

Joplin

Excerpt from the first chapter of a novel, Joplin, set in Missouri in 1930

The summer I was twenty-one I figured I'd marry Art Carson. I settled on it in the double parlour at Verna Hobbes' house, the day she married Alden Shirley, when the dance music treacled and I got stuck against the wallpaper with Art's sister.

It was late and the wedding party had sprawled past its welcome?from the lawn and into the house, straggled in toppled glasses and shoeless girls across Mrs. Hobbes' new rugs. The bride and groom had left hours before, bundled into Alden's automobile. We'd heard the cans on their bumper chattering all the way to the Connor on Fourth. The hired band played romantic tunes, to keep our minds turned that way, to the honeymoon suite: "Let Me Call You Sweetheart," with strings like a sick cat. "Keep the love-light glowing in your eyes so true."

Someone threw a shawl over the electric lamp and couples sucked together to dance. Joplin is small, and the circle of people Mrs. Hobbes would let in her house smaller, so I knew them all. June, Lenore, Inez: childhood friends, companions for passed notes and foolishness with sherry and rouge. They tottered with their husbands like they were running a three-legged race?legs scarfed together, arms twined. I stood against the wall, between the curtains and Billie Carson, and felt like I was going to smash a glass.

Beside me, Billie was swaying. She wanted to look inclined to dance if any man we didn't already know crawled out of the carpet. "Lenore told me Martin has terrible croup," she said.

I rolled my eyes. "She'll give herself croup if she doesn't shut up about it."

"I thought you were friends."

"Doesn't mean she can't make me angry," I said.

I'd run into Lenore in the kitchen earlier. Married women are always in the kitchen at

parties, hovering like flies over the food. She'd talked about the baby?the unexpected size of him, his teeth. She told me that she saw me in the drug store sometimes, through the plate glass window, and that I looked sad in my uniform, the smock the colour of Wrigley's and the matching headscarf.

"You should go to Little Rock if you want a man," she said.

"Do you have a catalogue?" I asked.

Lenore laughed, crooking her head like I was exasperating. "It's just that everyone here knows everyone," she said. I knew what she meant: "knows you and knows your aunt and her league of spinsters. Knows how your daddy drifted off like a weed spore and planted versions of you all across the Midwest." But Lenore was too polite to say it. She scrunched her nose and smiled. "Look how well Verna did, and you know her face." She rubbed her finger under her eye, where Verna had a birthmark like a drip of candlewax.

"He's very rich, isn't he?" I said.

He was. Alden Shirley owned an oilrig, which made up for the hair that grew down nearly to his fingers and how his lungs rattled like cans when he coughed. His mother's maiden name was a word all the Hobbes pronounced like a foreign language: in italics and as if it was something you would know how translate, if you were smarter, and not from Joplin. He was the catfish, the out-of-towner Verna's mother had been holding out for. But Verna Hobbes could afford to wait. Her family had run the electricity out to Joplin. They were the wealthiest people I knew.

Against the wall Billie was squirming. "I wonder how Verna's getting on," she said.

Everyone was wondering about Verna: flopping beneath her mother's catch on a bed yards wide.

"Wonderfully, I'm sure," I said.

I could picture how she was getting on; we all could. Mrs. Hobbes had been stage whispering the amenities of that honeymoon suite to everyone she could corner, set-dressing the scene. The king-sized bed, the icebox, the midnight supper

delivered to door. I closed my eyes and tried to conjure myself into that suite, with a husband. But I could only see a man like a paper doll groom: empty-faced and stuck in a penguin suit. There wasn't anything to him, underneath. Maybe I just lacked imagination. The only man I'd ever seen naked was Billie's brother Art?spied bathing in the sump behind the Carsons'?and he'd just been feet of pink rubber under his clothes.

Billie had pinwheel eyes, like she was seeing the suite too. She had definitely pasted Alden into it. She said he was "romantic." She was still spooning peach ice cream from dinner, slicking her tongue along it.

"You just want to be married. And rich," I said. "Alden Shirley: two birds, one stone. Too bad Verna's already got him."

"Verna already was rich. God, I'm going to be sick." Billie licked the rim of the ice cream bowl?shaped like a glass fleur-de-lis.

"Do you know how people can tell you're poor, Billie? It's how you eat. Like it's going to run out." I snatched the glass from her and shoved it, still sticky, behind the curtain. Likely maids would find it in the morning, with the other scraps of this party, the champagne flutes and the lost shoes. Mrs. Hobbes had gone to bed earlier crying about her rugs.

"Doesn't it dazzle you?" Billie said. "Ice cream and salmon paste and those red slug fish with their heads dunked in sauce. I'll be so sad when Art comes to pick us up in his stupid truck and it's all gone."

"Sorry, Billie." I squeezed her hand; it was damp like a child's. "I'm a grouch. It is the nicest wedding I've ever seen."

It was: the catering; the white frocked tables on the lawn; the champagne brought up the Mississippi in crates marked as china and split open right at the tables, sawdust spilling out, to show how ingenious the Hobbes were, how far their wiring ran. Billie was awed, but I couldn't muster it. Lately, I wasn't moved by anything extravagant. I'd thumb through a Sears-Roebuck catalogue and not find anything to shear out and paste to the wallpaper in my room at Mill's, where all my past greed had baked and curled in the sun.

A few months ago Verna lent me a silk frock and recruited a cousin of Alden's, a Princeton man, to make a foursome at the Connor. And I'd hidden and cried in the marble washroom through dessert because the three were so well behaved, as dull as lapdogs. Because, when faced with a plate of lobsters and sweetbreads, I only wanted grits and gooseberry pie. If Verna and her Shirley beau and her parents' fine house with the lights and pipes weren't exhilarating, if they made my eyes ache and their drinks started a fizzing racket in my head, I wasn't sure any longer what I wanted.

