



Printer's Devil Review

David Meischen. *A Man in the House*.
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A Man in the House

GRACE WAS DUSTING WHEN THE DOORBELL RANG. Four years at her new house in town, and still each time she heard the two-note chime, she wished she'd resisted when the builder sold her on this needless convenience. She liked the sound of a neighbor's knock. Dropping her dust cloth to the coffee table, she rinsed her hands at the kitchen sink and ran the tips of her fingers along the shafts of her eyeglasses, tugging stray hairs into place behind her ears. As she crossed the living room, the bell chimed a second time. She pulled the door open.

Rupert stood there with his hat in his hand, fresh combed and shaved at four in the afternoon, dressed in starched khaki from head to toe. Surprise got the better of Grace for a moment – the smell of a man on her porch, the years.

"Rupert Koehn." She paused with her hand at the screen door hook. "You'd surprise our savior at the second coming." It was a kindness – wasn't it? – to stop him where he stood.

He grinned. "You were never one to mince words."

Grace tried to resist the smile pulling at the set of her face, but Rupert's question was too much for her.

"How long do you suppose you can keep me standing out here before Frieda spies me?"

Plucking the hook from its eyelet, Grace stepped into the bright warmth. "Walk with me," she said. "I'll show you my flowers." Glancing at her sister's house, squatting unpainted on the other side of the garden – and

Frieda doubtless hovering, her nose at a slit in the window blinds – Grace led Rupert into her bluebonnets, the blaze of them beneath a cloudless sky.

In the years that came after, she marveled at their ease together that afternoon, as if their separate lives had wrought no change. Even Frieda's spying felt familiar. From the bluebonnets, they walked among hollyhocks, poppies, calendulas, phlox. They spoke of the next day, her sixtieth birthday, with no mention of the decades gone by. They drifted to the roses; a row of them bloomed along the garden's back border, with the climber at midpoint, a cascade of pale pink petals, yellow-gold at the centers with sticky stamen clusters.

Rupert put his nose to them and breathed. "Miriam would've loved these. I'm afraid I haven't taken care of her roses."

"You've had a difficult year."

"The house is so ..." Rupert studied the ground for a moment. "Quiet." He turned and moved to the next rose bush. "I never really got used to my daughter being gone."

Fourteen years ago, in the months after Pearl Harbor, Rupert and Miriam's only daughter had moved to Houston and found work there. Her failure to marry or return had caused considerable head-shaking here in Nopalito, where folks rarely made it even so far as Corpus Christi, fifty miles east of the brush country farms they still plowed with mules in the war years.

"Caleb was the real surprise," Rupert said. "He was barely five. How long ago was that?" His son, he told her, came back to him in dreams, a wide-eyed four-year-old holding Rupert's hand as they walked the fence lines, the creek bottom, the fields. Listening, Grace thought of her youngest brother, Julius, dead of a burst appendix in the fall of 1918 a week before his sixteenth birthday. She still felt the ache of loss, and there were mornings, she said to Rupert, when she woke to the feel of her brother's presence in the house.

"That's it," Rupert said. "That's how it feels. Like no time has passed. Then I look in the mirror." He turned to her, a handsome man still, but sixty. "It's like being hit with the backside of a shovel."

"And Miriam?"

"Her things are everywhere – clothes in the closet, perfume on them when I open the door for a suit on Sunday." Rupert stopped, as if

searching for words equal to what his wife's death had taken from him. "There isn't a thing in the house she didn't touch. On bad days I could light a match to the place."

Somewhere in the neighborhood a screen door clattered, the rattle of it dry as a husk.

"Come," Grace said, "let me show you my cannas," and they walked to a bed of lilies like tongues of flame in the rich wet bed beneath her kitchen window. Two hummingbirds were feeding there. One of the birds darted upward, hovering momentarily at Rupert's head, and then dropped back to the petals.

Grace laughed. "It's that sweet stuff you put on your hair. Making a fool of that bird."

"I confess I like to smell good. But Grace," he waited for her to look at him, "I'm long past fooling anyone." Rupert spoke directly, without a hint of pleading, and then turned back to the flowers. No burden of obligation had been shifted, no one else's need weighing her down as they finished their walk in the garden and she walked him to his car.

For a moment, waving as Rupert drove away, Grace felt almost dizzy, so rare was the lift he'd given her.



