

ELDORADO

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On the afternoon of Aggie Doyle's birthday, Evelyn got off the bus and went straight to her room. She stepped out of her school clothes and slipped on the sundress her mother had sewn for the birthday outing—a simple, coral-colored affair with lemony piping to set off a modest, straight-line bodice and wide straps. Even with no one to see her, Evelyn felt naked as she sat down to her dresser mirror, her shoulders and collarbone exposed to the afternoon cool.

She hadn't wanted a sundress and had held her ground until Momma threatened to fetch the hairbrush. Evelyn danced out of her clothes on the spot, a breathless chant coming out of her. "Oh Momma, please. Please, no. I'll get your tape measure. Here it is. See." And she babbled on—anything to create a distraction. It was humiliating, but she didn't want the greater

shame that came after a whipping with the hairbrush—hiding the bruises, keeping her part of a wordless pact. That this was between her and Momma. That her father, her brothers, must not know.

Grady's job this afternoon was to keep their mother occupied. Evelyn heard voices from the kitchen and crossed her fingers. She put on the barest minimum of makeup, then took a brush and touched up her hair. She took special care with her nails, using a translucent polish with enough color to soften her mother's displeasure. Her fingers were smooth and slender—graceful, even—and her nails perfectly shaped ovals. Aggie chewed her nails to the quick, and Fran had bony fingers. As the polish dried, Grady peeked in and gave a thumbs-up. Momma had said yes. He wanted to swim and laze around at the Doyles'. Evelyn wanted him along as a buffer.

At half past five Fran pulled up beside the hackberry tree outside Evelyn's window and honked. She was driving her father's station wagon. Momma knocked at Evelyn's door and entered without waiting for an answer. She was a pretty woman. Everyone said so, but for days now she'd kept her hair—unwashed, unbrushed—in a knot at the nape of her neck, its blond light dimmed.

“Don't keep your cousin waiting,” Momma said, her mouth pulled out of whack. “She'd ditch you like a rusty wagon if you weren't blood kin. Look at

you. Pretty dress like that wasted. Stand up straight.” She gave Evelyn’s shoulders a parting yank.

Fran sat behind the wheel in a white spaghetti-strap sundress sprigged with tiny flowers. She didn’t look happy. Grady took the back seat wearing nothing but a swimsuit and a smile. Evelyn took the front passenger seat, and Fran maneuvered the dusty Chevy out of the yard. Daddy waved from his tractor, cultivating grain sorghum in the field beside the lane.

As they turned into the county road, Grady launched into a stream of chatter. He was irresistible. Within minutes Fran was nattering back at him. It was warm, more like May than March, with the smell of freshly turned soil tickling at the edges of Evelyn’s consciousness. She drifted along, hearing her brother and cousin—the dip and sway of their voices, but not the words.

A mile or so farther down the road, on a curve beyond the creek, Fran gunned the engine and the rear of the old Chevy lurched to the right. She yanked the wheel left, then right, Grady whooping like a tilt-a-whirl rider while the station wagon fishtailed on crushed rock. Evelyn grabbed at the armrest on her door and felt the drag of the car sluing behind them, a lovely, crazy, terrifying weightlessness rising up inside her. The engine surged again, and when Fran stomped the brake pedal, the tail of the car made a dizzying half circle and stopped. Evelyn cranked wildly at the side ventilator window as dust engulfed them. She turned to her cousin, bent over at the steering

wheel, hugging herself. And laughing as if she would never stop.

She's hysterical, Evelyn thought.

Grady gave a great shout. "Goddamn, Fran," he said. "You made that look easy."

"Pure luck," Fran said and flopped against the back of the seat.

"Luck," Evelyn said. She felt hot and cold and dizzy all at once. "You might have got us killed."

The laugh faded from Fran's eyes. It was deathly still until she spoke.

"What is wrong with you?"

Evelyn turned to Grady, who shrugged and looked out the window.

She stepped out of the car. If only she were wearing a shirt and pants, a pair of decent shoes, she could step to the fence and slip between strands of barbed wire. She could walk into the pastureland beyond and not come back.

"Get in the car," Fran said.

Evelyn started down the road.

Behind her she heard the Chevy engine turn over, and then the big wagon was beside her, Fran insisting *Get in the car, Get in the car*—her voice oddly like birdcalls against the tamped purr of internal combustion, the smooth crunching of tires on caliche.

And all the while—*Stop, let me out*—Grady in a chorus from the back

seat. *I'll talk to her. Stop, let me out.*

On a Sunday in late February, Wadene Doyle had approached Evelyn and her mother after Mass. Each time Evelyn heard Wadene's name, the corners of her mouth curled into a smirk. A man was responsible, of course. Wade Keller—Two, he'd been called since he got grown and quit answering to Junior. Seems Wade had expected a firstborn son to bear his name. When fate intervened, he called his baby girl Wadene.

