

Mrs. Somebody Somebody

Hub Hosiery Mill, 1947

Lucy Mattsen was nobody—like all the women I worked with—until the day the baby fell out the window. It was break time at the mill. Us girls from Knitting leaned on the railing over the North Canal, airing out our armpits and sharing smokes. The baby was bare except for diapers. It fell like a bomb in the newsreels.

Where we were, the mill wall ran straight down to the water like a brick cliff, with the baby's apartment building doing the same on the other side. Lowell is like that with canals, one for every mill, dirty water running alongside the dirty streets, or under them. Nothing like those romantic canals in the posters for Holland, where flowers reflect in the water and there's a blue-eyed man behind every boat wheel.

Ever since lunch, a spring rain had fallen. Then a wind came up and the sun came out and glittered off the slate roofs on the neighboring blocks of company housing. That day Lowell looked good the way used-up brick towns can when the light's right. In the sparkle, the cockeyed look of the old buildings—how the shutters had peeled and loosened and fallen away—wasn't so noticeable. With everything shining, who cared if things didn't line up quite right anymore. The wet bricks and slate gleamed so hard under the blue sky, you could ignore the sad look of fences missing pickets—how nothing had been fixed up for years. Weather had polished the WPA walkway. Beyond our cigarette smoke, the air looked as clean as if the smokestacks along the Merrimack River had held their breath.

We'd been talking about men. I was as man-crazy as a girl could be. I elbowed Katie O'Neill, the strapping redhead, and pointed at the maintenance man stacking wood pallets down in the side lot. "You like those knotty arms?"

She wrinkled her nose and said, "He's too short for my taste."

"You'll like him better when he bends over."

She said, “Naw, I don’t care about his ass. I like men big. I got no use for the pretty little ones.” She juttred her pale elbow onto the railing and sank her chin into her hand—a dreamy boozier leaning on a bar. “I like to have to reach to get my arms around a man’s neck.”

“They call that ‘dancing cheek to tie-clip.’” Lucy Mattsen, the new girl with the Southern accent, chimed in.

I said, “Am I the only one who likes the shape of that fellow?” He tossed the pallets into a pile as if they weighed nothing more than playing cards.

Lucy scrunched up her face. She didn’t have much going for her except her teeth, which were all hers and very white. She was a sad sack, but with a little makeup, I thought, she could have passed for pretty. She said, “He isn’t my type at all.”

Katie O’Neill said to Lucy, “I’d say you like your men in wheelchairs.”

Lucy’s face went red as meat. Mr. O’Connor, the floor boss, had her pushing him in his wheelchair between the bays of us knitters as if he couldn’t manage. Lucy was floor girl in Knitting, which is where you started if you were like me and didn’t have family at the mill to bring you in. She moved the trucks of bobbins along, hauled empty trucks to pick up the done jobs, and swept up the lint and clippings, which were everywhere, like the fur off some dark beast.

Katie said, “O’Connor can roll his own self around. He’s got you thinking he’s a vet or something and needs help, but blood sugar took his legs.”

I was a knitter in O’Connor’s room. He tried that stunt on every new girl, and Lucy was the very first to go for it without wanting special treatment in return. Wearing some cast-off brown sweater and lace-up shoes, she wheeled him and his ripe nose around the bays of that big room as if it was the least he could expect. She’d rest under the one working fan to cool herself. Her hair hung lopsided, bent up on one side, flat on the other—she slept on it wet, anyone could see. Someone said she was a nun who ran away.

Lucy said, “I don’t like him, but I don’t mind giving him a hand.” Her words came out slow and round. She let a cigarette hang off her lower lip, trying to make her soft face look

tough. She said, “Seems like if someone has no legs, no matter how he lost them, he could use a little help.” Then she asked, “Who’s got a light?”

I couldn’t say as I knew any nuns who smoked. I pulled a pack of matches out of my apron pocket.

That’s when we saw the baby. At first, it was like someone had thrown a whole chicken out the window on the other side of the canal. The body dropping there just couldn’t be a baby. The splash it made was strangely satisfying. Something had been finished, sewn up, and you could say, *There, well, that’s done with*. The window screen, which had twirled and twisted in the air, landed with a splash a little farther along. Next to me, Sophie Robicheau flung her hands up over her eyes. The baby bobbed up in the brown water, flailing, face down.

That open window just sat there in the sparkling wet brick wall, gaping like a dumb mouth, while we waited for someone to come.

Maria Sarzana—she was a mother—elbowed her way to the front of the platform and started to take off her apron. Maria’s got a bum foot. I looked in the water. Rubber pants floating, the pale baby in them, bottom up. It had an air bubble in its dydees.

Until I saw Maria getting ready to go after him, it didn’t cross my mind that we could do anything. I couldn’t swim, but I said, “Maybe I should go.”

Pulling at her shoe, Maria said, “Who are you fooling, Stella? You might break a nail.”

Lucy’d already gotten over the railing by then. She hung on to it with one hand and ripped her shoes off with the other. She’d shed the sweater, and her arms—too thin and white—poked out of her work apron. Her big eyes found mine and didn’t let go as she handed me her shoes and stepped out into the air, all business. She held her nose. Her hair, which had been hanging like spaniel ears, flew up. Two stories she fell, feet first—her apron flapping up in her face. Who knew if it was deep enough. I held tight to her shoes.

Katie O’Neill said, “Gaah,” and leaned over, looking.

Lucy came out of the splash swimming as if she’d had lessons. My skin crawled with the idea of being in that water. She crossed the canal in six or seven strokes. We didn’t cheer when

she got to the baby, because we couldn't see if it was all right. She flipped it over and swam on her side, dragging it with the current, kicking like mad to keep it up.

All of Packing & Shipping rushed out and crowded farther along the edge of the canal, so when she climbed out, we couldn't see anything but the backs of a bunch of bent-over folks in aprons. No one made a sound—you could have heard a mouse piss on cotton. Lucy was doing something in the midst of them, on the ground. Since she'd jumped, each breath I'd breathed was one that the baby hadn't taken. My arms got to feeling icy; goose bumps came up over them and went away again. I hung on to Lucy's shoes. Sophie Robicheau began to sniffle and pray in French.

The man who'd had my attention straightening pallets sauntered out from the side lot to see what was going on. In the end, we'd all know his name and wish we didn't, but right then, standing by the others, he was just surprisingly short, not anything like what I'd thought.

A murmur started out there by Packing & Shipping. Lucy Mattsen had saved that baby. She and his air-trapping rubber pants. Noe Hathaway, the head fixer, a little walnut of a man, came out of the crowd carrying the baby under his arm like a sports trophy. The mill owner, Mr. William Burroughs, Jr., son of Hub Mills' founder, put his jacket around Lucy and led her inside by the arm.

In the doorway behind us, Mr. O'Connor clapped his hands, "That will be all, ladies." He let his voice slide on "lay-dees," so you'd do anything to shut him up.

Knitting is no work for anyone who needs variety. I watched the mouth of my machine—with its needles going up and down, around and around, casting the tube of one more black sock—and thanked that baby for giving us something different to think about.

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Single girls like us lived in a rickety rooming house planted in the shadow of the mill, where now there's nothing but a parking lot. Lucy Mattsen and I were two of a half dozen girls at the

mill who didn't live with their families. Our rooms lined up like stables along the upstairs hallways. The walls smelled like glue. You stayed there because you had to, or because, like me, you needed a stopgap. There was nothing homey about it: drab wallpaper, dented doors, and old iron beds.

My dream was to marry a good-looking man with enough money to set me up in my own shop. I wanted to run a beauty parlor. I hadn't come to Lowell to end up like Sophie Robicheau, slaving for the mill alongside her brothers and aunts and cousins, getting as used up as she was and no further ahead. The grandkids who brought her lunch every day would start in at the mill as soon as they were old enough to quit school. With her thinning hair and missing teeth, Sophie wasn't the only one who looked like life had punched her in the gut. Danuta Bukowski. Mary Karatelis. Nikola Georgeoulis. Corinne Girardot. I could go on.

Somehow, I'd had the wherewithal to get out of Granville, up in Vermont, where my father had been a quarry cutter. He spent his life in the belly of the hill, up to his knees in seep water, cutting Verde Antique marble, two- and four-ton blocks of it. Our house was smack up to a dirt road in front and the cliff of a spent quarry behind. I never knew my mother, and you'd think that all those years of keeping chickens and minding goats with no place to go but an outhouse would have got me ready for a life without niceties. Just the opposite. Soon as my father died, I quit my job at the wood paneling plant and headed for the city.