Two hours later, with her cleaning done and the supper dishes cleared, Grace paused for a moment by her kitchen table. A wedding gown lay askew there, a jumble of beaded satin bristling with net. She was sewing a copy, a bride's dress in miniature for the flower girl, her six-year-old granddaughter Janet, who stood in the middle of the kitchen floor wearing the beginnings of a satin under-gown and chattering at Dolan Woodhouse, Grace's boarder. Dolan was quarterback of the local football team; baby fat plumped his cheeks above a whisker-shadowed jawline. He was shy, and Janet had used that to her advantage, interrogating him about his engagement to Hollis Slater, his high school sweetheart.

"I'm engaged too," Janet announced, with a flourish on *engaged*.

Grace knelt behind Janet, took up her pincushion, and went back to the fitting.

"Who's the lucky man?" Dolan dropped his voice, but Grace could hear the tickle in his throat.

"Grady. I'm going to marry Grady. He's five."

"I don't think cousins are allowed to marry."

"But I want Grady. He takes care of my dolls."

Grace spluttered around the pin between her teeth. Grady Smith was cute as a button, dolls or no, but his father would be mortified to know that Janet was spreading the boy's fondness for a girl's playthings.

"Ouch!" Janet flinched and Grace lost her grasp on the hem.

"Hold still."

"Dolls aren't for boys," Dolan announced. "What if he doesn't want to?"

"Grady loves my dolls. Hey, wanna know a secret?"

The hem shifted in Grace's hands. She sat back and waited as her granddaughter rose up on tiptoe and stretched toward Dolan, who had leaned forward and cupped a hand at his ear. Grace couldn't distinguish a word, but as Dolan listened, his cheeks turned bright as a slap. Janet had a knack for embarrassing shy boys and men.

Grace had done that to Rupert once, made him blush just by whispering. They would have been sixteen, if memory served, the porch swing swaying beneath them, side by side in the warm hush of early evening. She knew he was courting her; she wanted that. It was like the rough and tumble of growing up together – the excitement of this new game they were playing – and she could make up the rules. Without so much as a word between them, she found herself up out of the swing and dancing with him, the two of them humming a familiar tune.

On impulse, giggling, she leaned into him, her lips to his ear, and sang a breathy bit of silliness from the lyrics. *There's such a funny meter to the roar of your repeater*. Rupert shivered, and when she pulled back to look at him, his cheeks were bright with the rush of blood. In the instant, brushing against him as they danced, she felt the ridge of his erection against her and knew what she was feeling. Rupert swept her away from him and into the swing. He scrambled off the porch, and was gone. She sat waiting – she didn't know what else to do – and when he came back the day had dimmed.

"You took me by surprise," he said, and took her hand.

"All I did was whisper. I've whispered in your ear before."

"It's not the same."

"I'll be more careful."

“Not too careful.” He smiled and squeezed her hand. “Promise?” Grace snipped a thread. *Promise*. Nothing but trouble in that word.

“Gramma?” Janet jiggled at her shoulder. “I’m talking to you, but you don’t answer back.”

“I was somewhere else for a minute.”

“You were right here.”

“Don’t sass your grandmother.”

“I need to know when I can marry Grady.” Janet had put a rein on her voice, but just barely.

At the table, the bride’s dress rustled with the arriving breeze. It made Grace’s skin prickle just to think of all that net.

“When would you like to marry Grady?” she asked.

“Soon as you finish my dress. Say,” Janet turned back to Dolan, “when are you getting married?”

“Not as soon as that.” Dolan looked at Grace and looked away. “Not as soon as I’d like.”

The breeze switched directions and slammed the back door shut. Grace dropped her pincushion. Dolan scrambled to his feet and opened the door. The breeze came in, whooshed out. The door slammed again. Grace dropped the hem and stood to face Dolan. Helpless is how he looked – skittish as a week-old foal.

“You’re young,” she said. *Still wet behind the ears* is what she thought. “Don’t rush to the altar.”

Dolan took a breath and began. “I know how you feel, Mrs. Hoffman, but Hollis wants us to get married right away. Her folks too. Coach says to get a season of college football under my belt first, but I don’t know.”

“Walk on your own two feet for a while.” Grace surprised herself. She hadn’t intended this meanness. She wanted to warn Dolan, to keep him safe from something she couldn’t even name. She wanted words that would release the weight she felt in her chest. Was this the best she could do?

Dolan stood there mute, like one of her sons. At Dolan’s age, they’d looked at the floor, too. And then did what they wanted.

“Don’t throw your life away.” Grace took up her pins and finished with Janet.



