

“Strangers”

By MJ Daspit

Myrt Vaughn fingered her gloves, fiddling up the nerve to come out with what was on her mind. “They say everybody finds Jesus in jail,” she said at last. She watched Claire unpin her black felt hat, hang it on the same peg where she’d put her coat and slip her white apron on over her black dress. “Don’t you think you’ve had enough for one day? Shouldn’t you go upstairs and rest?”

“No rest for the wicked,” Claire replied. “They say that, too.” She stepped behind the counter and shoved her glasses on. “Besides, we need the money. The store will be open every day from now until we move. I’m marking everything down.”

“Maybe I’ll take a look around.” Myrt stuffed her gloves into her handbag and snapped it shut. She headed for the fabric shelved against one wall. “Way I feel about it, those two boys shoulda been no-billed. Everybody in town thinks so, too, I reckon. I thought about killing your husband myself a time or two. Much stock as people put in horses around here, it’s a wonder he wasn’t shot down by the railroad tracks when he put that black and white filly down.”

“Poor Skunk,” Claire said. “She was high spirited. Adam couldn’t abide that in a female.”

Myrt pulled a yellow print from an array of chintz and held it before the window in the natural light. “What do you think of this color for my kitchen? I just need two

lengths for the window over my kitchen sink. I think it'll make up nice, don't you?"

Myrt plopped the bolt onto the counter and ran her hand across it one more time.

"I do." Claire pulled a couple of yards off the bolt and smoothed the wrinkles out of the place she meant to cut. She opened her shears and snipped about an inch in from the selvedge, then pushed the blades, going with the straight of the grain to the other side. Left an end as square as a Kansas cornfield. "No charge," she said. "Adam would want you to have it, for being a good neighbor all these years."

"If he ever knew how much I heard of what went on in here—not that I intended to, but living next door it was hard not to—I don't think he'd be disposed to make me a present."

Claire pulled out a hunk of brown paper from the big roll at the end of the counter and ripped it along the cutter. Myrt watched her put the folded piece of fabric in the middle and wrap it up with twine. "I sure will miss buying from you, Claire. You make the neatest job of things. Never a frayed end or a short yard."

"I use a steel on my scissors and knives every week." Claire wound the fabric around the bolt again and went to put it back on the shelf.

"You should stay here," Myrt said. "Go on running this store. You're good at it. Especially the way you do the front window. I declare it sure brightens up our dull old main street. I always looked forward to seeing how you'd change those two girls with different clothes and hats. Remember that one Christmas they were Santa's elves? This year we'll be lucky if we get a few shiny balls stuck up there."

Claire glanced at the mannequins, poised on the point of moving, with vague intentions caught on their painted faces. Setting up scenes with their dead limbs, she had tried to tell stories: a confrontation on the street between two women wearing the same outfit, typists conspiring against the boss at an office party, one woman giving her friend a manicure while burning her hair with a perm. It was challenging, thinking up situations. There were only female figures to work with, in the store window. "Maybe the new owner will get in a better line of hardware. That's something Adam had intended to do."

"A hammer's a hammer to me." Myrt shook her head. "I just don't know how you can go out to the old James place. Sam says it's a quarter section if it's an inch. He says there's no way a woman can work that much land with only two little boys. You taking them with you or leaving them with your mother?"

"Soon as I get settled out there I'll bring them home," Claire said. "We'll be all right. I grew up dry farming."

"Won't you be lonely out there with no one to talk to?"

"I reckon I'll be too busy to notice."

That night Claire lay in the middle of the double bed eyes wide open, waiting for him to walk through the door like he always had, drunk, mean, dangerous. She knew in her head he wouldn't, that he was beyond all that now. But at the core of her, she couldn't believe it. A person of faith would say God had looked down and seen what only He could see and laid a Judgment on Adam as sure as the gravediggers had laid a stone over his coffin. But Claire was not of a righteous bent. She had never been able to

convince herself there was an Almighty with His eye on the sparrow. All she could do was whisper in the dark. "It's over. It's over."

She lay there wondering how Adam might stand at Judgment Day, if there were such a thing. She imagined how he might plead. *Yes, I raised my hand to keep order in my house, but as long as I lived I never turned away a beggar.* She remembered the first time she had tried to shoo a bum off the porch, Adam's lecture on the ancient Greeks who believed a wanderer might be a god in disguise. Refusing hospitality could bring down a curse on the house, he'd said. Highfalutin nonsense, she'd said. Unthinkable, such rash frankness in light of what had come next. She'd tasted her own blood that day, ladling out to such vagrants as might have caught the whiff of her stew from twenty miles off. She'd wondered how they found her door, but knew better than to speak a word. In time, one of the tramps had told her about the runes, the signs the hobos left by the road that pointed a way from the railroad station along by the feed store and up to her door. She'd fed every sooty hobo that clambered up the back steps, but Adam had found other reasons to beat her, up until that night he got his throat slit.