Three. That's what Evelyn's father called Wadene around his daughter and sons, any time their mother was out of hearing range.

"Three sheets to the wind." That was Ralph, Evelyn's older brother, who always buttoned up in front of Wadene to keep her eyes off the chest hair he paraded so proudly otherwise. Twenty years married to Vernon Doyle and the rancher's wife looked at high school seniors like Ralph as if she might undress them on the spot.

That morning after Mass, though, Wadene was swathed in one of her winter suits, lush silvery-gray wool setting off the jet-black hair she pulled into a bun for church. The hat said money—the extravagant brim, the drape of net beneath it and Wadene's dark eyes behind the veil saying *look at me.*

No liquor on her breath this morning but beneath her perfume, the faint odor of mentholated smoke that trailed her everywhere.

“Good morning, Bernette,” Wadene said. “That’s a lovely suit you’re wearing.” And the two women made small talk about clothes and the approach of spring. Evelyn’s mother wore the blue satin she’d sewn in the dead of winter. Momma’s outfit played up the curves beneath the satin, the top button on the jacket leaving the barest hint of breasts. She had covered a tiny pillbox hat in the suit’s blue satin and perched it on top of her glorious hair. Momma used lemon to bring out the highlights. She kept her favorite perfume, a sweet, heavy musk, in a crystal decanter on her dresser. This morning as usual, she had called Grady just before stepping into her suit. Thirteen and giddy and clearly his mother’s favorite, Grady grasped the decanter in one hand, the fingertips of the other ready at the atomizer. On cue from Momma, he squeezed, and their mother stepped into a cloud of mist.

“I suppose you’re wondering where Aggie is this morning,” Wadene said. “She missed her curfew last night. Would not get out of bed this morning.” She trained her eyes on Evelyn. “You should double with my daughter. I bet you’d get her home on time.” There was admiration in her voice, but mirth too, an edge of mockery. She turned back to Evelyn’s mother.

“Aggie’s birthday is coming,” Wadene said. “A school night, but she’s got your niece on her side. They expect me to surrender my keys.”

Beyond them, in a slot at the curb, sat Wadene’s car—a 1961 Eldorado convertible, three years old but shimmering like new, sleek and pearl-colored, its top up while the weather stayed cool.

“Evelyn must come too,” Wadene said. “But it seems there’s a problem about homework?”

“I assure you my daughter can take a night off.” Momma turned to Evelyn. *Just wait*, her look said.

Around the last curve and the Doyle ranch house—a sprawling, stucco hacienda roofed with Spanish tiles—came into view at the top of the rise ahead. Fran revved the old station wagon up the drive and parked in a spot shaded by crepe myrtles. Evelyn got out. Below the rise, on a level patch of open grass, she could see the faint outline of the baseball diamond Wadene Doyle had laid out when she arrived here as a bride. Evelyn was not especially fond of baseball, but she loved anything that set her free outdoors. They’d grown up running base to base down there—Ralph and the friends he sometimes brought along, Aggie and Fran, Evelyn, Grady. And always, Wadene in their midst, coach and player rolled into one.

For years they’d celebrated Aggie’s birthday here on the ranch—with

baseball and swimming, hot dogs, roasted marshmallows. Evelyn would have shucked her sundress in a heartbeat, put on Bermuda shorts and a shirt, grabbed a bat and gone running for the diamond. Anything but the evening Aggie and Fran had planned.

But no. She followed Fran and Grady through the hacienda's dusky, open-air entry hall and into the palm-studded atrium. Wadene greeted them from a chaise longue by the pool, a drink beside her on a little white wrought-iron table, smoke curling from the ashtray beside it. She waved Grady into the pool and spoke to Evelyn.

"I half-expected Ralph might drive you over."

Fran answered. "You knew she was coming with me."

"Well, but Grady's here."

"Grady's twelve."

"Thirteen," Evelyn said. But no one paid her any mind.

"Ralph was always here before," Wadene said. "I miss those days. Besides"—her voice, her eyes hungered—"I could use some company."

"Ralph has other things to do," Fran said.

"Besides flirt with you," Aggie added, arriving among them. She had on a backless sundress, a deep, shimmery turquoise, more green than blue, the heart-shaped bodice showing off the figure she was so proud of. Her skin was smooth and pale, her hair jet black like her mother's. She'd have been

pretty, Evelyn thought, except for the eye shadow, gobbled on like Cleopatra's.

"Why weren't you in school today?" Fran asked.

"Charlie Blackburn took me out last night," Aggie said, her grin spreading.

Ice clinked in Wadene's drink. Behind them, oblivious, Grady splashed in the pool. For a stretch of seconds, no voice rippled the calm. Then, squealing, Aggie and Fran jumped at each other. They grabbed hands and spun like girls on the playground.

"He's twenty-six," Aggie said when she could catch her breath. "Showed up out of the blue."

