “It's like I've been tellin' Ma—” one motion of her mother's hand from the head of the table silenced him. Hal turned to her.

“Hal, what are your plans exactly after you, uhh, get *released*?” She said it in a saccharine tone that Norah recognized from late November days when male turkeys were gingerly coaxed from grazing in their yard into the kitchen.

“Well, uh, I don't rightly know as of yet.” He had just taken a large bite of chicken fried steak before she'd asked him. Norah couldn't help but wonder if her mother hadn't timed that.

“I figure, with the war goin' the way it is and all, I might not have to know just yet. But I'll, you know, I'll figure somethin' out. I've been hearin' 'bout a few things around town with

the boys.”

Norah could feel her mother’s thin-lipped smirk form and fall in her direction. She had seen it many times before, in scenes just like this one, to know when it was coming. She shook her head and tried to find a way to recover.

“Well, Hal. Dear, you’ve always talked about asking Mr. Pulsipher for your hay-and-feed sales job back. Remem—”

“Ah, Norah!” He said, flinging his napkin onto the table. “Farms is dead to me! Why it’s in the oil industry is where the money is these days, I tell ya,” he said turning to Mr. Peterson, “maybe I’ll get me one of them cheap business partner buy-ins and they’ll cut me a good deal when I’m a returned G.I. and all. Yesiree, that’s where the money is, pouring in.” He leaned back in his chair and interlaced his fingers across the shining buttons on his government-issued jacket.

When supper had been finished and the table cleared, Norah walked Hal to the gate, knowing full well that this may be the last time she was to see him.

She stood on the side closest to her mother’s house drying and re-drying her hands on the white eyelet trim apron she wore. She kept her head down and tried to convince herself that there weren’t tears coming. It was impossible and irritating. She had never known herself to be a crier. Hal stood across the fence, lacing his arms through the gate. He looked down and studied the spotless brown combat boots on his feet, exhaled and reached to grab both of her hands in one of his.

"Norah, it's really not going to be that long--just a year, maybe two." The salesman was making itself apparent in his tone. "Goin' 'overseas' is just sumthin' I gotta do right now, and I think you know that. Don't know where to yet, but in about a year or so I'll be able to come home and we can be together and we'll...you'll see, we'll be alright." He fingered the small, sharp diamond on her left hand as he spoke. She hadn't yet looked up from her apron.

"Well, I don't understand why you don't know how long *they'll* be sending you to that awful place!" She tossed her dark, pin-curled head upwards and looked out towards the west where the cows were—where they always were slowly and predictably bending their heads down to feed on the sweet, Colorado grasses. She felt an eerie sense of satisfaction from seeing them, but in a moment, her pleasure was interrupted.

“Look, doll. I gotta get goin’. I’m meeting up with a few of the boys before we head down to the train station tonight, so can’t we just, you know, say our goodbyes now?”

She narrowed her gaze. "Well, get goin' then, wontcha? I've got to can some peaches before it gets dark anyhow." She dropped her hands from his and stepped towards the house so he had to strain over the gate to kiss her briefly. He gave her one last, hard look and then turned towards the town—towards the war. She could hear herself whimpering slightly on the way back to the house. But this was nonsense. The peaches, after all, were waiting for her.

She preferred to work alone. There was therapy in her system—a kind of tempered perfection. Two days later, she was still canning. Shuffling around the dark homestead kitchen as she had a hundred times before, bringing the water inside Mama's thick aluminum boiling pot to a perfectly sterile temperature. With careful delight, she placed each of the blushing peaches into the pot—but only for 20 seconds before dousing them in ice water for a full five minutes. Their skin would then fall off smoothly, slowly. Looking at them amber and exposed on the countertop now, she thought they were at their most beautiful.

They would then be quartered, no larger than an inch and a half each. 20 quarters per jar, and no more. Her army of empty Mason jars waited in a hot pan of water, preparing to be employed. Norah slipped on a pair of rubber gloves, grabbed a jar, and began ladling the peach quarters in, smothering them with the thick syrup simmering nearby, sealing each tightly with golden-hued tin. She would wipe off any excess syrup with the hem of her apron, but there rarely was a need.

It was in the middle of placing a seal that Mama came in. The sound of her footsteps startled Norah and sent the jar and its thick contents crashing to the floor in a crunching, syrupy mess. She leaned over the counter and placed one of her palms on the surface and the other pressed firmly against her forehead for a moment before reaching for a rag and bending down to the sticky shards below.

Mama, still standing in the doorway over her, closed her eyes and swallowed, speaking slowly, “Norah, I think it’s time that you stop all this canning business and clean up now. Your father is working late in the fields tonight and we got cump’ny coming for supper tonight, so why don’t you go and put on your better apron and help me get ready for it.”

She stood up with the broken glass in her hands and dumped it into the sink, the ring from Hal sat above it on the windowsill in a discharged jar. She carefully untied the dripping, white apron from her waist and smoothed the one she had on underneath it as she searched for another. “Who’s coming over then, Mama?”

“Red Stevens. From town. He’s home from college now, just Thursdee last, and I thought it would be a nice time for you two to get reacquainted.”