How a quarry cutter's daughter gets screwball ideas could be a whole other story. The happy accident—how my nose and eyes landed in a nice arrangement, how my lips came to be a fashionable shape—had a lot to do with it. People have always been pleased to look at my face and figure. Anywhere I've gotten, I've gotten because of my looks. But being a looker can make you think you might be something special. Let me tell you, you're not. You may have the finest eyes in the world, long dark lashes, lovely shape and color, but it's what those eyes see that counts. Mine were blind, blind.

Glamour and *LOOK* magazine showed me better ways to live. I loved those glossy pages of beautiful women, all those brides who looked like they knew the secrets I would learn. I never

doubted that I could be one of them. Not for a second. Those days the world was my mirror. Nothing but shiny surfaces to give me back myself. Wherever I looked, there I was.

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That night, when Lucy came for her shoes—“Stella? Stella, you home?”—I knew it was her by the accent. She was the only southerner at Hub Hosiery.

I opened the door saying how brave she was to jump into the canal, but she would have none of it. She came on in and crossed the creaky floor like she was going out the window herself.

“His daddy failed to apprehend that there’d been an accident.”

To look at her, you wouldn’t think she’d know to use words like that. Her hair bent out from her head at odd angles, and her pants hung long. She said, “I’m going over there to see that baby’s all right.”

She was barefooted and waving around a pair of the ugliest brown socks on earth. Her hands were more graceful than the rest of her, but she’d bitten the nails to the quick.

I’d been gussying up a hat, sewing fake cherries onto it and about to add a little veil. I handed her sturdy browns to her.

She said, “How could someone not notice his child is missing?” I didn’t remember her being so loud, but I didn’t smell liquor on her. “We’ll just see what’s what,” she pronounced. I had to run down the stairs to keep up with her.

We crossed the WPA walkway over the canal, past Worsteds, where the air smelled toasted. We were lucky, working with cotton. The people who worked with wool shuffled through their mill gate at the end of a day, boiled and limp.

I asked, “Where did you learn to swim like that?”

“Back where I grew up.”

“Where’s that?” I asked, trying to see her face in the dark.

“Down South.”

“Yes, but where?”

“You ever been South?”

“No.”

“Then it won’t matter to you, will it?”

On Suffolk Street, people sprawled on their stoops, enjoying the spring air. It was a quiet night. One lone kid skipped rope—*clickety-swish, clickety-swish*—in a circle of streetlight. You could feel in the air how tired everyone was.

Lucy didn’t seem to notice. She clomped along next to me in those shoes. Even by streetlight, I could see her eyebrows were in need of a good shaping, but she had fine cheekbones.

That afternoon with Lucy gone, folks in Knitting had talked about her. Katie O’Neill had said it must be true Lucy was a nun, what with her self-sacrifice and all. And hadn’t we seen the shoes she wore? Who but a nun?

Teresa Bukowski said that was no kind of proof. She’d heard Lucy was a debutante. We all laughed at that one, but she said, “No kidding. How else are you going to explain those teeth?”

Mr. O’Connor put an end to it all, saying, “She’s really the Queen of Sheba. Get back to work.”

Lucy hadn’t told anyone her story. Marching down the street next to her, I asked, “How did you know what to do to make him breathe again?”

“Learning to swim and do first aid was part of growing up in my daddy’s household.”

“Why?”

“There was a pool where we lived.”

The only pool I knew was one at the Chelmsford Arms. But that was for paying guests of the hotel.

She slowed down. “Let’s try this one.” She stepped into a vestibule that smelled of spices

and rotting wood. By what little streetlight squeaked in, we looked for his name. Except she didn't know his name, exactly. She said the baby was Greek.

"That's all you know? We'll never find him." I ran my finger down the line of names, many more than there were floors. Almost all Greek. "Birds of a feather."

She said, "I just need to know that baby's really okay." Her lips started to tremble. I tried to tell her she should feel good. She'd done her part for that kid. The air went out of her. Her back sagged, and just like that, she was crying.

I wasn't good with crying women. My stepmother never quit sniffing, and I got out of there young.

Lucy sucked a ragged breath and blew her nose on a handkerchief she pulled out of her back pocket. I thought, if this were a man weeping, what would I do? Well, I'd find him a drink. She said she didn't want one. So we moseyed back the way we'd come.

The mill, with its windows lit, reflected in the smooth water of the canal like something grand in the movies, like a place Hollywood could feel nostalgic about.

As we walked, she said, "It isn't right for me to blame the baby's father. I know just the kind of tired he was. He's probably afraid he'll lose his job if he says no to unpaid overtime. He works whatever he's told to work, which is too much, probably night shifts, and then when it's his turn to watch the baby, he can't keep his eyes open." She used her hands. "The boy's next to him on the bed, and the window's open because the man can't afford a fan, and the baby is a bright little thing and wants to look out at the world. So he crawls across the bed and stands up. All he wants is to look out, just to get a gander at the life around him. He leans on the screen and that's all it takes." She stopped in the middle of the block and turned toward me. On that side of the street, everything but our boardinghouse was dark, and I couldn't see her well. "Since when is curiosity a luxury?" she asked.

It seemed to me that we didn't have it any better than the baby's father, or any worse. Millwork was millwork. "What can you do about it?" I said.

She opened our squeaky boardinghouse door and held it for me. "That's what I keep

asking myself.”

We parted at the top of the staircase, but afterward, I looked around my room—at the peeling paint of the wainscoting, the path worn in the old floor from the bed to the door, and the bed to the corner sink, and I thought, everything that happened in mill life had happened before, and would maybe happen again, with or without someone like Lucy trying to make it right.

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For a long while I didn't pay much attention to Lucy for the simple reason that she wasn't a man. I didn't have girl friends, really. All of my waking thoughts went toward my next date. In those days, I had my sights on Bucky Thompson.

Bucky was one of those sandy-haired people who can't sit still for more than a minute because his energy fizzed up somewhere, in tapping fingers or a shifty seat. Bucky said he couldn't always go out, because he had his old mother to care for. We liked to double date with his buddy Pete Jenks.

Lucy seemed like a girl I'd never have to worry about losing boyfriends to, so I tried to get her to go out with us.

I said, “I know a fellow you might like.”

“Do you like him?”

I shrugged, “Yeah, he's okay.”

“Then why are you foisting him off on me?”

I said, “I just thought you'd like him.”

“So there's something about him that's not good enough for you?”

“No, well, he's not really my type, but he's nice.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Is there something wrong with the way he looks?”

“He has a big nose, but I thought you'd like him because he's sensitive. He keeps a diary.”

She narrowed her eyes. “So you think he’s a homo with a huge nose, which might be just about right for me?”

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She’d come looking for me now and then to share a cigarette at break time. We started to fall in together, maybe because we were both outsiders. She brushed off anything I asked about herself or her life before she had come to Lowell with a million questions of her own. We’d be leaning on the splintery railing, staring down at the water she’d plunged into, and she’d look around to see that we were alone and then ask how long had Julia had that wheeze? Or had I noticed that Maria, the spinner, was going deaf?

There’d been a lot of union talk—a lot of whispering—recently, and I wondered what she was getting at.

“Is it true Charlotte Stackley lost her hearing running that same spinning machine as Maria?” she asked.

I’d been there less than a year, but anyone knew a person could go deaf working in a mill. Noise bounced off the high ceilings. Downstairs, the cotton processing machines didn’t let up, like drums strong enough to slant your heartbeat. Their *thump-thump* shook the building, reaching up through the floors to the Knitting room, where our rows of circular weave machines whirred like dentists’ drills.

Charlotte Stackley was old and deaf, but because she did what she was told and kept her head down, management liked her. She hadn’t been laid off; now she worked in the boarding room, shaping socks. Except for the sock stretchers down in back, which sounded like the drummer’s whisk at the Colonnade Ballroom, the boarding room stayed pretty quiet, almost as if it had floated free of the bump and clack of the other floors—nothing but women’s hands smoothing damp socks onto the foot molds, sliding dry ones off, women’s hands sorting piles of limp soft socks, making pairs and repiling them by the dozen.

Lucy squinted her round eyes, and said, “Wasn’t it just a little late to move Charlotte to a quiet place?”

“She’s lucky to still have work.” I flicked ashes toward the canal, where they disappeared before they hit the swirl of brown water.

She straightened out of her usual slouch and said, “That’s just the attitude management hopes for, and exploits.”

Exploits. Union talk coming right out of Lucy. I watched a cloud skidding away behind the chimneys of the baby’s apartment building and said, “You’ve got to go along to get along. Otherwise, they’ll show you right out the door.” I handed her what was left of the cigarette we were sharing.

“How would you feel if Mr. William Burroughs decided to hire his retriever to run the Knitting room?” Mr. Burroughs owned the operation. She dropped the cigarette and stamped it out like she was mad at it.