"What about Vernon?" Fran asked.

"He was not available," Wadene said, "to protect his daughter's virtue."

"You let her go?" asked Fran.

"We reached an agreement." Wadene unfurled a cloud of smoke. She offered nothing more by way of explanation, but Charlie's family was old money from the county seat. That alone might have persuaded Wadene. That and maybe Vernon's reaction to his daughter seeing a twenty-six year-old. *Not available* meant not home. *Not available* meant chasing skirts somewhere. Wadene regularly balanced her husband's indiscretions by loosening her rein on Aggie.

“We had a burger at the drive-in,” Aggie said. “Charlie poured tequila in my root beer.”

She made a face. “Hadn’t tasted the stuff. Wadene keeps the liquor cabinet locked.”

Raising an empty glass, the rancher’s wife produced a ring of keys and jangled them. “I think I’ll have another.” She disappeared into the house.

Fran asked Aggie if Charlie Blackburn had behaved himself on the return drive. It was clear that she hoped he hadn’t.

“I drove,” Aggie said. “I wouldn’t let him. He was sloshed.”

Evelyn felt the laughter coming. She couldn’t help it—they were funny. Fran with her blond do, her haughty attitude. Aggie with her hand on her hip and that ridiculous eye makeup. A Technicolor raccoon, Grady called her behind her back. They were just skinny girls with hips and breasts. Playing dress-up.

“What’s so funny?” Fran asked.

“Her,” Grady said, bobbing at the side of the pool. He was pointing at Aggie. “Look at her,” he said, and backstroked out of reach.

Fran stuck out her tongue at him. “Look somewhere else,” she said. And—fixing Evelyn with a practiced glare—“You too.”

Evelyn straightened and held her gaze steady at her cousin. She didn’t blink. She had the unsettling sensation that her mother was present too,

inside her, looking through her eyes, daring Fran to go any further. This moment came back to her in her mid-forties, one day when she caught herself in an airport restroom mirror and saw her mother looking back—Momma’s facial bones, her mouth, her unflinching gaze.

“Who cares about her?” Aggie said. “Let her look all she wants.” She went back to her adventure with Charlie Blackburn.

Evelyn watched. Aggie and Fran, their breezy voices—they were lit from within, bright as sunlight beneath the murmuring palms. Grady, too, splashing in the pool. Whatever she’d felt laughing at her friends, staring Fran down, they hadn’t noticed. They didn’t see her.

“I gave him strict instructions,” Aggie was saying. “Stay on your side of the car. Keep your hands to yourself.” Charlie had behaved like a gentleman until they reached the private road to the ranch, whereupon he scooted to her side and got all whispery, wanting her to pull off somewhere and sit with him for a while. “He was so close,” Aggie said. “It made me giggle.” She had declined Charlie’s request, though she’d let him put his hand on her thigh. Recounting the moment, she pulled up the skirt of her sundress as if the imprint of his fingers lingered there. Evelyn wished for a sweater. She wished for jeans.

Just as Charlie’s car had reached the cattle guard, he slipped a finger beneath Aggie’s panties and tickled. “He didn’t mean to,” she said. “But

that's what his finger did, it *tickled*." Aggie swerved and hit the brakes. She stopped and set Charlie Blackburn straight. He sobered up right away, left as soon as he'd walked her to the door.

"Interesting story," Wadene said, dropping into her chaise longue. "You're lucky a scare was all you got." On the table beside her, she placed her drink and a little box of the kind that held teabags on a grocery shelf. She flipped up the box lid and pulled out a shiny chain of foil packets.

Evelyn had not seen a box of condoms before. She hadn't seen them linked.

"Put those away," Aggie said. "I would never."

"Best keep your knees together then. I'm not ready to be a grandmother."

"We're *Catholics*. We don't believe in birth control."

"Last time I looked in the catechism"—Wadene blew a cloud of menthol at her daughter—"I didn't find a dispensation for finger-fucking."

"That is *not* what happened."

"Be glad he didn't tickle you with more than a pinkie."

Poolside, Grady lapsed into a snickering fit. Fran shooed him away.

"I can't wait to get out of here," Aggie said. "I'm not ever coming back."

"Won't be so easy with a baby on your hip. Or two. Ask Candy Lambert what that's like."

“Candy’s going to be an actress,” Fran said. “A movie star.”

“She’s getting out of here.” Aggie dismissed her environs with a wave.

“When her little ones are old enough.”

“Me too,” said Wadene. “Soon as I finish this drink. Fame awaits me.”

“It’s my birthday.”

“Go on, then. Celebrate. Find some grease monkey with sideburns to knock you up.”

“Eavesdropper.”

“You’re letting them go?” Evelyn asked. “After what you heard?”

“What do you mean, *them*?” asked Fran.

“I’m not going,” Evelyn said. And she didn’t.