The next morning, after clearing the breakfast dishes, she sat for a few minutes over a second cup of coffee. Opposite her place at the table, double windows looked out on her open back porch, framing a view of the unfenced yard – and, on the other side of the alley, Karl Lindeman’s back yard, also unfenced. Grace liked the unobstructed view. She relished the pocket of night air still hovering in this space near the window – until Papa Karl stepped out of his back door. Even before the old man hoisted the waistband of his khakis and took his cane in hand, she suspected he would come to her door. It took a while for him to haul his girth across the mowed expanse that separated her house from his.

“*Guten Morgen*, Grace.” He made the last halting steps across her porch and rattled the screen door.

“Morning, Papa Karl. *Was machst du hier so früh?*” She had no intention of opening her door. She’d never be rid of him if she did.

“Been up since five,” he said. Grace knew the force of that habit. “Expected you by 8:00, 8:30.”

“It’s 7:45.”

“*Mein Haus*, Grace, *mein Haus ist ein Schweinerei*.”

Grace could picture the mess. There was only one of him, but he might as well have let pigs run loose in the house. “I’m not your *Putzfrau* every day of the week. I cleaned your house *am Montag*. *Heute ist Freitag*.”

“It’s not Monday yet?”

“That’s what I’m telling you.”

The old man scratched at the stubble on his sagging jaw line and released a burst of gas. “Can I sit with you for a spell?”

Holding her breath, Grace stepped onto her porch and sat down.

Papa Karl lowered himself into the other chair. “Back home on the farm *habe ich nicht so viel vergessen*.” The bulk of him pushed at the chair arms. “Always on Monday washday. Always *Arbeit*.” And he launched into a litany of the work he had not forgotten.

His shirt, as usual, was not up to its task, the spider-veined flab of his stomach bulging pale as pork belly, a thicket of white hairs at the line of his khakis swirling to the parts he scratched so fondly. His ponderous undershorts carried stains for her on washday. She could feel

the naked burden of him shoving at her, this neighbor who'd offered to marry her – and Garret barely settled in his grave. The bone weight of Garret in the marriage bed she carried with her still – the heft of his need, the load that had shifted to her when he opened his wrists. The dead weight of him when they found him.

“*Was ist das?*”

Grace looked up from her thoughts.

“In the light. There's something in the light.”

She followed the line of his forefinger. “*Schmetterlings*,” she said. “Oh, look.”

Several butterflies hovered in a shaft of light beneath her mulberry tree, and the sun came dancing through their wings – orange, edged in black, dabbed here and there with white. A moment and they were out of the light, all but lost now in shade.

“I can't even *see*.”

Grace turned to Papa Karl. “They're gone now.”

He had tears in his eyes. “What good am I, Grace? What for I should get out of bed in the morning?”

The old man had survived half of the ten children born to him alive. He'd seen his favorite daughter trip at ten into a cauldron of rendering lard, his eldest son felled by a heart attack at forty. Seventy-five now, he'd been defeated by the new house in town. She knew it wasn't the house, really. He felt useless off the farm. But the sight of his slumped shoulders frayed her patience.

“You can't let yourself go.”

“I know what you're going to say next. I've got it by heart. Count your blessings.” Papa Karl chopped at the air with a lecturing forefinger, a mockery of Grace that was not lost on her. “Put one foot in front of the other. Get down on your knees and thank the good Lord.”

“And good advice it is, if any man on God's green earth could take it.”

“You're like the parts that keep repeating when we sing a hymn at church on Sunday.”

“Exactly.”

And Grace sent him home. There was a time she'd have invited her old neighbor in for coffee and cake. If he were sick in bed or visited by a kind of loss that could be measured, she'd still lend a helping hand.

But naked weakness had brought Papa Karl to her door this morning. It hardened her heart just to look at him.



The widows arrived shortly before three, with Grace's younger sister, Norma Pfeiler, rapping at the front door.

“Do I smell peaches in April?” she asked, following Grace to the kitchen with Brunhilde Klein and Gertrude Krause behind her, all three of them in rayon floral prints they'd worn for Easter Sunday not quite a week ago.

Grace insisted that hats and gloves be left at home for her hen parties. Norma had never objected. She set her poppyseed cake on Grace's dining table and removed her head scarf, revealing salt-and-pepper hair pulled back smoothly into a bun at the nape of her neck. Gertrude slid a lemon chess pie onto the table, while Brinnie slipped a plate of crustless pimiento cheese sandwiches into place. Younger than the other widows by twenty years – no one but her mother had ever called her Brunhilde – Brinnie pulled a compact from her purse and patted her hair into place. Her tiny, plump fingers were encased in short white gloves, Grace's stricture notwithstanding. Satisfied, she turned to the source of Norma's question about peaches.