She thought of those two sorry scarecrows who'd be going upriver for Adam's murder, the way they'd appeared at the back door, peering in through the screen. She had just picked up her knife to start peeling potatoes for stew, slipped it into the pocket of her apron when she went to speak to them. The taller one had worn a battered straw hat, tugging the brim as she stepped out onto the porch. "Morning, madam," he had said, his smile flat on one side beneath a drooping eye, like maybe his face had been stove in once. A good sized man, but narrow in the shoulders, made more for running than working, in spite of the grease-stained denim coveralls and the sweaty bandana around his neck.

“I’m Philip Prendergast and this is my companion Leonard Frye.” The shorter, pigeon-chested and hook-nosed companion had worn a fedora and a dusty pinstriped suit. In his hand at the end of the frayed sleeve he carried a small canvas grip that held, surely, everything they possessed in the world between them. “We understand that this house is kindly disposed to persons such as Frye and myself who are on the road.” She remembered how Prendergast had flicked his tongue over his lips. “You’re a charitable lady. You have a kindly eye. You could spare an apple, a glass of water, perhaps.”

“Sit down on the step and I’ll bring you each a cold plate and a glass of milk.”

It’s only a few cents worth of crackers, a spoonful of beans, Adam would have said. But he had gone dove hunting that morning. She spoke her thoughts when he wasn’t around to hear. “You’d feed the devil himself.” They can tell you don’t mean it kindly, Adam would have said. “I never yet had one refuse to eat because they thought I gave surly service.” Claire remembered that old cold feeling at the core of her body, saw herself dishing up pigs knuckles and putting a thick slice of bread on each plate. She’d heard tell of vagrants who came by during the day to beg a meal and look around for valuables they might come back for at night, how sometimes they’d kill the householder sleeping in his bed. She’d felt for the knife in the pocket of her apron before putting the plates on a tray and pushing out the screen door.

Prendergast had stood to receive his. “This looks fine. See here, Mr. Frye, trotters.”

* * *

She realized she had slept only when she woke with a gasp. Her terror shimmered in the dark though the room was empty of any person save herself. She swung her legs to the floor and toed the cold boards for her slippers. Somewhere Adam's ghost was gnashing his teeth, thwarted once more. Often as he might rush out of the bathroom with the porcelain top off the toilet tank she would always wake before he brought it down on her head. She pulled on her robe and went downstairs through the store and back to the kitchen to put on coffee. Her hand shook as she struck the match to light the gas. Through the kitchen door she could see a dusting of snow, not enough to hide the bald dirt of the yard, but enough to tell her no one had come up to the door to shelter on the porch in the night. The tramps had stayed away since Adam was killed.

Waiting for the coffee, she took up her knife steel and began flicking the long blade of her favorite carving knife along its length. That first time Adam had wrapped his arms around her and guided her hands with his as he spoke in a voice like the center of a dark chocolate truffle, "a twenty degree angle to the steel."

She felt the rhythm of the flashing blade falter and put down her tools, steadying herself on the counter. His sweetness, even in memory, could still melt her, the memory of them spooned together in bed, his gas-jet eyes, his deeply fleshed hands that knew her body's cravings. She dropped into a chair and covered her face with her hands, stifling sobs until she felt she would strangle. How was it possible those same hands could rain down such blows as would cow a man his own size, much less a woman who had scarcely felt the sting of a rough word in her father's house? What set him off? She remembered bathing contusions, wracking her brain to discover her offense. The irrationality of it more than the beatings themselves had steeled her to the deed—that and

pure fear, wondering what new form his wrath might take as day by day his gentle side lost ground to the monster. She hugged herself, rocking like an abandoned waif until she managed to tamp down her grief again. Then she rose unsteadily and poured herself a mug of coffee.

Her chilled hands around the mug, she climbed back upstairs to dress. Her funeral clothes lay across the chair where she'd left them the night before. Such black things. So new. She felt of the fabric as it lay there, inanimate, waiting for her to put life into it. But how? How to start again, face another day with the blood stain at the foot of the stair? She'd scrubbed her fingers raw, but she could still see the outline that showed where his life had gone after it leaked out of him. She put on her faded calico house dress, left the mourning on the chair to be dealt with later. She drank the coffee down, as it had cooled to something below scalding heat, and plodded down the stairs to another day in the store.