Candace Lambert was twenty years old. Four months she’d been married to Buddy Grant, killed in a car crash two months before their daughter was born. She had a nice house in town, courtesy of the dead boy’s life insurance. Currently, she was married to Stan Meyer, number six of the seven Meyer boys, but he left her husbandless doing stints on an offshore rig. When Stan was out in the Gulf, his wife regularly left their two-year-old boy with her in-laws. The little girl—three now, a pale, blond miniature of her mother—was dropped with the parents of the deceased. Candace might have relied on her own parents, but she would

have nothing to do with Winnie and Hugh Lambert. They were old enough to have been her grandparents, awkward as immigrants fresh off the boat. Their clueless timidity put her off—the way they carried her shame when they came to town, their eyes cast down with the weight of it.

Though Candace had a casual attitude toward her second marriage, the first time around she had thrown herself into the role of wife. She'd practiced *Mrs. Buddy Grant* as her signature so often and so well that sometimes she forgot and signed checks with her dead husband's name. Others might snicker over this lapse, but not Evelyn's mother. Momma thought Candace Lambert was tragic—like one of the doomed beauties in the soap operas that brought life to a halt every afternoon between two and three. Candace had looked lovely in black, Momma said, which she'd worn exclusively for the several months of her widowhood, right up to the day she walked the aisle, four months pregnant with a second child, to say I do to Stan Meyer. She'd eloped with Buddy Grant. The second time around, she had the wedding she'd wanted, white dress and all. *Candlelight*, Momma said, defending Candace, her wedding, the lace dress she'd purchased with Buddy Grant's money. The dress wasn't, strictly speaking, white. It was *candlelight*.

The sun was setting when Aggie and Fran departed—a red glow filling

the entryway as they walked out to the Eldorado. It looked as if they were entering an element of fire. Grady adjourned to the record collection in the Doyles' music room, leaving Evelyn poolside with Wadene. She hadn't thought about what she'd do once her friends were gone, how she'd handle this woman who had always seemed to mock her. But without Evelyn's mother standing by, without Aggie and Fran to trigger Wadene, the rancher's wife let go of the edge in her voice. She smoked less, let her drink glass stand empty. Evelyn had a lifetime to look back on the evening. When she did, it was the hush she remembered, the thickening dusk, her awareness—sitting opposite the rancher's wife, with the little wrought-iron table between them—that something vital was being placed in her care. It was Wadene's voice she remembered too, the way it took root in her, the strange fruit it bore.

“What are we gonna do with you?” Wadene asked. She was lying back in her chaise longue. Her eyes were closed. Evelyn thought maybe she wanted to be alone, to nap for a while before dinner.

“I've got a book,” she said. “I'll go inside and read.”

“I don't mean tonight.” The eyes were still closed.

Evelyn didn't say anything. A breeze rustled momentarily among the palms.

“You showed some nerve back there. Standing up to them.” Wadene

sat up. “Might try a bit of that with your mother.” She looked at Evelyn, who looked away. She felt Wadene’s eyes on her.

“I see the way she looks at you. You always look down.”

“She’s my mother.”

“Ralph doesn’t put up with her guff.”

“He makes her so mad.”

“What about Grady?”

Momma loves Grady. She couldn’t say that. “Grady makes her laugh” is what she said.

“And you?”

“She doesn’t want a daughter like me.”

“We should trade.”

Evelyn pictured herself let loose here—and Aggie blinkered by her own mother, stringent, steel-willed Bernette Smith. It was a good joke. Only years later did it occur to her that the strange woman sitting beside her that night might have meant what she said.

“If you were of age”—Wadene raised her empty drink—“I’d fill two of these and make a toast.” She held the glass between them for a moment, sighting on Evelyn across the rim. “You’re a smart girl, Evelyn Smith. You’re not like them. Like me. Buck up.”

Pockets of dark settled in the cooling spaces between them.

How? Evelyn was never sure if she said the word aloud.

“You think I know?” Wadene searched the heavens, as if one of the few stars that had blinked on might send an answer. She brandished her glass again. “You won’t find the answer in this stuff. Or a license to marry.”

The air stirred, and Evelyn knew that she was cold. The last color was fading in the west, the palms in the atrium turning into silhouettes against the hacienda’s ghostly walls.

“It was no accident Charlie Blackburn showed up here last night.”

Wadene’s announcement hung in the air. Evelyn was not surprised by the words—only to hear them said aloud. And so matter-of-factly.

“Charlie is wild,” Wadene went on. “But he’s careful.” She fingered the chain of condom packets on the table beside her. “If it comes to that, well, at least he’s got money. Every day of her life, my daughter will need money.” The brittle timbre was back in her voice, the hint of mockery in the set of her mouth as she got up to go inside.