If Grace numbered pride among her sins, she would likely blame it on yeast. With a plentiful supply of peach preserves left on her pantry shelves, she'd decided to splurge and fix her favorite coffee cake – sweet, kneaded dough rolled to the shape of her jelly roll pan, spread thick with jam and sprinkled with her perfect streusel, the buttery smell rising in waves from the center of the table where the cake cooled.

As they fussed over the coffee cake, Frieda came to the back door. Wearing a faded dress and lady's black lace-up wing-tip shoes run down at the heels, she carried a birthday card and no contribution for the table. Tall and large-boned, her shoulders stooped by the weight of the hay she'd stacked, the milk pails she'd carried through six decades of farm life, Frieda looked every bit of her seventy years. She paid scant attention to her face or hair. As Grace and Norma knew, their sister had given up on the niceties one day in 1925 when a mule kicked her husband in the gut and he bled inside until it was too late.

“Well, Gracie,” Frieda growled, eyes bright with the joy she took in sparking mayhem. “*Hast du ihn schon geküßt?*” She pursed her lips and made kissing sounds in the air.

Brinnie came sniffing at the scent of gossip. “What’s that? What did she say?”

“What’s going on there?” Norma spoke from the table.

“Frieda said something about kissing. Oh!” Brinnie all but stomped her foot. “I wish you all wouldn’t talk German.”

Norma looked from Frieda to Grace. “Sisters?”

Frieda shrugged and moved to the table. She’d pull a paper bag out of her purse before the afternoon was over and load it with leftovers. She was sitting on a pot of money, but the shame of pilfering left no mark on her.

“What’s this about kissing?”

“There hasn’t been any.” Grace dismissed them all with a wave.

“Not yet. But once before.” Frieda winked at Grace.

“You old fool. That was forty years ago and more.”

“What *are* you talking about?” Norma had clearly reached her limit.

“Rupert Koehn dropped by yesterday. I showed him my garden.”

“Oh.” Norma looked blank for a moment. Then her face brightened. “Sister, that’s wonderful.”

“Don’t play matchmaker with me.”

“But isn’t it too soon?” Frieda wrestled her face into an expression of mock alarm.

“It’s been ... how long?” Brinnie paused, measuring. “A year since he lost Miriam.”

“He didn’t lose her.” Norma showed no patience with words that prettified death. Of all Grace’s acquaintance, she was the only one not afraid of the words for what Garret Hoffman had done to himself with a freshly honed knife.

“Sister.” Grace put an edge in her voice, a plea.

“He didn’t misplace Miriam. The woman died.”

“I’d lay odds he was marking the calendar.” Frieda’s chuckle rattled in her throat. “Waiting one year exactly.”

“Whatever for?” Gertrude shared an isolated farmhouse with her mother-in-law, well past eighty and ghostly frail. Without so much

as phone service, she had trouble making sense of what the hens said when they got together.

Grace spoke to Frieda. “You’ll have me dancing with him before the day is through.”

Norma took her up. “You two were born dancers.”

“What’s this about calendars and dancing?” Gertrude was still trying to find her way. “And who kissed whom?”

Grace opened her mouth to put an end to things, but Norma stepped in.

“Rupert courted Grace. A long time ago. She caught him flirting with me and threw him over.”

“Oh.” Gertrude looked as if she would never catch up.

“After Charlie passed,” Brinnie spoke into the awkward silence. The widows never mentioned her husband, killed on an oil rig twenty years ago, when a piece of his shirtsleeve had snagged in an auger.

Brinnie looked at Norma and cleared her throat. “After Charlie *died*, not six months later, Joe Glenn Edge came to my door. He stood on the porch and asked me to marry him.” A quiet wonder softened the edges of her words. “I didn’t so much as ask him to come in, so afraid what folks would think. I don’t remember what I said. Scared him off for good. Next thing I knew he was married to Stella Brown and her belly out to here.”

The young widow glanced around the room. Her eyes came into focus when she met Grace’s gaze. “Look at me,” Brinnie said. “I’m thirty-nine years old.” She pronounced her age like a sentence and, turning, led them to the living room.