“Might be an improvement over O’Connor,” I laughed.

But there wasn’t a hint of a smile anywhere on her face. Sure, the bosses had favorites, and some people worked overtime without overtime pay, but I couldn’t see what difference a union would make. In those days, management had a saying: “You can squawk, but the door’s as open as the shop.” That was because of a new law that said mills could hire anyone they wanted, union or not. That was how I’d got my job. I didn’t worry about working conditions, because knitters who’d been there during the strikes before the war said things were nowhere near as bad as then. And O’Connor looked out for me. It took an occasional kiss on his cheek or sometimes a spell of sitting in his lap. He had a greasy scalp and dandruff all over his shoulders but was harmless enough.

I said, “Your fussing isn’t going to get you anything but trouble.”

Lucy straightened her shabby shirt collar. Our break was over. We joined the others. She passed through the door with the rest of us, but something more than just her Southern-ness made her different.

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Lucy swept the floor with a broom as wide as she was tall, trudging after it and turning, trudging and turning, rounding up the lint and clippings that otherwise stuck to our clothes and hair—the picture of the put-upon worker, her shoulders stooped, her hair limp, no one you’d expect anything from. But then, as she passed me, she’d shift her eyes in O’Connor’s direction—waiting until I’d seen him crabbing his way along in his wheelchair—and say something like, “New land speed record holder making news.” She was sly that way, not missing a trick and delivering her cockeyed commentary out the side of her mouth in a way that surprised me every time. By then, we’d gotten pretty comfortable with each other. She’d see me freshening up my lipstick and say, “Whenever Betty Boop is ready, there’s a truckload of bobbins waiting for her.”

I started to look forward to the entertaining ways she’d break the day’s routine. One time, she brought a cigar for us to try, saying she wanted to see why men made such a big deal. We were both coughing and, as she said, bilious in no time, hanging on to the railing of the platform like landlubbers clinging to a heaving boat rail. The rest of the girls held their noses and laughed at us.

One day, she pinned a cartoon from the *Lowell Sun* onto my door. It was these two fellows:



I thought it was funny, but maybe not so funny that you'd want someone else to see it, so I marched across to her room. Maybe I only knocked as I was opening the door, I don't remember, but I surprised her. She jumped up, clapping shut some kind of ledger, which she stuffed into her bureau drawer, fast.

I said, "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you." Her room was even worse than mine. A water stain ran from the ceiling all down the wall behind her, and someone long ago had drawn flowers springing up from the wainscoting in dark pencil. The sorry little space could have been anybody's.

She saw the cartoon in my hand and said, "I wanted to let you down easy. Maybe laughing." She held out a jar of licorice to me. Her tongue was as brown as her sweater. I shook my head. I didn't want to look like her.

"I know you're hell-bent to be Mrs. Somebody Somebody, but it's not going to be Mrs. Bucky Thompson," she said, taking a bite of licorice. "I overheard Pete Jenks telling O'Connor that Bucky Thompson's wife is a real dish."

I yanked out the bobby pins holding my hat. "That son of a bitch."

Mrs. Somebody Somebody was exactly who I wanted to be. The way some kids grow up knowing they want to be mayor, want to have their name in the book of history, I wanted to wear a white dress and a ring that said I was taken care of. It was all mixed up with my hankering to live better, to have pretty things, to be glamorous. I wanted that Mrs. title like it was what I was born for—a want that settles into you when you are very young and grows as you grow.

She scuffed toward me in her stocking feet, tilting her head like a dog, watching my face.

"How many dishes does one man need?" I asked, jerking my hat off. "His old mother needs him, my foot."

She took hold of my shoulders like she might hug me. Maybe she saw through my blustering and thought I was going to cry. Her turned-down eyes filled with understanding. I smoothed the veil on the hat I held between us. "You must think I'm dumb as a stump."

She held my cheeks in her hands, as if she was memorizing my face. Then she turned

away. “Far from it.” She plunked down in her chair. “I think he’s a bounder who led you on,” she said. “Your problem is you want to get married.”

“Isn’t that what we all want?” I tossed my hat onto the bed. “I should’ve known,” I said. “When he first picked me up at Harley’s Café, he ordered an ‘Angel’s Tit.’ Who but a stinker would order *that* to drink?”

Lucy crossed her legs and said, “Men are simple people. I’m not sure that most of them think a whole lot.”

I was supposed to chuckle, but I sat on her saggy bed and sagged right along with it. “At least you always know what they want.”

“You tell them they can’t have it, they try anyway.” She rolled her eyes back in her head so the whites showed, and fluttered her eyelashes dramatically, horribly, like a blind person having a fit.

I couldn’t help but laugh. But she grabbed my knees and fixed me with a look. “You’re way too good for the likes of him, married or not.”

Angel’s Tit Recipe

Ingredients: 1/4 oz white crème de cacao
 1/4 oz sloe gin
 1/4 oz brandy
 1/4 oz light cream

Directions: Pour ingredients carefully, in order given, into a poussé café glass so that they do not mix.

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After work the next day, Katie O’Neill, Teresa Bukowski and her mother, Danuta, Lucy, and I traipsed down Aiken Street over the Ouellette Bridge to cool off in the river. Walking was like swimming in soup, it was so humid. Five mill girls straggling down to the water: one giant

redhead, pink in the face; a couple of bowlegged Polacks working hard to keep up with Katie; me, so hot I made no effort to hide the dark haloes around the armholes of my shift; and Lucy, who said it was just like a spring day in her hometown, hardly breaking a sweat at all, even in her slacks.

Bucky would be waiting for me at the Paramount in fifteen minutes. I was standing him up.

Lucy popped tar bubbles by the curb with a stick as we went along, the tar slumping back on itself like molasses. I stopped halfway across the bridge to light a cigarette. The river stretched below us. In the flat, white light of the day, I couldn't see the match flame until Lucy held her hands around it.

She said, "Now tell me honestly." She settled her eyes on me. "You don't miss Bucky one bit."

Bucky's Stella of the day before seemed like a sweet deluded relative I'd been close with once. The air between us and the "mile of mills" wavered. Hub Hosiery hunkered on the bank and beyond it: one mammoth flat-topped brick building after another; the Merrimack, the Massachusetts, the Boott, and their tons of smokestacks, row upon row of windows reflecting the afternoon sun—all of it wavering in the heat as if stone and brick and glass would melt in a minute.

I said, "He wasted my time," and handed her the cigarette. "He isn't the only bubble in the champagne glass."

"I wouldn't let you go so easily." She squinted at me.

"He'll get the message when I don't show up."

She looked at the pavement. "You make people love you, Stella."

"Too bad for him."

We followed the others down the bank through the scraggly bushes on the far side of the bridge. Katie, who had a Brownie camera with her, put it down on a rock, threw off her shoes, and plowed in. We slid our feet on the cool hard mud in the shadow of the bridge. Lucy rolled

her slacks up to her knees.

Danuta and Teresa held hands and stepped in. Teresa squeaked. She was a softer version of her mother—short and round everywhere. Danuta kept her hair in the old style and had that wary way about her of people who had been cold and hungry in the bad times. Her hands were like knots. She'd been working at Hub since before the Depression, and her English wasn't too good. She splashed water on her face and didn't let go of her daughter.

When I felt the water, I wished I could swim. I rested my eyes on the empty shade under the arch of the bridge. Bucky hadn't been all that special. I'd been stupid, no bones about it. The rippling of the water echoed under the bridge—a comforting noise. I wished I had a bathing suit. I had the figure for it.

Lucy tucked her hair behind her ear and skipped a stone, making it spin and stutter away across the top of the water. She asked, "Aren't you going in?"

I looked at the water, and confessed, "I never learned."

She cocked her head at me. "You pulling my leg?"

"Nope."

"Come here, and I'll show you how to float."

"I'd sink like a stone."

"No, you won't." She sounded so sure. "You're going to lie down on the water." She took my hand and led me deeper in. "I'm not going to let you sink, but it's going to be the water that supports you."

"Sure, and then I'll rise up and walk on it."

"First, you have to relax." She put my arm around her neck. She lifted me. "If you get all stiff, it won't work."

I hung on to her neck while she lowered and laid me out on the water. Her eyes moved down the length of me while my dress soaked through. She looked so earnest, almost tender, that I wanted to laugh.

Katie whooped at the sight of us and turned her Brownie on us. "Stella doesn't know how

to swim!”

At first, I was giggling too much. But then I saw how Teresa watched us and knew she didn't know how, either. Lucy cradled me, one arm under the backs of my legs and the other under my shoulders.

“Just call me Esther Williams,” I said, my feet sinking.

Lucy stood still, up to her waist in water, willing me—longing for me—to learn, it seemed.