In 1944, when Vernon Doyle married Wadene Keller, he started construction on a house suitable for his moneyed bride. The Spanish-style abode sat on a caliche rise overlooking the largest ranch in several counties, a thin-soiled, mostly flat expanse bristling with mesquite, huisache, prickly pear, yucca—a host of thorny things that thrived on drought. Wadene

christened her new house Roca Blanca, though folks referred to it mostly as the Doyle place. Sometimes, the Rock.

In 1947, with the war well over and his pocketbook fat from unloading several hundred acres of the vast Doyle holdings, Vernon bought Wadene her first Cadillac, a convertible, its coat of paint the shiny liquid green of grass in parts of the world graced regularly by rain. It was the most beautiful, the most luxurious vehicle the town had ever seen. Wadene kept it in a constant state of polish. She had it washed weekly, summoned a ranch hand to wipe it free of dust each time she returned from a drive. She stood by while her mechanic worked his magic beneath the hood. The grand old Caddy lasted her for thirteen years, and she might have kept it longer. But in the fall of 1960, confronted by unimpeachable evidence of her husband's infidelity, Wadene drove to Corpus Christi and bought herself a brand-new Eldorado.

Evelyn Smith grew up visiting Roca Blanca, hearing stories, too, about Vernon and Wadene Doyle. By 1964, their epic binges, the colorful, violent shouting matches they spawned, were central to the story Nopalito residents told about themselves and their people. Prior to Aggie Doyle's sixteenth birthday, Evelyn got to ride in Wadene's Eldorado several times. She never forgot the lovely humming silence of those cushioned rides.

Midnight approached with no sign of Aggie and Fran, no hint of Vernon's return—and Grady fading on the couch beside Evelyn. Shortly after the hallway clock struck twelve, the phone rang. Wadene shouted from upstairs that she would take it. They heard her voice briefly and then silence. Evelyn put her book down and said it was time to turn in. Grady would take his usual bed in the guest room. Evelyn knocked at Wadene's door and announced her intention to sleep in the bed opposite Grady—said she didn't want to be disturbed on a school night, didn't want to be waked when Aggie and Fran came in. Wadene gave her an odd look. She seemed on the verge of objecting but then said fine, she didn't really care.

Grady was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. Evelyn had just begun to drift off when she heard Vernon Doyle's voice downstairs, the angry rise of it, broken off when Wadene let loose at him. Grady slept soundly while they went at it, didn't wake at the sound of breaking glass. It was quiet after that. One minute Evelyn was listening, the next she was coming out of a deep sleep. There was liquor in the air and fumbling at the covers and then someone sitting, the weight of him on the mattress at her knees. Then, through the fabric of her nightgown, a hand on her breast. She reached out wildly in the dark, raked fingernails down the unshaven cheek her hand slapped up against. He was up cursing. The light came on, blinding bright. And Vernon Doyle stood there, a hand to the side of his face.

Grady sat up, drugged with sleep. Wadene came to the door, a bat in one hand, the other holding a flimsy silk wrapper closed between her breasts. She pummeled the air with curses. But when she paused to catch her breath, Vernon launched into a cover story. He was sorry, he said—should have slept in the bunkhouse. After all, that’s what she had suggested when he got home.

Wadene brandished her bat. “Should’ve whacked you when you walked in the door.”

Vernon shrugged in Grady’s direction. “Had a few drinks tonight.”

“You stink of gin,” said his wife.

“Didn’t trust my footing,” the rancher added—another plank in his alibi. The bunkhouse sat below, at the bottom of a rocky, twisting trail. “Thought better of it,” he said. “Decided to bunk with Grady.” Vernon’s eyes flickered up at Evelyn and then back down again. “What’s she doing in here?”

“Sleeping,” Wadene said.

“Supposed to be in town.” Vernon took a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the marks on his cheek. “With Aggie and Fran. Least that’s what I was told.” He played the confused drunk flawlessly.

“Goddamn it,” Wadene said. “Spend a little time here, you’d know which beds are occupied.”

Vernon backed up to Grady’s side of the room, put Evelyn’s brother in

front of him like a shield. Grady stood there with his hands on his hips, wide awake now and clearly having the time of his life—a comic-book superhero in pajamas—while the rancher finished his tale.

“This young man takes the same bed. Always. Every time he’s here. I was gonna take the other. Should’ve been empty.”

They were still then—like figures in a tableau. Philandering husband, indignant wife. Grady looking on. And Evelyn, cold to the bone, her palms itching to get at the rancher’s face again—anything to remove the feckless look she saw there.

“He’s telling the truth,” Grady said, and a second hush came over the room.

No, Evelyn thought, but Wadene spoke to Grady.

“You don’t know my husband.”

“It was an accident,” Grady said.

“He put his hands on your sister.”

“You heard him. He thought the bed was empty.”

Evelyn watched herself watching while Vernon played the injured party and Wadene harangued him, her bat gripped as if she might still use it. With Grady between them, so caught up in the night’s little drama he seemed to have forgotten he had a sister.