“Oh, Mother! I’m in no condition to entertain—I’ve got the canning to finish up and mending to do and I’ve got a letter to write Hal and...”

“Oh, Hell's Bells, Norah!” She raised her hands heavenward so you could see her sturdy, corn-fed frame. She was one of those “founding mothers” of the town. Her face had been wizened and colored by hard work both in and out of the house. From nearly a mile away, you could tell she was country folk.

She stepped gingerly towards her daughter, avoiding the thick mess below her, and placed her palm on Norah’s shoulder, her tone softening, “Leave it be, Norah. Now, Red’s a nice young man. He’s finished with his schooling. He’s goin’ places in this world, Norah. And from what I hear from his mother, he’s *very* easy to get along with—just needs a good woman to take

care 'a him and show him a thing or *two*." Her eyes leveled her daughter. "Now you'll go upstairs and put on your new blouse and more importantly *a smile* before he gets here. Men don't want girls who whimper and whine around broken jars of peaches, especially the *college ones*."

Suppertime came and the table was set with healthy portions of fresh corn and pea hash, beefsteak, potatoes, lemonade, peach jelly and hot bread. Mama dabbed at her temples with the daisy handkerchief that was tucked underneath her watchband and carried the conversation on, sweetly.

"Red, why don't you tell us what all the college kids are doing these days?" The tall, gawky young man whose strawberry hair stood a full three inches from his head moved the corn kernels around his plate as he spoke.

"Oh, I don't know if there's much to tell about that, ma'am. We just study and fraternize a little, and hope we all pass on into the next stage." He gave a wide, brief grin in Mama's direction and returned to the close examination of his corn.

The handkerchief was tucked back away now at her wrist and she interlaced her fingers gingerly in front of her before speaking again, slowly.

"Yes, but what's this your mother was telling me about that offer you got out west for that big engineering firm." As she said this, she kept one eye on Norah. Red stopped taking an interest in his food and looked up at Norah from across the table, half smiling. She had to admit, she liked the way he looked at her—cow-eyed and a little sheepish, like he was waiting for her to tell him what to say next.

After the table was cleared, Mama encouraged Norah to check on the cows down by the gully as it was getting to be dusk. And since she was headed in that direction, she might as well walk Red as far as the end of the road towards town.

His long, slender legs bowed out at the knees when he walked, shuffling and stirring the gravel underneath. He was holding a dark tweed Fedora in both hands at his chest and was so tall that he hunched over it slightly, fiddling with the brim.

"I sure appreciate the invitation to supper tonight, Norah. You and your Ma put out a pretty good spread."

"Oh, it was nothing." She said it with a toss of her hand, now looking over to closely examine his slight frame.

"You know, if you want to avoid looking hinged at the waist there, it's best to walk with your hands behind your back like this, to stand up taller." She demonstrated and he smiled as he mirrored her.

"Thank you, I'll try and remember that."

The sun was nearly set now and gave off a marmalade glow to her skin, while the deep Colorado wind echoed and played in her dark curls. After they were nearly at the end of the road he stopped and turned to her, speaking softly.

"Say, is that fella Hal still hanging around here much?"

Norah looked down and realized that her engagement ring was still above the sink in a Mason jar and she suddenly felt very naked and vulnerable. She immediately stuffed and twisted both hands inside the pockets of her apron, keeping her head down.

"No, no. He's gone off to It'ly for now, off to fight, and I don't rightly know when he—"

"Well, if it'd be alright with you, I'd like to come by and call Tuesdee night, about 7:30."

Tracing her naked finger with her thumb inside of her pocket, she looked up into his warm, expectant eyes that stood a full six inches above hers. There was a blossoming air of distinction about him, not fully ripe yet, but there was a wanting—a humble wanting to be liked and impressive to her that she hadn't ever seen in the years she had grown up with Hal. With a little more help she was sure that Red really would be 'goin' places,' like Mama said.

"I have canning to finish. It'll have to be 8."

Red nodded, twitched his hat onto his head and began making long, bowed strides towards town, his hands still behind his back.

It wasn't long before time spent with Red became expected, even desired. Long afternoons of her instruction on the *correct* way to play pinnacle, fold a pocket kerchief and comb his hair turned into weeks, then months. Before too long, Red had awkwardly made his way down onto one of his knees and asked her to please marry him. Norah was satisfied—it was the same kind of satisfaction she got from watching the cows graze predictably in their pen everyday.

Sitting across the room from the grandfather clock now, she couldn't make sense of why she was nervous still. She was going to be Red's wife. Hal had been with her nearly everyday for the past few years and she was breaking it off for good. Sending the ring back to him was the only way to make this official and permanent. Studying the writing on the envelope in her lap, she looked up when she heard the gate close out in the front yard. Turning to look out the window, she saw Red making his way up the path, hands behind his back, but his tie a little askew. *That's what you get, Red Stevens, when you do a single instead of a double-Windsor knot,* Norah thought. But she didn't mind for too long. He would be in her house shortly, and she could fix it for him.