By three thirty, the gathering had recovered. Grace loved the sound of a *kafee klatch* – voices rising and falling in the afternoon light, the widows spilling words into the swirl, their hands keeping time like a chorus of band directors. Sometimes, though, with no cue that a change was coming, the conversation snagged on a single comment. Voices stopped and hands dropped into laps, all eyes homing in on the one who’d rippled the peace. As happened at exactly 3:47, by the clock on Grace’s kitchen wall. Having started a pot of coffee, she stood in the living room doorway for a moment, listening.

Frieda, seated opposite in Grace's rocking chair, informed Gertrude Krause that someone with more money than sense had installed a washateria in Kingsville. This news had circulated after Dolan Woodhouse returned from a football recruiting visit to the college there.

"I think it's a good idea." The voices stopped and all eyes turned to Brinnie, stranded in the middle of Grace's couch. From the space behind her, she fetched the purse she surrendered to no hostess, grasped it primly in her lap, clasped her gloved hands on it and waited. With her dimpled cheeks and her wide-eyed innocence, her impossibly small pumps not quite making contact with the hardwood floor, she looked nothing like the woman who, half an hour before, had told them about the man who got away. This was the Brinnie they knew.

"I *do*," she said. "I wish we had a washateria in Nopalito. Wait, let me explain. My Mr. Dentry, he's been with me for two years now, coaching over at the high school? He says he likes it here. Well how's the poor man supposed to wash his clothes?"

"Am I to understand," Norma asked, "that if he had a place to do his wash in public, you'd stop doing it for him?" She suspected – she'd said as much to Grace several times – that Brinnie did more than laundry for the man who rented her garage apartment.

"Send him to Kingsville," Grace said.

Brinnie rewarded her with a blank stare. Kingsville was a forty-mile drive.

"Whatever you do," Norma put her hand on Brinnie's arm, "stop cleaning up after him. Or put him to work helping you. Let the man at least hang his own clothes."

"And who's going to iron them?"

"Honey, a washateria doesn't iron your clothes."

"I hope you charge him for ironing his pants," Frieda declared. "That heavy khaki. And all that starch. *Gott im Himmel*, I hated ironing my Augie's khakis."

Norma turned to Frieda. "Sister, I wouldn't iron a stitch for Jake Pfeiler if he rose up out of the grave tomorrow."

Grace spoke to Brinnie. "You're as much as taking money from another woman's pockets."

The little widow blanched, but Grace was in no mood to be kind. She took in ironing. Brinnie didn't.

"If Bob Dentry's mother didn't have sense enough to teach the man to iron, he ought to be paying someone for it." Grace stopped and kept the rest to herself. Brinnie's coach was cute as a puppy and about as useful. Not worth the effort it would take to swat him.

"I would never have let Mr. Krause do the ironing." Gertrude started to defend her statement, but Frieda and Brinnie turned to Norma and the conversation moved elsewhere, the momentary discord forgotten.

Grace wondered what would happen if the widows were asked to fold their hands in their laps when they came together. Would they go mute? Several months back, her eldest grandson, ten years old and full of himself, had tried to negotiate her living room with a dozen women gathered. He'd been all but knocked down by the flurry of hands in the air, like birds indoors, wings beating to get out.



When it was time for refreshments, Norma followed Grace into the kitchen. She dropped her voice into the register they'd used as girls with secrets in a house full of ears.

"Did he ask you to go dancing? Tell me you're going to see him again."

"Ooh, that Frieda." Grace opened her silverware drawer and counted out forks. "I wish she'd choke on her own tongue."

Norma counted spoons from the drawer and moved to the table with Grace. "Has it ever occurred to you that you keep too tight a rein on yourself?"

"So I should make a spectacle?" Grace lowered her voice. "Like Brinnie running after her coach?"

"Let her chase him if he makes her happy."

"*Sie hat nicht alle Tassen im Schrank.*" Grace shimmied one of her coffee cups against the saucer beneath it. "A few cups missing from the cupboard."

"That's unkind. But it isn't news. Something's always gone missing with Brinnie."

"She wasn't even twenty." Grace paused, thinking of the day the constable had knocked at her young friend's door to say that Charlie Klein would be returned to her in pieces.

"It's a wonder all of us haven't rattled something loose," Norma said. "My house is so quiet some days." She looked intently at Grace. "Four years I've been a widow, but no man showed up at my door yesterday. Oh, sister, don't turn Rupert Koehn away."

"You step out with him." Grace spoke with a bluntness she hadn't expected. She turned toward the living room, suspecting the others had heard.