Finally, Wadene relented.

Vernon decided to risk a treacherous descent in the dark. Backing out of the room, he looked as if the bunkhouse wasn't far enough from Evelyn's nails. Wadene followed him and tossed a few dispirited curses down the staircase as he retreated. Then her bedroom door closed.

Grady turned to Evelyn. "Are you all right?"

"His hand was on me. Here," Evelyn said. She wanted to say more. She wanted to say, *How could you?* She was angry. At Vernon, yes. And Wadene. But mostly at Grady. For crediting the rancher's story—true or not. For making light of his drunken blunder.

Grady paled suddenly, as though he'd seen what she was thinking.

"Oh, Linnie, I'm sorry." He moved to comfort Evelyn.

She backed away. "I can smell him."

"I don't think he meant to."

"I don't care. He was drunk. He—"

Evelyn had never felt so far from Grady.

"You want the light out?" he asked.

She did not. She went into the guest bathroom, changed out of her nightgown, and put on the clothes she'd brought for school. She packed everything back in her bag so she'd be ready to catch the bus in the morning. She took up her book and, with Grady behind her, knocked again at Wadene's door.

“I can’t sleep,” she said. “We’ll wait up for Aggie and Fran.”

“They’re staying in town.”

“Where?”

“Candy Lambert’s house.”

“What?”

“Fran called earlier. Before the hullabaloo. They’ll be back in time for breakfast.” Wadene closed the door and left her standing there with Grady.

She walked downstairs with him, switched on lights in the den, and sat down. She opened the book on her lap. She didn’t read. Grady fell asleep, but she didn’t.

The summer she turned twelve, the sounds coming from her parents’ bedroom left Evelyn at the wrong end of her mother’s hairbrush. She’d known for a year about the act that leads to conception, though she would have much preferred something more civilized, like the image she had conjured—entirely on her own—in the absence of specifics about the joining of sperm and egg. She had pictured a man and a woman—not her parents—dressed in their Sunday best, seated in facing stiff-backed chairs and holding hands as a kind of magical transference took place. Eventually, though, she had arrived at the truth about bodies, helped in part by the noises that sometimes issued from her parents’ bedroom in the dead of

night—bedsprings, muffled voices, cries that mixed eagerness and pain. More than once, from the bedroom her brothers shared, she'd heard Ralph shushing Grady, who wanted to know what was going on. Until one night, when Grady giggled. For the space of a heartbeat, Evelyn was appalled, hearing knowledge in Grady's giggle. And then she felt laughter, like a trigger in her throat. She put her wrist in her mouth and bit until hurt tamed the tickle itching to be heard.

The following afternoon Evelyn found herself alone with her mother, folding a pile of laundry. What happened was so predictable, so preventable, that afterward she could not stop rehearsing the scene, could not cure an aching need to re-imagine her lines and come out whole on the other side. Momma was talking, Evelyn drifting, not really paying attention, when Grady's giggle came back to her—a flutter of sound trembling at the edges of her, an answering tremor from within.

“What's so funny?”

Evelyn tried to get a hold of herself, but she felt the same tickle as the night before.

“Well?”

“A joke.” This was dangerous territory. She liked it.

“Tell,” Momma said. “I could use a laugh.”

“Just something I heard,” Evelyn said.

“Well?”

“Last night,” Evelyn said, breaking free. “What you and Daddy were doing.”

Her mother was strong. She was angry. And careful. When it was over, Evelyn carried the imprints of the hairbrush in a dapple of bruises beneath her shorts. In the weeks after, she took extra care that no one would see. It was the third time her mother had used a hairbrush on her. Evelyn meant for it to be the last, and to that end, she set about insulating herself from Momma. She practiced the appearances of deference. She taught herself to hear if not to listen. More often than not, she succeeded.

Evelyn and Grady were at the kitchen table having a glass of orange juice when Aggie and Fran walked in, haggard, their hair wild about their faces. Aggie had an ugly egg-shaped bump thickening above her left eye and a milder bruise, barely showing at all, on her right cheek. Blood welled from a fresh nick on the bridge of her nose. She grabbed a cup towel and dabbed at her face.

“Don’t ask,” she said, dropping into a chair and putting her head in her arms on the table.

“What a night,” Fran said. She picked up Grady’s glass of juice, absently sipped from it, and put it back down.

A growling noise came from the direction of Aggie's stomach. "Sorry," she said, looking up. "I'm hungry."

"Me too," said Fran. "Starved."

"Pancakes," Grady said. "Please." Everyone who knew Evelyn loved her pancakes. Grady had confessed privately that hers were better than their mother's.

Evelyn assembled eggs, flour, sugar, bowls. Behind her, Aggie and Fran entered into a half-whispered exchange about their night in town, their stay-over at Candy Lambert's house. Grady urged them on. He thrived on gossip.