She said, “Breathe in slowly.”

I rose up. She looked away. “Don't let go of me,” I said.

“I wouldn't let go for anything,” she said. “Close your eyes.”

“I can't quite.”

As long as I didn't breathe too much, I could just lie there. It was an amazing feeling, nothing like being in a bathtub. My arms felt like jelly. I looked up at the fancy clock tower on Merrimack Mills—some declaration of Prosperity and Progress from a better time.

Lucy said, “Imagine that my hands, instead of holding you up, are really the only things holding you down. They are like anchors, heavier than water, keeping you attached.”

After a bit, I started feeling weightless and peaceful in the stillness. The hot sky wrapped all around me except where the brick wall of the Merrimack soared straight up. I'd heard Noe Hathaway had been inside there recently. Word had it that those huge rooms that once held weave machines as big as my room were vacant except for leaves that had blown in some broken windows. The whole concern had moved south. He said the place was quiet except for those leaves scraping the floor.

I closed my eyes. The water washed all the heat and sweat away. I imagined little waves slapping against my sides. I was a shell as empty as the Merrimack, all filled with air. Breezes blowing through—leaves sliding across the floor of me. I breathed and floated up. I let the air out, and sank a little, but not too much. Lucy's hands moved with me.

Far away, I heard one of the others, maybe Teresa, say, “She told me herself. It happened

in Tallapoosa, Georgia.” Lucy’s grip tightened, and I popped my eyes open. It was like waking very suddenly from a deep sleep. She tipped me up, and I had to put my feet down fast. I stood, surprised, gingham plastered to me. She stared at the water, her eyes as big as a jacked deer’s. I looked where she was looking: nothing but brownish river water and stones.

Teresa said, “Then they drove Edna out to who knows where, and the old man driving said, “This is as good a place as any.” So they stopped and took Edna down from the back of the truck and threw all her stuff, even her radio and her shoes, down after her. They said, “Don’t come back, Edna Martin. Make no mistake: we don’t want your union, and we are the Law here.” Then they drove away and left her somewhere near the border of Georgia and Alabama, all because she let slip to the boardinghouse owner in Tallapoosa that she was a CIO rep.”

Katie asked, “Did they untie her before they left her?”

“I don’t know.” Teresa swatted at a fly pestering her mother. “She got back North all right, though. She’s working over to Remington right now. She says the Tallapoosa mill owner has everyone in his pocket: police, politicians, everyone; even the boardinghouse ladies.”

Lucy hadn’t moved. I asked, “You all right?”

They all turned to look at her. She turned red, and waded out. Her eyelids fluttered. She said, “I grew up in Tallapoosa.”

Danuta asked, her Polish accent so thick she seemed to swallow her words, “Your family mill folk?”

Lucy said, “American Thread.”

Katie asked, “What’s the story, they want a union?”

“They need one worse than anybody.” Lucy rolled her trouser legs down as if they weren’t soaked through, hiding her face behind her hair. “But they’re scared. People have been hurt.”

We started back. Floorgirl was a job for people with no experience and no connections. Why would Lucy leave home when her family could get her a job, easy? My dress hugged me like a second skin and slapped my legs when I walked. I let the others get ahead of us.

“If your family’s mill folks down where all the mills are moving to, what are you doing here?”

Lucy held herself as if her joints had seized up on her, and she didn’t speak. She took that posture whenever O’Connor yelled at someone. I pictured Edna Martin, kidnapped and left on a country road all because a few boosters had gotten wind of her unionism. I asked, “Are you CIO?”

Lucy couldn’t wear a poker face for anything. Right away, I regretted asking. I didn’t want to get mixed up in any of that mess. Her feelings, or else her fight to beat her feelings, was all over her face. She wanted to lie to me. That was plain as day. But she couldn’t.

“That’s why you’re all the time so damn dodgy.”

She grabbed my arms. “Swear.” Her nose flared, and her eyes filled. “Swear that’s only between you and me.”

<extra line space>

I still have a snapshot of Lucy down by the river. She is waist-deep in that dirty water. Her hair hangs to her shoulders. She is holding me in the water, but you’d have to know that’s what she’s doing in order to find me in the swish of fabric floating in front of her. She has raised her face as if she’s listening to something far outside the picture’s frame. From this distance, anyone can see how lonely her secrets kept her.

*

Sometimes in the Knitting room, if we pushed all the big windows open as far as they’d go, a strong breeze would come through even in late summer. We’d imagine it brought whiffs of salt air. We’d think of a cool sandy beach where the Merrimack River finally flowed out to sea,

where there was enough wind so seagulls could take it easy and just hang in the sky. But the week leading up to Labor Day, the air didn't move. Even with the windows wide, I felt as if my head had been stuffed with rags.

O'Connor asked me if I would train Lucy how to use a knitting machine. It meant I wouldn't make as much that week, but he knew I wouldn't squawk.

I thought she would catch on easily to knitting, but her machine kept getting all jammed up. She had to be doing something wrong. She kept showing me how she had done what she'd just done, and it looked right, but somehow the needles kept getting out of whack with the sinker bar. Every morning we went through the same rigmarole, checking the needles and getting any backed-up lint out. The longer it took, the more time I lost. The heat settled on me and flattened my hair. Maria Sarzana, Leona Pastana, Katie O'Neill—we all wilted over our machines.

When I'd taken Lucy's place at her machine for the fifth time that morning, she said, "If *you* ask, maybe O'Connor will get Noe Hathaway to take a look at it. I swear it's nothing I'm doing wrong."

Noe Hathaway was about the only one she didn't have a nickname for. He was a little man just begging for one. He had no teeth, shaved his head, and was bowlegged as a gunslinger. I'd interrupted her talking to him more than once in the stairwell.

He came through the door saying, "It's hot as a dye house up here."

O'Connor poured sweat from wheeling himself the twenty yards from the fan in his office. He said, "Forget your dye house. It's hotter than a two-peckered billy goat in this place," and wiped his face on his sleeve.

In the pocket of quiet from our two stilled machines, Noe began to take the circular head apart. He'd lost four fingers when he was a weaver. He'd worked in just about every mill in

Lowell, and he could fix anything with those greasy stumps.

Noe looked over the top of his glasses at Lucy.

Lucy said, “Thank you for your help, Mr. O’Connor.”

O’Connor said, “If it’s all the same to you, I’m going back where it’s a little cooler.”

O’Connor wheeled around and rolled back to his office.

As soon as the door closed, Noe said softly, “I worked a dye house over to the Merrimack. Did I ever tell you that story, Stella?” He paused while he unscrewed the swing plate. “The steam was so thick in that house that at first I didn’t know anything was wrong. I could barely see my own hands, so I didn’t know my buddy wasn’t where he was supposed to be.”

I couldn’t help watching his hands work. I thought maybe he was going to tell how he lost his fingers. He lifted the needles one by one, slowly, blowing carefully at each bit of lint.

Like she’d got a pucker in her stitches, Lucy’s face got all pinched together. “Go ahead, Noe. We don’t have much time.”

Noe continued a little more softly, “I nearly tripped over him. He was flat on his back on the floor. So of course, I tried to help him. But the floor boss . . .”—he shot a look at O’Connor’s door—“. . . he shouted, ‘Get back to work, or you can walk.’” He widened his eyes at me. “My buddy died of a heart attack right at my feet because there was no union.”

Noe finished, “I left that job the next day and went and found me a union.” He held the circular head up between us and whispered, “See anything fishy?” He pointed with one of his stumps to two scrapes in the metal. “It’s had pliers taken to it. Someone *wants* your machine to cast off unevenly.” Then quite loudly he pronounced, “Lucy, I don’t know why you think there’s anything wrong here. I’ve taken the whole thing apart, and the only thing I can think is that you

need more practice.” He loosened the screw that had been tightened.

Lucy didn’t let on. She grinned at me like a clown, as if she hadn’t just learned that someone else must have known who she really worked for.

*

There was going to be a Company party the night before Labor Day. I thought it was a big deal. Lucy said it wasn’t but a trinket tossed out by management to appease the workers.

I dragged her down to Merrimack Street past Sully’s Tux Rentals and Arthur’s Paradise Diner, where, these days, they sell a “Hub Mills Sandwich.” The Bargain Box was a cute little used-clothing store with windows full of the latest in cast-off fashions. I opened the door for her. “We can snub our noses at the Junior League snoots who run the place.”

“I thought we were going to the Dry Goods,” she said.

“You got that kind of money?”

“I don’t want to deal with the Junior League.”

“I can handle them,” I said, still holding the door.

She refused, like a dog pulling against its leash. I said, “Come on.” I cocked my head at the dressy but headless mannequins in Sully’s window. “You can’t leave them lonely.”