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Upstairs, in the blue-lit lavatory, I looked sick, and thirty, I estimated. The yellow frock Verna had dressed me in for the wedding was like a splash of lye; it scrubbed the features out of my face.

I'd been an attendant at the ceremony, with a hare-lipped Hobbes cousin from Des Moines. A girl had to be untouched, and yearning, to trail after a bride, bunch the veil in her hands.

I ran the tap. Water loosed from the spigot, thick and continuous as the magic scarves I'd seen Art Carson pull from his ear.

The yellow frock had cost four whole dollars from Christman's department store. When I saw it in its box?crumpled and livid, a lemon in the bottom of a shandy?I'd wanted to rush to Verna and tell her how I wasn't so pure. How a Calvert uncle had showed me a set of postcards of naked women: in high stockings, with hair as curly in the joint of their legs as on their heads; playing cards and kissing each other and setting kettles on the stove and crouching to piss. And how Roy Hartley from the drug store had once thumbed my breast through my blouse, but couldn't kiss me because he was engaged to a girl at Drury College. Verna's mother would have had an etiquette book that told her I couldn't handle the veil and comb her daughter's hair then, if a man had touched me like that.

I'd told Billie all of these stories, about the uncle and Roy, of course. She'd nearly forgotten to breath as she listened.

At least this dress was better than Billie's, I thought. Hers was a frontier thing, sheared off and hemmed crooked. She shouldn't have even been invited, but I'd begged Verna.

Downstairs, Billie wasn't against the wall. I heard her before I saw her: her giggle like a hot kettle, "stop, stop!" but like she didn't mean it. She was in middle of the parlour with Sol Valence, Inez's father, recently widowed and tonight, drunk to puce. They were dancing, a reel when everyone else was hardly swaying. He spun her out like a fair ride, then drew her close and buried his face in her chest; then out again, with a war whoop.

I'd taught Billie to dance: a cramped foxtrot and a stumbling waltz in Mill's parlour, until we knocked a shelf and shattered Mill's glass Paul the Apostle. We'd been very proper: me, the boy, with my skirt tucked up; Billie, in her fusty long dress, chewing at her lip until she got it right. Nothing like she was dancing now.

Lenore appeared beside me. She was damp-face and sipping a drink through a paper straw. "You know the Carsons?" she said, as if they'd just occurred to her, although like everyone in parlour, we were staring right at the middle one. The Carsons were unmistakable: always in ragged clothes and so towheaded you could see their scalp pinking through.

"Sure," I said.

Lenore sucked to the bottom of her drink, making it burble. "Well, I always wonder how they survived out there. That's the worst tract of land in the county. Lloyd told his brother he thought Art was running a brothel. No, he didn't tell me. But I heard. I see things too. All those sisters..." Her eyes were like half-dollars: shiny, giving nothing back.

"That's hogwash."

Her mouth pinched. "Isn't Art always picking up drifters, showing them around town

like they're the governor?" she said. "If it's not a brothel, it's something else." She pushed her empty drink into my hand and turned.

It wasn't true?couldn't be?but I looked at Billie: buckled in laughter, her breasts nearly tumbling from her dress. Sol was dragging her across the rug. She followed, limp and trailing, like a sheet.

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Art was so late I thought I'd have to walk Billie out to the house off Black Cat Road. We sat on the veranda, after the band packed up their instruments and the dancers stumbled home, still walking like they were scarfed together at the thighs. Billie slept with her head in my lap, snoring in whimpers.

"All right, Alden," she said, when I jostled her.

"Hush about that," I said.

Lenore wasn't right: not about Art, although he did pick up drifters; and not about Billie, although she was graceless and as pliable as a pet. But thinking about that brothel, that whiff of rot, gave me a thrill. And more than all the fine things at the Hobbes' house did, the piping and the fish paste, and probably in the suite at the Connor, if I ever saw it.

I thought what I thought earlier, in the parlour, when I watched Billie dancing. Just marrying, being done with it. Marrying Art, because he was around and because in Joplin, he counted as strange, someone to talk about. I didn't want Alden. I didn't want to sleep on silk sheets and fret about people spoiling my rugs. And I didn't want to stay at my aunt's, tiptoeing around her glass apostles and bridge fours. I wanted to see Lenore's face twist and crumple like a cheap candle.

Art arrived in the rusted truck after three and I led Billie to it, her head rolling on her shoulders. She was as heavy as if I'd dragged her, clothed, from water. Art helped

me settle her on the seat. "Jeez," he said, as she slumped between us.

"She's more tired than drunk," I said. "If you drive me out there, I'll put her to bed." I'd rarely been to their house. I usually wheedled Billie into town.

Art blinked, as if he had to adjust his eyes to me, in that dress. "Sure. I guess."

As Art drove, I watched him. He was tall and flat; sitting down, he was folded out like an ironing board, knees snapped into place. He chewed the side of his cheek and didn't speak. I thought about when I'd seen him undressed. Billie and I scrambled out of the pond and ducked in the scrub when he appeared, but we still saw, because we looked: Art, undoing the snaps on his long underwear, exposing more and more of his gelatine skin and finally, the empty pink pouches of his rear.

I thought: I can't have Billie outgrow me too, can't have her marry Sol Valence and have a baby with croup and look back and see how I was bluffing, about Roy, about men.

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Lauren Van Schaik Smith was published in this year's UEA Creative Writing MA Anthology: Prose Fiction & Non Fiction