Their voices stilled at the sound of rain, heavy splatters on the roof, moving over and quickly gone.

"We're in worse trouble now," Aggie said, and looked at Fran.

"What about?" Evelyn asked.

"Never mind."

Evelyn broke eggs into the mixing bowl and switched on Wadene's mixer. As she flipped the switch again, she heard Aggie behind her at the table.

"She uses a diaphragm. You know? For birth control?"

Evelyn banged a Pyrex measuring cup on the counter top.

"What?" Fran asked.

Evelyn nodded to indicate Grady's presence at the table.

“Goody two-shoes,” Aggie said. “Bet he knows more about it than you do.”

“I don’t want to hear another word about Candace Lambert,” Evelyn said.

“She gave us fashion tips,” Fran told Grady.

“Like what?”

“How to prop these up,” Aggie said, cupping both hands beneath her breasts, lifting them up and together beneath her heart-shaped bodice to create the kind of cleavage Candy regularly displayed.

Grady erupted with laughter.

Aggie watched Evelyn. She didn’t seem to like what she saw. “You needn’t look at us like that,” she said. “Someone’s mother puts hers on display.” She paused, as if waiting for that to sink in. Then, with her eyes on Evelyn, not seeing the look coming over Grady’s face, Aggie made a tactical error. “I’m not talking about Wadene.” She turned back to the table and registered the change in Grady.

“Take that back,” he said, his voice curdling.

“No need to jump the fence,” Aggie said. “I take it back.”

But it’s true, Fran mimed to Evelyn. Grady didn’t seem to notice.

“Slut,” he said to Aggie.

Fran grabbed him by the wrist. “You can’t talk like that.”

“Cock-tease,” Grady said to Fran.

“Grady?” Evelyn said. She wasn’t sure she wanted to call him back.

Grady turned to Aggie. “Dick licker.”

Aggie slapped him. Grady’s face went pale, the imprint of a hand coming up on his cheek—faint, then darkening, like a Polaroid photograph.

Evelyn picked up Wadene’s flour scoop, dipped into the canister, turned, and flung the stuff at Aggie. She turned, dipped again, turned, and flour arced across the kitchen at Fran. The room was dead silent for a moment, a powdery cloud hovering above the kitchen table. Aggie and Fran wore masks in white that streaked up into their tangled hair. Beneath the flour, their faces were wiped of all expression. They stared. They seemed not to know what they were seeing.

Evelyn removed the apron she’d put on to mix the pancake batter, wadded it up, and dropped it on the table. “We’re going home,” she said. “One of you can drive us.”

“What about school?” Grady asked.

“We’re not going.”

“What about our faces?” asked Fran. “Our hair?”

“We’re leaving now,” Evelyn said. She picked up her overnight bag and her book satchel from their place beside the kitchen door. Grady followed suit. They stepped out the kitchen door. Morning light poured into the

atrium, palm trees stirring as the cool shifted.

Carrying kitchen towels, Aggie and Fran stepped out behind them. They dusted the flour from their faces and batted at their hair. When they were done, Aggie took the towels and dropped them into a chaise longue. By the look of her, she had begun to simmer. But the rancher's daughter didn't say a word.

Wadene's Eldorado stood just outside the entryway. The driver's side headlight was smashed, the bumper beneath it bent back, and the fender behind crumpled. The top was down. Rain splatters pocked the dusty finish, wet marks stippling the leather upholstery. They stood there as if memorizing what they saw. Then Fran palmed a ring of keys and led them to her father's station wagon.

Half a mile from the house, just beyond the cattle guard, sat Vernon's pickup truck. Fran slowed as they approached. Vernon was standing to the side, inspecting the damage his wife's car had done to the welded pipe-work there. Aggie rolled her window down as Fran eased the Chevy over the cattle guard and stopped. Vernon rested an arm along the bottom of Aggie's window, his cheek scabbed and swollen from the night before. He did not look happy.

"What happened to you?" Aggie asked.

"Might ask you the same," Vernon said. "Your face looks kind of like my

cattle guard. I don't suppose you were driving? Face hit the steering wheel?"

"Right on both counts," Aggie said. "Satisfied?"

The rancher broke into a grim smile.

"Momma do that to you?" Aggie asked. "Or one of your floozies?"

Vernon got red in the face. He kept his eyes on his daughter, hadn't once looked in Evelyn's direction. He seemed to be groping toward words, but Aggie didn't wait.

She turned away from him, turned to Fran, said, "Gun it," her voice blunt and ugly. Fran hit the gas, wheels spun beneath them, and the big car leaped ahead.

Evelyn turned to look back. She thought of Vernon's hand on her breast in the dark—the drift of liquor distilled with bad breath and sweat. In the years that followed, she had occasion to be grateful to the rancher. One moment with him in the dark of night and she'd been cured of men who drank.