The Bargain Box was dark and crammed to the ceiling with clothes. The smell—something between mothballs and perfume—seemed like a promise. I led her to a rack of dresses.

Right off, a little blonde asked if we needed help finding anything.

I said, “No, thanks, doll,” and sneaked a look at her hairdo. Definitely a salon job. I shifted through the dresses—some real possibilities—with Lucy hanging behind.

The blonde began refolding a perfectly folded pile of sweaters next to us. I thought with my tasteful hat I could have passed for someone who didn’t need to shop there, but Lucy, Lord,

with those brown slacks and her droopy hair, there was no mistaking her for anything but a mill worker. I said, “You’d think we’d be stuffing something under our blouses and making a run for it.”

Lucy turned to the blonde and said, “What she means is that we are just looking, but will inform you as soon as we are in need of assistance. Thank you.”

The girl nodded like a dismissed servant and went back to the cash register.

In a whisper, I asked, “How’d you do that?”

She didn’t answer me.

“Where did you pick up that college voice anyway?” I pushed back the hangers to make viewing room.

She stared at the floor, holding her pocketbook like a shield, and turned ten shades of red. She whispered fiercely, “If you must know, my mother was in the Junior League.”

You could have knocked me over with a feather.

“And just so you know, I don’t want to wear a dress.”

Junior League was for the wealthy women who wanted to look like do-gooders. But if you made anything of Lucy sharing tidbits of her past, she clammed right up. So I said, “What else are you going to wear to a party? You have to have a dress.” I held one up to her—trying not to let her see how what she’d said about her mother had thrown me. “That one shows off your hazel eyes.”

She avoided my face, and said, “Do you think?”

“Try it on.” I held it out to her. “And try this bright green one, too, with the sequins.” She took them from me without making a peep and headed for the changing room.

What if she lived in one of those houses with huge white pillars and big trees with creamy flowers like the ones in *Gone with the Wind*? The lawn would go on forever. There might be horses. A stable. Miles of white fence, and a big old turquoise swimming pool.

If that was how life was for her, then what was she doing telling Danuta her people were mill folk? I whisked through the hangers on the rack. I got to feeling itchy all over.

Maybe I was wrong to think we were friends. I told her everything, and what did she tell me?

She caught my hand as it madly flicked hangers. I hadn't heard her coming out of the dressing room. She slipped the sequined dress back onto the rack and whispered, "I've been afraid to tell anyone, even you. My father owns that mill, the one in Tallapoosa. American Thread. If anyone knew—you can see how that would go. There are just some things that shouldn't be said out loud."

She was still her soft-faced self, but everything about her had tipped off-kilter.

I turned her to face the mirror. I gathered her hair up off her neck into a twist and held it on her head as if she wore it in a chignon. Did I know her at all? With my free hand, I fussed with a hook that was loose at the waist. Lucy's eyes looked sadder even than usual. She checked herself up and down in that blue dress. Then she caught my eye in the mirror. Feelings crossed her face like clouds—like weather brewing—but I couldn't have said what they were.

To break the spell, I said, "I have some pop-it beads that would look nice. They'd show off your neck." I stopped myself saying, "Unless of course, you've got some pearls." I let go of her hair.

She said, "I'll take it. Let's get out of here."

While she was paying, I found a pair of shoes to match, but she refused to have anything to do with them because there was no Union Made sticker in them. Even secondhand, she wouldn't hear of it. "If I'd wanted to dance in nonunion shoes, I could have stayed in my daddy's house," she said. "I could still be living like a doll in a glass cabinet." She said all she had to do was think of Edna Martin, or any of the good people he'd put down, and know she'd rather go barefooted.

*

Lucy's room had the same inescapable view of the mill as mine. I'd decorated with postcards,

pillow shams, and a bedspread to match—which was tits on a bull, if you think about it. Lucy’s room was bare, except for books. She had more books than I had magazines. Her favorites were two dog-eared ones she kept by her bed: *Home Cooking with Mabel Lums*, and *Letters to a Young Poet* by some foreigner, and a slim little one she said was hot off the press, *The Golden Apples*, which she liked to read out loud.

I arranged just about every cosmetic I ever owned on her bureau top. “Come take a chair at Stella’s Salon.” I pulled her chair over. “That doesn’t sound right. How about Stella’s House of Beauty?”

Lucy said, “Stella’s Shear Nonsense.”

She wouldn’t let me pluck her eyebrows. When I tried to curl her lashes, she acted like I meant to put her eyes out. She’d have nothing to do with bobby pins. “Why does everything have to be curly?” she asked. “I’m not a curly sort of person.”

“Why can’t you relax? Here,” I said, pulling out her bureau drawer to make a footrest.

She pushed it back in and said, “I’m just as comfortable sitting up.” I’d forgotten she kept that ledger in there. She squinted at me as if I’d gone out of focus.

Then she opened the drawer and pulled the ledger out. In the front, she was keeping track of on-the-job injuries, who got paid overtime, who didn’t, who got paid vacation, and who didn’t. The second part was a list. On each line was the name of someone employed by Hub Hosiery. She’d tallied who had joined and who would join a union. Lucy said, “The CIO is pushing to increase the number of organized plants.” She said she was recruiting members, but there had been threats, so she’d been signing them up and collecting dues outside the mill walls.

She opened the bottom drawer and lifted a couple of folded towels to show off hundreds of leaflets. “Why Hub Needs a Union and How You Can Help.” She said, “These are for when we move into high gear. I found a printer who did them up for free.” She said that by sending a woman and trying a quiet approach, the CIO was still hoping to avoid violence. Management had people like Maria Sarzana on its side. Mr. Burroughs had seen to it that O’Connor gave Maria first shift so that she could be home with her kids after school hours, and in return, she was a

company girl. “For her, an organized mill would mean she’d lose the benefits of being a favorite of the bosses.” Lucy held the book out to me. “She may well be the person who messed up my machine.”

There was my name in Lucy’s script, Stella Lewis with no check in the yes or the no column.

“The more who say yes, the stronger we’ll be. If you sign up we’ll be one closer to moving in,” she said.

“We have it pretty good, you know,” I said. I didn’t want to be on a list either way. Seeing my name there gave me the heebie jeebies. “We have jobs. Look what happened when the Merrimack organized.”

“Management likes to keep that rumor circulating.” She shut the book and slipped it back into the drawer. “The Merrimack Mill was moving down South either way. The bigwigs had already settled that.”

I wasn’t sure it made sense to go to work and then give money over in dues. What if some bigwig bought himself a car and had big times, spending and springing around with my money? I asked, “If I joined, who would know?” I pointed to the chair so we could get her made up.

“You and me, and one other CIO rep. We work in pairs.” She sat. “In another month we’ll be ready to make our next move.” She picked up one of the lipsticks and read the bottom. “‘Candy Apple.’ Who names these things? I want that job.” She twisted to look at me. “How long will I have to sit here?” She reminded me of my stepmother’s goat, who used to push me off the stool just when I thought she was buckling down.

“You think this is going to improve me somehow?”

“Of course it is.” I rubbed rouge into her cheeks. “You only want to put this up on your cheek bones so you emphasize the contouring of your face.”

“You think I’m ever doing this to myself?”

While I did her lips with a creamy Revlon, she studied me. “So?” she said. “Are you in or

out?”

“Does it matter to you, personally?”

“Very much.”

I straightened up. “If it’s that important, then I guess I’m in.”

She looked at her hands in her lap and a lopsided lipsticked smile slid across her face.

I held the mirror up for her. She looked at herself carefully, turning her head, holding her chin up, and to the side. “Just like a monkey,” she said.

*

They had the company bash at the Bonita Tavern. Who knows why a town on a river thinks it has to have a seafood joint, but it did, and the place was all gussied up in red, white, and blue, maybe left over from the Fourth of July. A little toy train, rigged out with dusty flags, *hoot-hooted* along the track that ran the length of the bar, dragging our drinks in a freight car. Cute. It was the sort of party where we drank a lot. Not that that excuses anything that happened. What a scene: cigarette smoke thick as fog, all of us girls dolled up, the men—at least some of them—in suits.

Lucy tottered to a table by the dance floor in my pumps, which were union made, but not to fit her. She put her elbows on the table and surprised me by launching into a speech. “Here, at the Hosiery division of Hub Textiles . . .” For an awful moment, I thought she was starting up about unions right there at the party. But she said, “At our annual fashion parade . . .”—she leaned toward a paper napkin dispenser like it was a radio microphone—“. . . we are seeing a new and exciting trend in elegant wear.” She cut her eyes toward Johnny Frenier, who wore a suit that looked to be his father’s. “The zoot suit has finally made it to Lowell.” Lucy’s deadpan got me laughing. She shifted her eyes right and left, mumbling like an undercover radio announcer into the paper napkins. “And look folks, here comes Bucky Thompson with, could it be? His sister?”