Norma kept her voice down. "Hasn't he done his penance yet?"

"It's not that." Grace hated the sound of her whisper. She might as well have hissed.

"Sometimes I think you're hard."

"I've had to be." Grace felt the tightness at her throat. She'd had a household to look after since her mother died and, after Garret's suicide, three grief-stricken sons to raise up on her own. A farm to run. A war coming. No man beside her when most she needed help.

"You're not hard with your grandchildren."

"It's not the same." And Grace was finished. She excused herself to her bathroom, leaving Norma to play hostess.

Taking a washcloth from the linen closet, she wet it under the tap and dabbed her face. It was delicious – the moist cloth against her eyes, the drift of cool in patches on her forehead as the damp evaporated in the air from the raised window. Opening a compact from the medicine chest, she retouched her powder and put her glasses back in place. A gray-haired woman who clearly looked her sixty years gazed back at her in the mirror. Grace used a little bit of powder and a light shade of lipstick, an occasional home permanent, a rinse that left her hair with a silvery sheen. Her breasts, still ample, sagged beneath a simple shirtwaist dress.

Garret had loved her breasts. He'd loved looking at them in the lamplight of their bedroom, touching them, putting his mouth to them when finally she let him, skittish and self-conscious though it had made her feel. With time she had eased into this pleasure between them – until a night during her first pregnancy, when Garret put his mouth to her breasts and they began to leak. Her breasts weren't for Garret anymore. She didn't stop him, but she knew he felt the change in her. It opened the first distance between them. In the last months of his life, as darkness overwhelmed him, she'd despaired of his dependency in bed

with her, eyes closed like a baby, something vital drying up inside her while he suckled there.

The light fluttered at the edge of her vision, and Grace turned from the mirror. Like a breath at the window, the breeze toyed with an edge from her curtains.



By five, Grace's party was winding down. Frieda complained about her aches and pains, grouching that she needed to get back home. Gertrude washed the last of Grace's cups and saucers, and Brinnie dried them, her gloves lying neatly on the countertop nearby.

"Girls." Norma's voice beckoned from the living room. "You're not going to believe your eyes."

Brinnie dropped the cup towel and reached for her gloves while Gertrude dried her hands. Grace followed her friends to the living room window.

Dolan's Studebaker stood in the little half moon of crushed rock out front, its chrome-tipped airplane nose pointing at the trunk of Norma's dusty old DeSoto. At the open passenger door of the gleaming Studebaker stood Dolan and Hollis, looking like a picture. Dolan had on a suit clearly just off the rack. Hollis was dressed in pale yellow with matching shoes and hat. She was holding a bouquet of yellow roses. He had a yellow rose bud at his lapel. Everything about the couple, even the way they smiled, said newlyweds. Brinnie burst out the front door, with Norma and Gertrude behind her. Frieda all but shoved Grace down the steps behind them.

They converged in a jumble, with Dolan and Hollis telling their story in fits and starts. Grace stood at the edge, watching. Her boarder and his intended hadn't wanted to wait, they said, and Hollis hadn't really wanted a big church wedding. Her parents had given the young couple their blessing and driven to the county seat with them to serve as witnesses. When Brinnie got breathless wanting to know what was next, Hollis announced a suitably romantic weekend.

"I'm all packed and ready to go. Dolan's got to grab a few things here and then we're honeymooning – you'll never guess where – at the Casa Ricardo in Kingsville."

At the mention of honeymooning, Brinnie turned to Norma and, standing on tiptoe, whispered into her ear. Norma nodded and turned to Frieda while Brinnie whispered to Gertrude. Norma led Brinnie and Gertrude back into the house while Frieda strode across Grace's garden and her own barren yard, then disappeared behind her front door. Suddenly it was quiet, so quiet Grace could hear the bees at work among her flowers.

Dolan stepped forward and took her hand in both of his while Hollis retreated behind the open car door and stood there waiting.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Hoffman. I should have told you last night." He leaned in and lowered his voice. "But I promised Hollis."

"You've kept your word. Now what? You've got bed and board here but no room for a bride."

"Coach Dentry got us a garage apartment over by the high school." Dolan's words came at her in a rush. "I had to tell Coach. He's been like a father to me, and I know he didn't tell Mrs. Klein. He promised he wouldn't. Oh, and we'll pay for my room through May, Hollis says we should and –"

"You'll do no such thing. I haven't got so feeble I need charity." Grace turned to Hollis. "What about you, young lady? What are you going to do with yourself?"