"She's gonna be mad," Grady said as Fran drove away with Aggie, leaving them beneath the same hackberry tree she'd parked beside the afternoon before.

"I know," Evelyn said. "I don't want you in the middle."

"I can sweet-talk her."

“No.”

“Or play the clown. Let her chase me around the house.”

Evelyn heard her brother’s words, her own, against a backdrop of silence—the fields, the grazing land beyond, empty and still—their voices thin, wavering, like heat mirage.

“I can’t take you with me everywhere,” she said.

“You’re mad at me.”

“No.”

“About last night. For believing Vernon.”

It wasn’t the rancher on her mind, though. It was the quiet that unnerved her, the unrevealing windows of the house she must enter, the chill of her mother’s presence.

“I’m sorry, Linnie.”

“It doesn’t matter. You can’t fix this.”

She extracted a promise from Grady—that he would stay well out of it until she called for him. He headed for a stand of trees behind the barn. She watched until he disappeared into a scrim of shadow beneath the leaves. The yard was even quieter now—the lane, the county road beyond bone-white beneath the morning sun.

The hackberry stirred above her, leaves trembling in a momentary gust. Momma would’ve heard the car, would’ve gone to a window and watched.

Aggie and Fran, Vernon, Wadene—they were nothing now. Evelyn stood there summoning what courage she could. From behind her, in the trees by the wash line, a jaybird scolded. Above in the hackberry branches, a mockingbird answered.

She had loved church until sometime during her fifth year. She didn't know what Latin was, but the flow of sounds that came from the parish priest, the altar boys, entranced her. So too with her mother's voice, the blended voices of assembled churchgoers, during a litany. She was ten before she realized that *prayfrus* was not a Latin word recited in response to the name of a saint, but rather three distinct English words, *Pray for us*, soothingly blended by generations of repetition. Incense smelled like old men and their cigars, like old-fashioned spice cake. It swirled out of censers and rose through light that was like shade and sunshine all at once. The saints, the vestments, the colors—they enchanted her. Until one day when Momma's whispers failed to reach her.

"Sit still," her mother said, her lips so close, the words like tissue paper. Evelyn tried, but there was so much to look at. She couldn't understand Ralph, on the other side of their mother, rigid as one of the statues. She stood, leaning, and tried to catch his eye. Gloved hands grasped her at the waist and sat her back down. Thumb and forefinger found the tender under-

flesh on her upper arm and pinched. Evelyn gasped. She would have cried out, except that Momma took her by the chin and looked right down inside her. Words were not necessary.

When Evelyn entered the kitchen that morning after leaving Roca Blanca, her mother was at the sink washing dishes. She was humming. Evelyn wasn't fooled. She took a breath and plunged.

"I'm not going back there. Ever."

Momma took up a cup towel and dried her hands. "You will go where I say."

"Not the Doyles'. Not with Aggie and Fran."

"You will pick up the phone. Whatever you've done, you will apologize."

"No, Momma. I won't."

"We'll see about that." And Momma was gone.

Evelyn heard the sound of a dresser drawer being yanked open. She knew what her mother was getting from the drawer. In the drain tray on the counter, she saw the rolling pin, freshly washed. She picked it up. She didn't know what she was doing, but she stood there with it. Momma stopped in the kitchen doorway, hairbrush in hand.

"You wouldn't dare," she said. "Look at you. Shaking like a leaf."

Evelyn shivered. She couldn't stop. She raised the rolling pin and

brought it down, slamming it into the stovetop. She peered down and saw an ugly chip in the enamel.

“How are you going to explain that to your father?” Momma said.

“Maybe I’ll tell him.” Evelyn took a breath and steadied herself. “What you’ve done.” She indicated the brush. “With that.”

“He wouldn’t believe you.”

“Grady might.”

“You haven’t got the nerve.”

Evelyn looked at her mother while her mother looked right back. A fly buzzed at the window. In the far distance, almost inaudible, a tractor engine rumbled.

“Maybe I do,” Evelyn said. “I am your daughter.”

Momma stood there and looked at her. She looked for a long time. Then she spoke.

“Well, I never.” She turned and walked away, her footsteps retreating through the house.

Never. Momma’s final syllables hovered in a shaft of light that poured in from the kitchen window, dust motes dancing in the wake of her departure, the sound of her bedroom door closing. The loveliest combination of sounds Evelyn might ever hear. *Never.*

David Meischen has recent fiction in *Bellingham Review*, *Dogwood*, *Prime Number*, *Printer's Devil Review*, *Superstition Review*, and *Talking Writing*. Co-editor of *Wingbeats: Exercises and Practice in Poetry*, a 2011 release from Dos Gatos Press, he has had poems in *The Southern Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Borderlands*, *Cider Press Review*, and elsewhere. Meischen won the Writers' League of Texas Manuscript Contest in Mainstream Fiction, 2011.