I had hoped he wouldn't show. There he came with, it must have been his wife. She looked just like him, tawny haired and jittery, with a cute little figure. I hadn't heard from him since the day I'd stood him up, and I had nothing good to say to him now.

To Lucy, I said, "You need a drink."

"I believe I'd like to try an Angel's Tit," she said, leaning back in her chair.

The smells of fried fish and cigarette smoke blanketed the crowded room. Billy Note and the Hi-Hat Band started up. Right off, Pete Jenks asked me to dance. I never learned anything but the polka and a Scotch jig when I was growing up, but I could fake a waltz. Pete stood a good couple of feet taller than me, but he smelled nice and only stepped on my toes once. After that, Stan Beecham wanted a dance. His hands sweated, and he kept wiping them on the front of his pants.

Lucy bowed in front of me and offered her arm. I laughed. Dolling her up really hadn't made her any more presentable. She looked like someone's maiden aunt. I should have insisted on the dress with the sequins. I'd made her up to be someone other than herself, and seeing how she didn't quite pull it off—how the dress she wore wasn't the best fit, and how my shoes did no favors for her legs—started something in me.

I sat down and watched people coming in. Just about everyone I knew crowded into that big room. I had never seen everyone in one place at one time before. O'Connor in his wheelchair patted as many women's bottoms as he could reach. Maria Sarzana limped on her lame foot. Katie O'Neill tried hard to look good in green. I was seeing, maybe for the first time, really seeing, the lineup of people I worked with. From their getups, you'd think the Depression had never ended in Lowell. The men joshed with each other and danced awkwardly with their wives. None of them had a full set of teeth. I felt embarrassed for them. But as I sat there, it came clear to me that this sorry-looking bunch was my crowd. I felt embarrassed for us all.

I'd thought I was different. No. Worse: I'd been convinced that I was better. The man for me was supposed to step through these people to find me. He would look something like Rock Hudson. Like me, he'd only be passing through Hub on his way to better things. Like me, he

would be meant for a finer life, and he would want nothing more than for me to share it with him. I watched Pete Jenks dancing with Katie O'Neill and saw that she had had her wish come true. But all she'd asked for was a man tall enough so she had to reach to get her arms around his neck.

A fellow who looked like he'd just walked off the boat asked Lucy to dance. She craned her neck, looking for someone, anyone but him. Before too long, Noe Hathaway cut in. His head shone as if he'd oiled it. He looked natty for an old codger, like a cricket in a vest. Lucy danced as well as she swam, as if she'd had lessons—which she probably had.

I went to the bar, hoping someone would buy me another drink. The little train with its old flags tooted. I listened to two stocky fellows from the dye works arguing about the Red Sox and the Yankees. Katie and Pete danced past, then Sophie Robicheau and her bent old husband. I had on my best hat, but I was no different than any of them.

The fellow who'd danced with Lucy sat down beside me and leaned on his elbows. He looked Greek. His suit was so new that the thread from the tag still clung to the sleeve. His big tired features reminded me of the lion statues at Hub's front gate. He rolled his drink on his tongue as if he'd never had a Tom Collins before, and stared at the silly train chugging around the bar. His hands were huge and scarred. Everything about him, but his clothes, looked beat up or worn out. I turned away. It wasn't my night.

Lucy stood with Noe in a dark corner, their backs to the dance floor. Lucy's hands flew around while she talked. She was even further off course than I was. She'd left a life with swimming and dance lessons, of being taken care of. She'd *chosen* to be at Hub.

The man beside me stood and bowed slightly in my direction. Looking over his shoulder at the ceiling like he'd find the right words there, he pronounced, "Would you?" He placed his big hand on my arm. His accent made each word as carefully put together as a whole idea, "Please dance."

I'm not sure why I said yes, maybe because he and his cheap new clothes hit me as just the perfect punishment for someone like me, who thought she was better than everyone else. I

said yes because I had no one but myself to blame. He smelled of gin and bacon.

The band played a waltz. He was broad-chested and solid. Anyone could see that his new shoes hurt. We spun until Lucy, watching from the edge of the floor, became a blue smudge.

After that, they played a jazzy two-step. I faked it. He did, too, and smiled at our trickiness. Before the dance was over, Lucy stood in our path. To my surprise, she introduced us. “Stella, George Kritikos.”

He bowed low to Lucy, with Old Country grace. He stayed down there until she tapped him on the shoulder. “You don’t have to do this every time you clap eyes on me.”

He trapped her hand in both of his and said to me, “She saved my baby, Constantine.” His eyes crinkled at the corners. Why did men get all the good eyelashes?

Lucy said, “Please excuse us, George,” and hooking arms with me, marched me off the dance floor.

“What are you doing?”

“The question is, what are *you* doing?” She propelled me into the ladies’ room and faced me. “Don’t you know who he is?”

“No.” I turned to check my hair in the mirror. “Who put the burr under your saddle?”

She grabbed my arm and spun me toward her. “That man is the baby’s father and no one you want to have anything to do with.” Her face swamped red.

I took my arm back. “Calm down.”

“That man has a wife and a baby at home. A pregnant wife and a baby not even out of diapers.”

“How choice—a family man.” I refreshed my lipstick. “Even more perfect than I knew.”

She was all business then, her eyes flat and dark and huge, like when she had jumped into the canal. “That isn’t the half of it.” Her hair was slipping out of its bun. She didn’t know how to stand in heels—she was the picture of a dish ready to fall right off its shelf and smash on the floor.

“I’m only dancing with him,” I said.

“You’re not anymore.”

“A bad two-step with me isn’t going to break up his home.”

“That’s not it,” she said.

“Don’t bother. His company suits me tonight. That’s all.” I opened the door. “And don’t tell me you have any better reasons for the choices you’ve made.” I turned from her, probably too quickly, but it was done, and the ladies’ room door shut between us before I could think about what I’d said or the frostiness I’d said it with.

George Kritikos was waiting for me. He could well have stolen his clothes. I sat with him at the bar. Stan Beecham bought me a drink, but I didn’t feel like dancing. Kritikos was happy to sit silently. He closed his eyes. The place seemed tighter, as if the ceiling had lowered, closing us in with the smells of smoke, fish, and perfume. I had nothing to say to anybody and nothing to lose. Maybe Kritikos was drunk. What did I know?

He opened his tired eyes, ran his outsized hands through his hair, and asked, “You are always American?”

“Far as I know,” I said.

He said, “This means you have good job. I see this.” He nodded. “Greeks have not so good. But then things happen to get better.”

I said, “You’re a philosopher.”

He wanted to know where I’d come from and who my friends were. He asked what was my opinion about this Union that people were talking about. “Is Lucy Mattsen good friends to you?”

“She’s my best.” I sipped my drink. “Or was.”

Lucy sat at the corner of the bar. I could feel her eyes boring into the side of my head, but I wasn’t going to look at her.

George Kritikos said. “Please to dance.” He took my hand. I shook my head.

He said, “I persist.” Of course he meant insist, but persist was true. He was using himself up by living his life—you could hear it in his struggle for every word, see it in the scars on his

hands, the bags under his eyes—but still, he was curious about me, and even with sore feet, he wanted to dance with me.

I polkaed with him. He got my waist in his big hands, and took off. Dizzy, I began to feel lighter. It was good to be held that way. The smoky room whirled away and seemed larger, airier. The people blurred into splotches of color. I couldn't judge them then. Dancing, I got to feeling light as a wishbone, as if nothing really mattered.

I don't know when Lucy left. When the band stopped playing, I walked with him down Market Street, our shoes *tock-tocking* over the bridges in the quiet of the late night. You can hear the water flowing under the city that time of night. Two rivers and all those canals, gallons and gallons of water moving through.

The air had cooled. He gave me his jacket. I picked at the thread that hung from the sleeve. Walking with him felt more like the end of something than the beginning of anything else.

We turned toward the Merrimack on Cabot Street, where, from a radio in a darkened window Nellie Lutcher sang, "Come on-a My House." The Strand Theater was shut for the night. Kritikos said, "You aren't like the others," and stopped walking. "I see this immediately." He rolled his eyes to the streetlight as if he pulled his words from there. His black hair shimmered like a pelt. He took my wrist and guided me under the theater marquee, which boasted, "The Wonder of Stereophonic Sound Gives Realism to the Miracles of Cinemascope." Behind him, Loretta Young, in a maid's uniform, advertised *The Farmer's Daughter*: the movie Bucky and I didn't see. George pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and squeezed my elbow. He leaned to look at my face. "You have light."

I started to look for my matches.