Hollis stepped out from behind the car door, wilting under Grace's gaze. "The apartment Coach Dentry got for us? It'll take weeks to get it clean and straight. Not that I mind." Hollis grinned, as if to reassure herself. "I never much cared for high school. Seemed like band was the only part I liked."

Grace clasped her hands behind her back and fought the itch to shake Dolan's bride. With her own mother three years gone, Papa had pulled Grace out of school when she was ten and put her to work in the kitchen. She hadn't had the chance, at seventeen, to prance around a football field half naked, twirling what looked like a cheap double-tipped dinette chairleg at the head of the marching band.

Brinnie flung Grace's front door open, saving the bride from what might've been said. The tiny widow rushed toward them, with Gertrude and Norma close behind. On cue, Frieda appeared among the hens while Dolan retreated to pack his things.

Watching them flutter, Grace felt suddenly old. Her friends still looked like the aging widows who'd fetched up at her front door just hours before, but they'd broken free. Giddy as schoolgirls, they deferred to Brinnie, who moved as if she could not keep up with her heart.

The young widow chanted in a breathless rush. "Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue."

"Schnarreganz," Grace said. "Honking like a goose." But no one paid her any mind.

The other widows took a collective breath and repeated the chant. Even Frieda. It was too much for Grace, her sister's old-man voice, low and rough and quivery all at once, let loose from its tether.

Frieda fanned at the bride with a lace handkerchief she'd tatted at fifteen for her trousseau. Hollis hugged her and tucked it in her purse so that when she closed it, the lace protruded like a fan.

Brinnie pulled a rhinestone-studded comb from her hair and a compact from her purse. She'd had the comb less than a week, she announced, had worn it only twice, for Easter Sunday service and Grace's birthday party, so it was good as new. Hollis removed her hat and, setting it on the carseat with her purse, swept her hair back on one side and slid the comb into place, then replaced her hat, took up her purse and smiled, a brightness like love or lunacy spilling from her.

Norma stepped forward, and for a moment Grace couldn't breathe. Her sister was holding their mother's cameo brooch. Fixing Grace with a quiet stare, Norma turned to the bride. "This was Mama's. Except when my sister wears it, she hasn't let it stray from her dresser since Papa gave it to her. I've borrowed it for you, Mrs. Woodhouse." Hollis blushed at the mention of her married name. "You are to return it to Mrs. Hoffman first thing Monday morning."

Grace watched herself step forward and pin her mother's cameo to the young bride's bodice. Norma waved a length of satin ribbon, a pale powdery blue, scavenged from Grace's sewing box. She twined it around the bride's bouquet, tied a bow into place, and stood back. Dolan reappeared as Gertrude produced a box of rice from Grace's kitchen cabinet, and when the newlyweds stepped to the car, the widows tossed handfuls into the air above them. Dolan started his Studebaker while Hollis arranged herself beside him. Had Grace ever been so young? She

knew the click of a camera had not captured her at such a moment, and no one, it seemed, had thought to snap a picture of Dolan and Hollis this afternoon, at the start of their life together, before a bedroom door closed on them as man and wife.

When finally the widows stopped waving, Gertrude turned to Brinnie. "Let's you and I walk Frieda home." Brinnie looked lost for a moment but went along without a word. Grace knew what her friends were up to, but she was too tired to resist. She walked with Norma to her own front door.



The two sisters lit at the kitchen table. Norma looked around the room, then turned to Grace.

"This house is going to feel mighty empty with Dolan gone."

"I have the hens. My grandchildren. Some days I have too much company."

"That's not what I mean and you know it. Oh, sister, go dancing with Rupert Koehn."

"He hasn't asked me to go dancing."

"Give him half a chance and he will."

"I haven't danced in years. I'd step all over my own feet."

"A body doesn't forget." Norma swept Grace to her feet, waltzing circles with her as they had when they were girls together at home. Norma hummed a tune from years back, then sang almost under her breath, "Du, du, liegst mir im Herzen. Du, du, liegst mir im Sinn." You live in my heart, you live in my mind. The words trailed off and left her humming the rest of the old waltz.

"Have you forgot what rhymes with Herzen?" Grace surprised herself with the question.

Norma stopped short and looked her right in the eye. "Schmerzen, Grace. Heartache. Just plain old human hurt. Put it at last behind you."

Grace gathered herself and tried to find words for the ache that weighed on her this afternoon, a way to explain the separation she felt between herself and her sister's wish. "It's too late," she said and took her place at the table again.