"No." He showed me his own. "Inside you is light, shining. I see into you."

"What is it, exactly, that you see?"

"That you are lucky in love."

"No one has ever said *that* before."

He said, “You are here, no?” He stepped closer and drew on his cigarette, looking down at me as if he owned what he saw.

George Kritikos wasn’t what I’d planned. I’d believed I was too good for his sort. Now, I wanted to see myself the way he did. Maybe it sounds like I am looking for excuses. I kissed him because he wanted me to, and there was no way for me to confuse what was happening with my silly ideas of how life was supposed to be. He wanted me, and he was as far from my cockeyed dreams as I could get.

*

The next morning, Lucy, in her usual brown slacks and sweater, slept against my door, her legs pulled up to her chest, her lips pouting comfortably against each other.

The hallway smelled like mildew. I put my hands to my cheeks to cool them, and hoped hard that the sleepy gray light from the stairwell window was dim enough that she wouldn’t notice the state I was in. You could hear the hum of the city waking up. A dog barked once. Church bells rang for the early Mass. Lucy’s head drooped heavy as a seedpod on a stalk. If she hadn’t been in my way, I would have left her alone.

I squeezed her shoulder.

Her eyes worked hard under her lids, then blinked open. “I was waiting up for you.”

She stretched her neck one way, then the other, and yawned. Her mascara had smudged to raccoon eyes. She pulled her watch out of her chest pocket, looked blankly at it, and stuck it back in again. She said, “You wouldn’t listen.”

“I heard you last night.”

“No.” She took my hand, and I pulled her up. She stood stiffly. “No, Stella.” She had my hand by two fingers and tugged it up and down in an odd, hopeless way that bothered me. “What did you tell Kritikos?”

I fished in my handbag for my key. “I told him you’d taught me how to float.”

“Good.” She rubbed her eyes. “But remember how I wanted to go see the baby after he fell?” She was blocking my door. “There was more to it. The next day, I got Kritikos’s name and found their apartment.”

I kept my head down and went to the side of her to put the key in the door.

She said, “I thought Kritikos and his wife were likely to help us organize. If Kritikos was so tired that he could sleep through their baby falling out a window, management was taking advantage.” She trailed in behind me. The place was stuffy with the smell of lavender soap. My hats were all over the bed—leftovers of my hopes for the party. I kept my back to her and heaved open the window to the morning, as if that would bring a fresh start.

“The baby, Constantine, was fine, like a little prince, pulling himself up and standing. But Kritikos didn’t want to hear what I had to say. He kept saying, ‘Mr. Burroughs will see to everything. Everything is good now.’”

With Lucy nattering on, I couldn’t quite hold on to what I’d done. George Kritikos had made love to me frankly, as if that was what we both expected.

“Burroughs had gotten there ahead of me.” She slipped a folded clipping from her pocket and held it out to me.

It was a photo from the *Lowell Sun* of George with Mr. Burroughs and the baby. Burroughs had his arm around George like an old war buddy. The caption said, “*Mr. William Burroughs, Jr., of Hub Textiles, with George Kritikos, whose baby was rescued from the canal yesterday by one of Burroughs’s Hosiery division workers.*”

“That poor baby has to go through life with the name Constantine Kritikos. Can you imagine?” I said, handing the clipping back to her, and taking my shoes off.

Lucy closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Kritikos isn’t working night shift anymore,” she said. “Burroughs gave him second shift, so there’s no more sleeping while his baby does things he shouldn’t.”

“Another happy ending.”

“Don’t you see?” She took a weary step closer to me. “Kritikos made a deal with the

devil. He's a company man."

"Don't be silly."

She looked at the floor, and I thought she would never say another word. Then she came toward me. "Ask him where he got the money for his party clothes."

I pushed the hats out of the way and flopped on my bed. "How do you know Burroughs didn't just buy something nice for a fellow who almost lost his son?"

She crossed the worn boards in front of the window. The sun had made it over the mill walls and lit her up from behind. I had to squint through my headache to see her. "Mill owners," she stopped. "Don't ever do anything just to be nice, Stella." She jabbed her finger at the clipping. "See who is and who ISN'T in this photograph? The *Sun* might as well have said it was Mr. Burroughs who jumped into that canal. Why do you think Kritikos went for you last night?"

"Why wouldn't he?"

"Why do you think he was there without his wife?"

"Someone had to watch the baby?"

"And why do you think Kritikos asked so many questions?"

"Lucy, that's what you do at parties."

"He'll use you, if you let him." She seemed more sad than angry. "George Kritikos is a stool pigeon."

The last few hours came alive and crawled around inside me, but I said, "I don't buy it. I don't plan to be seeing him again, anyway."

"It's what he plans that matters. What would *you* do for double pay for overtime? Soon, he'll be sniffing around, asking when are Lucy and Noe Hathaway going to make their next move? What are they planning? How many can they count on?" She knelt by the bed. She was so close I could feel the breath of her words. "One slipup and they'll fire me, Stella. They'll stop us in our tracks." She bit her lower lip and cupped my cheek with her hand.

Trying to focus on the wash of freckles across her nose, I looked back at her like I hadn't been out all night and my face wasn't red with beard burn.

“You went to bed with him.” She stood up. Her shoulders sagged worse than my mattress. The sadness in her turned-down eyes wasn’t coming just from their shape. “How could you?” She passed her hand over her face, a strange, slow gesture. She crumpled the clipping. She jammed it into my wastebasket on her way out. She didn’t even shut the door.

George Kritikos gave me no reason to ask why he did what he did. No red-blooded man would have done any differently, given the chance.

*

All the next week, Lucy avoided me. She kept her eyes on her knitting machine and her thoughts to herself. Her hair hung down over her face. O’Connor yelled at her more than once, calling her Grandma Molasses.

Once, I caught her with Noe in the stairwell. She paced on the landing and said, “Damn it all to hell.” Then she saw me, shut up, looked at the floor, and waited for me to pass.

Rumors whispered their way through the mill. People were saying Maria Sarzana was going to get two weeks paid vacation, O’Connor’s medical bills were being taken care of by Mr. Burroughs, Charlotte Stackley’s daughter, who had no seniority, had been hired to be Mr. Burroughs’s secretary, all sorts of rubbish like that. The whispering didn’t get to me any more than Lucy’s snubs did. I couldn’t pay attention to anything but the slow syrupy feeling of Kritikos sliding his lips from my thigh to my belly. The memory went through me like a shiver through the side of a horse.

He’d undone me. I couldn’t remember a time when I’d thought, yes, this is what I want—but I’d think of the way his eyes looked for mine and what it felt like to be *seen* that way, and I’d be off again, piecing that night into a good thing, bit by bit.

The hot day that Noe set up a jerry-rigged information table in the mill yard, people weren’t working any harder than they had to, and no one said much. The effects of the party hadn’t lasted long. Resentment ran through the mill sure as a vein of marble through granite.

On my way back from the ladies' I slowed by the bank of windows—hoping in vain for a gust of air. The sky, low and hazy, held out for a shower. From below, I heard cracking wood and a crash.

Down in the yard, Ted Thibodeau, the maintenance man I'd admired the day Lucy saved the baby, had pushed Noe back into the table—which collapsed under him. About a million pieces of paper slid every which way under Noe's efforts to get up. Lucy's fliers.

Thibodeau wasn't any bigger than Noe himself, but he had the advantage of being young and spry. He jumped on Noe and commenced to hitting him with a stick—a broom handle, it looked like. Noe tried to fend him off, but he had nothing but his hands with those stumpy fingers to fight with. Thibodeau hit him wherever he moved.

I didn't decide to step away from the window. It just happened, like when you step back from a too-hot fire. Lucy saw me, and she ran for the window. I tried to stop her, but she dodged me. I grabbed her around the middle. Even now, I am not sure why. She dragged us to where we could see Thibodeau going at Noe the way you'd beat a rug.

People crowded in one end of the patchy yard inside the brick wall, but for some reason, no one moved to help. Lucy broke free of me and made for the door, but O'Connor had wheeled himself square in her path. She could have darted around the bays and come at the door that way, but she flew at O'Connor, grabbed the handles of his chair, and flung him out of her way. He had no choice but to careen into Luellen Michael's machine and crash over onto the floor. Maria Sarzana pulled on O'Connor like a sack of rice, trying to get him up, yelling for someone to put his chair right.

In the mill yard, something held everyone back. Ted Thibodeau had broken the broom handle against Noe by then, but kept on hitting him with the butt of it. The folks who'd gathered in the yard shot frightened looks at something directly below the window.

It was Kritikos—I knew that pelt of hair—and he wielded a metal stool like a lion tamer, swinging it and jabbing the legs at anyone who made a move to help Noe. My insides lurched, and I don't know what kept me from vomiting.

Lucy flew out the downstairs door. When she saw Kritikos, she slowed, circling but keeping her eyes locked on his. She was half his size. They could have been doing a circle dance, she in those sorry-looking shoes of hers—except her face pulled tight, and the only music was the steady drumming of Thibodeau’s broom handle on Noe Hathaway. As Kritikos followed her with the stool legs, I said out loud, like a lopsided prayer, “She saved your baby.”

When Lucy spun away from him and jumped on Thibodeau, Kritikos didn’t stop her. Noe’d quit fighting back. Lucy tried to grab the flailing broom handle or Thibodeau’s arm, anything. He went at it like he was the one who kept the world spinning. He turned, trying to get at whoever was slowing his progress, but when he saw it was a woman, he stopped. He looked down at Noe—who was all over blood like something in a slaughterhouse—and he took off running. Kritikos headed in the side door to the office, still carrying the stool, leaving Lucy with Noe—what was left of him. She talked to him and made as if straightening his shirt would fix his face.

I slid down the wall by the window. Maria Sarzana wheeled O’Connor into the freight elevator. He held a blood-soaked handkerchief to his forehead. Everyone else had cleared out down the stairs. I stared at the big room of machines, the pillars and pipes, our empty apron pegs along the far wall, the greasy paper lunch sacks and thermoses by our chairs, and the pinup girl in pink garters on O’Connor’s door. The blades of the ceiling fan twirled and twirled, easy as a lazy Susan, serving up whatever would come next.

*

The mill owner, Mr. Burroughs, in his three-piece suit, stood by the windows to talk to us. He spoke quietly—someone used to being in charge. I didn’t see Lucy anywhere. Mr. Burroughs had brought his son, Dr. Charlie Burroughs, a fine-looking man, who wore tweeds and a bow tie. Katie O’Neill whispered to Teresa Bukowski that she’d heard the young doctor was still in training. He didn’t know where to look. Those handsome eyes followed the pipes from the

ceiling to the wall and couldn't settle any one place. He told us that Noe Hathaway wasn't conscious and so wasn't feeling any pain. Dr. Charlie Burroughs said that no one could say whether Noe would pull through or not.

When his son's gaze fastened on the floor, Mr. Burroughs stepped forward and said that the Burroughs family would make sure Noe had the best care possible. He said we should be proud that our socks carried the Hub seal on each and every arch. Our work was important during the war, and our veterans needed to know they could still get the same quality product they'd come to rely on. He talked about the years of dedicated service Noe had given to the company and asked if there was anyone whose machine hadn't been tended by him. Which of course there wasn't. Mr. Burroughs said that his prayers were going out to Noe with ours.

If Lucy'd been there, she might have said—out the side of her mouth—Doesn't the whole concoction remind you, just a little, of the recipe for an Angel's Tit? But she wasn't there, and I didn't know where she'd gone.

*

Lucy didn't answer when I knocked on her door. It felt like the room had been sitting silent for months, nothing happening but dust falling. Standing in the hallway, smelling the pasty scent of the walls, and knocking and knocking, I knew she wasn't in there.

I went back to my room and fell into bed, still in my clothes. I dropped into an exhausted, dreamless sleep that didn't last. Sometime in the middle of the night when the only lights shining were the mill's, I woke knowing I had to see the inside of Lucy's room.

I crept down the hall. Her door swung open on a dark and empty space. I flipped on the wall light. The mattress was bare, the pillow tossed onto the foot of the bed. I was suddenly sure she'd been run out of town the way Edna Martin had been, with all her belongings thrown into the road after her. But that was just midnight thinking.

The window was closed and locked. She'd had time to be thorough. Maybe even while

Mr. Burroughs and his son spoke, she'd gathered her things. Her brown sweater and a couple pairs of slacks. Her accounts ledger and hairbrush. Her books. I searched her bureau drawers, which smelled only of themselves—cheap pine. I checked under her saggy mattress. I don't know what I thought I'd find.

I could imagine her carrying her suitcase quickly down those creaky stairs in the smudgy light from the hall window. I came up short, though, when I tried to think what she was thinking as she propped that book she loved so, *The Golden Apples*, against the mirror. She was proud of that book because a Southern woman had written it. She was always wanting to read it to me as if she'd written it herself. I thought I'd find an address inside it, a message, some way of finding where she'd gone. I upended it and splayed the pages out, but there was nothing.

The only other trace of her was the blue dress. She'd left it hanging in the closet like an accusation.

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I muddled through the next days and weeks. O'Connor had seen me trying to stop Lucy from getting to the mill yard, so they didn't fire me. I tried to keep my head down and my machine's needles clear of lint. People whispered when I walked by. I'd worked there before I'd known her; why couldn't I keep on?

Too much had got all mixed up together inside me. Had Noe just followed orders from the higher-ups in the CIO, or did he go off half-cocked because of me? Had he brought the campaign inside the mill walls in a hurry because he didn't think I had the sense to keep a secret? There was no one to ask. Could I be responsible for the way someone judged me? Was it my fault that Noe was attacked? I couldn't catch hold of the answers. What I thought I knew slipped in and out of my head fast enough to make me sick and dizzy.

Instead of sleeping at night, I tried to come up with what I'd say to Lucy. I'd surely hear from her. She couldn't have gone far, maybe over to Remington, or up to Wamsutta over the

New Hampshire border. It was a matter of time. Then, as if Lucy had died, someone else moved into her room.

*

I keep the book she left behind in the magazine rack at the salon. I keep hoping, as I comb out a client's freshly washed hair, or roll and pin her curlers, that the next girl, waiting her turn, might get curious and discover the stories in it. I still think of the times Lucy came to my room to read to me from it. She lay on my bed with one arm behind her head. She read and read to me in her Georgia slow-talk. One time I was seeing if Maybelline mascara—that old waxy block in the red case—did what it promised. I balanced it on the edge of my sink and wet the little brush. She rolled over and propped herself up on her elbows so her back bent like a spoon.

Easter's hand hung down, opened outward. Come here, night, Easter might say, tender to a giant, to such a dark thing. And the night, obedient and graceful, would kneel to her. Easter's calloused hand hung open there to the night that had got wholly into the tent.

I liked it, letting the words flow over me while I brushed my eyelashes.

Nina let her own arm stretch forward opposite Easter's. Her hand, too, opened, of itself. She lay there a long time, motionless, under the night's gaze, its black cheek, looking immovably at her hand, the only part of her now which was not asleep. Its gesture was like Easter's, but Easter's hand slept and her own hand knew,—shrank and knew, yet offered still.

Her reading was like having a radio playing, but as if it played only for me.

In the cup of her hand, in her filling skin, in the fingers' bursting weight and stillness, Nina felt it: compassion and a kind of competing that were all one, a single ecstasy, a single longing.

When Lucy was done, I asked, "Do you like it parted this way?"—I showed her my

hair—“Or like this?” I parted it in the middle, and stood for her.

Her eyes settled on me, stilled there, taking me in with a look I’d seen before and didn’t know how to read. I just thought she was trying to educate me in the stuff she cared about.

*

One whole wall of the salon is mirrors, just the way I used to imagine it would be. I’ve seen a lot of people’s faces reflected there. Some of my regulars are men—like Pete Jenks, whose thinning hair I’ve been trimming ever since he married Katie O’Neill. Some of the boys from the State College have come to me for all four years they’re in Lowell. One of them came back last week so I could be the one to give his baby her first haircut. George Kritikós’s boy, Constantine, once came for a buzz cut, and I told him the story of when he was a baby and fell out the window into the canal.

But most of my clients are women. They share their plans and heartaches with me. Countless times I’ve watched a woman settle into one of the salon chairs, clutching in her hand a dream picture from a magazine, in her heart high hopes that a new cut or color will make her into the woman she’d always hoped to be. I can sympathize.

Not too long ago, a woman walked in who had that sadness in her. She didn’t look like Lucy, but she had the same fine dark hair.

I couldn’t comb out her hair like it was any old hair. When I tried, my hands shook. I had to ask one of the other girls to take over for me. I took my shaky hands into the salon’s back room and tried to pull myself together. I don’t know what they must have thought.

I have to live with this: I won’t ever be able to tell her that I’m sorry about what happened. I wish I could have seen her for who she was—her whole complicated, funny, private self—before she was gone.

Remembering her face now is more and more like imagining. I can get the spray of freckles, or her round cheeks, or the sad corner of her eye right in my mind, but they melt before

I can put them all together over her little chin.

What has stayed with me, though, along with my regrets—what I hang on to still—is what it felt like to float for the very first time—to lie back in the dirty, cooling water of the Merrimack River and learn that with every breath, I could rise up.