"To let go?"

But Grace had let go. She'd gone on without Garret. She'd let go of so much. She'd learned to be wary of attachments.

"I was sixteen." Norma's voice broke in.

Grace shook her head. Her sister had taken a wrong turn.

Norma didn't seem to notice. "I wanted to believe that the face I saw in the mirror was pretty. I wanted to make Rupert look at me. And that's all he did. He looked at me."

"He looked at you the way a man looks at a woman." Yesterday – ten years ago – the old bitterness in these words would have gnawed at Grace. Today she felt acceptance, even release.

"You were upstairs." Norma was arguing a point she clearly didn't realize Grace had conceded. "You weren't supposed to walk in on us. We meant you no harm. He meant you no harm."

A long lost image of Rupert's upturned face glimmered at Grace. He'd promised her no harm. "Pride goes before a fall," she said.

"Who're you accusing? It was your pride that roused his."

"But only for a little while."

"Sister, I'm lost."

"He humbled himself. Two days later, he came to me and he humbled himself." Grace couldn't sit. She got up and walked to the door. Late afternoon shadows crept across the back yard, softened by the fine cross-hatch of screen she peered through. Memory tugged at her from a hideaway she'd left dark these many years. She heard June bugs clicking against the window screens on the old house, saw lamp-light pooling on Rupert's face, with him on one knee looking up at her.

"He pleaded with me," she said. "He swore by my memory of Mama it would never happen again."

Stand up like a man. She'd torn the words out of herself and flung them at Rupert. She wanted to slap him. Telling Norma, Grace could feel the itch in her palm, and she understood it wasn't pride at work in her the night she turned Rupert away. It was contempt.

"He looked weak as a bottle-fed calf. I didn't want him like that."

"Making a promise he would've kept."

"I didn't want him on his knees." As simple as that, she had decided

two lives. Like shuffling at cards, the clatter of them coming together in a new pattern. Tap twice against a table top and the deck is whole again. With no way back to the moment before.

“And now?” Norma asked.

Now.

There was such stillness, such quiet, for a stretch of moments. It seemed to Grace that everyone was holding a collective breath, listening. She felt Norma waiting. She pictured Frieda at her back steps across the way, Gertrude and Brinnie on the stoop behind her, each with a hand cupped to an ear. She imagined Rupert pausing at his back gate – and a hush in the cemetery where Garret, where Miriam, lay biding. She felt herself listening, wondering what the answer might be.

“Grace?”

“Shhh. Listen.”

Out in the yard, the mulberry tree stirred, leaves brushing against one another in a whispery flutter. A moment later, on cue, the Gulf breeze whisked through the screen door, a cool drift trembling in the hair at her neckline. She felt the pull of the draft flowing through the house behind her, heard curtains rustle at the living room windows. And Grace was back – breathing, thankful – at her own kitchen door. In a little while, as on so many nights of her life, she would open a bedside window, take a seat in her rocker by the window in the dark, let go of her day before getting into bed. That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been.

She’d been such a fool. She almost smiled to think so. She felt lighter somehow, unburdened.

“I’m waiting for an answer.” Norma spoke from behind her. “What now?”

Grace turned to her sister. “I have a wedding dress to sew. A spare bedroom to clean for my next boarder.” She looked forward to both.

“Don’t trifle with me,” Norma said. “I am not a patient woman.”

“You want to know about Rupert.” Grace took her sister’s hand. “It was pleasant to be in his company,” she said. “That’s all the answer I have.” She paused. Then, for herself as much as for Norma, she added four simple words. “For the time being.”

Together, then, they walked to Frieda’s to fetch Brinnie and Gertrude for their ride home with Norma. The day was fading, the western sky spilling amber. Afterwards, when Norma drove off, Grace walked in her garden. She stopped to admire the hollyhocks – planted last fall and coddled through the winter, their shoots as high now as her shoulder, tight buds unfolding at the peaks and beneath them looser and looser eruptions of petals. They went all the way back to Papa’s house, these flowers. They’d begun with her mother. Grace had been saving the seeds – and trading with her neighbors – for fifty years. She had picked them with her treasured brother Julius. She had teased Rupert, who never got the hang of flowers. Every year of her married life, she’d planted them with Garret. Another day, admiring them, she’d have clipped some for the kitchen table. But somehow this evening, she couldn’t bear to. She wandered there for a while, and when dusk took the color, she went back inside. 🌿