She flicked on the lights, took up her dust rag as she did every morning before opening time, and started wiping the tinned goods on the next shelf over from where she'd stopped the day before. Sardines from Portugal. There was a picture on the lid of the oval can, a smiling, black-eyed woman in a red dress that hung a little off the shoulder. How lovely she was. How much to be envied—untouchable, young, laughing. She held a platter of fish fillets, offering them to anyone who might glance at the tin. How generous she was, how much better than Claire felt herself to be. Claire felt that she'd held herself back from charity because that was what *he* wanted, what *he* prided himself on. She had to take the opposite position if only to hold on to something of

herself, a tiny spark. But it hurt her that she had taken the miser's part of the argument. It had cost her. "No more," she said, as she wiped the tins of sardines, "No more."

There came a pecking at the door a good hour and a half before she usually raised the shade. It was Jasper Weiss, the sheriff. He waved at her through the black front window. She put down her dust rag and smoothed her bobbed hair. With a moment's hesitation to remind herself who he was and what he might want, she answered the knock.

A breath of sparkling cold came with him as he entered. He swept his hat off his head with a blunt-fingered hand. "Mornin, Claire. Hope I'm not botherin you, but I saw you up and doin. Wonder if we might have a word fore you open up and get busy."

His newly razored cheeks were pink and tender-looking, his eyes red-filigreed under drooping lids that would have been rakish if it weren't for the rest of his face drooping, too. "Sure," she said. "I've got coffee I can heat up in the kitchen."

He followed her through the racks of clothes and tables of speckled porcelain cookpots, crockery bowls, and canning jars. "How's Marjorie?" she asked, over her shoulder.

"Declinin'. Doc says she likely won't make it through another Thanksgivin'. Marjorie always liked the Thanksgivin' dinner cause they put a feather headdress on her, you know cause of the Indians who come to eat with the Pilgrims. That made her happy. I wish she could make it through one more turkey dinner."

"She still don't know you?"

“Naw. They tell me she won’t get her memory back.” He sat down at Claire’s kitchen table and watched her bend to light the stove.

“Just be a minute. I made it about an hour ago, so it’s not stone cold. Probably warm enough for some people as it is, but I like my coffee good and hot, don’t you?” She slipped the matchbox back up on the shelf over the stove and asked the question before she turned around to face him. “What was it you come to talk to me about?”

“Awful lonely out there on the James place. I don’t know why you’ve got a mind to leave the store here. You like to make up the display window and stock shelves, don’t you? And you’re good at it. I’ve never seen anythin’ like it, how you can dress those dummies up and make ’em look like they could walk right out of the store and down the street.”

“I can’t stay here, Jasper. I can’t even close my eyes at night for thinking of what happened right downstairs while I was asleep in bed. I feel like if I’d waked up I might have run them off somehow before they...”

“We never found that money,” he said.

She got up and went to the stove, took the corner of her apron and lifted the lid of the coffeepot. “I don’t want it to boil,” she said.

“Buried somewhere most like.” He tipped his chair so it stood on the back legs leaning toward the wall and watched her reach down a clean mug off the shelf. She took hers from earlier off the drain-board. “They shoulda buried that knife, too.”

“I got no hopes of seeing that money again,” she said.

He set his chair foursquare on the floor. "Come and sit down here a minute, Claire."

Dumbly she came to the table, sat on the edge of the chair and clasped her hands in her lap.

"You know I care for you. Many evenin's I've seen you at work in the store late, busy in that front window playin' with your big dolls, the light shinin' from behind you. Occurs to me since Adam died the two of us should marry when Marjorie's gone. It only makes sense. You're young, too young to be without a man. I'm not young, but I ain't old enough to live without a woman."

"Jasper..."

"Let me finish."

She cast her eyes down on the oilcloth.

"I got no illusions of romance. I'm not of an age to sweep you off your feet. I'm of an age to not want to appear foolish, though I often do."

"That's not true," she said. "Not at all."

"I have an honest proposition to make you. I want us to go upstairs right now. I want to show you, Claire. I'm not as old as you think. I can make you happy."

"Jasper, I got my boys to think of. I—Damn it!" She heard steam bouncing the lid of the pot and jumped up to pull it off the burner with her apron bunched up in her

hand. He came up behind her, put his hands lightly on her shoulders. His lips brushed her ear. "Claire, I know."

She felt a drop of sweat roll down under a spit curl on the side of her face and the warm damp of his words. Her voice barely scratched out a sound. "What?"

"Those two old boys said they found that knife wrapped up with two wedges of pie you gave them to put in their bag b'fore they left. Must have hurt you to part with it, much stock as you put in your knives."

"That's a lie. One of them came in and took my knife while I was out waiting on a customer in the store. When I left the kitchen it was next to the spuds I was peeling. I shoulda taken a minute to latch the screen door, but they were standing up to leave. I was in a hurry. Sure enough, when I came back to the kitchen the knife was gone and so were the tramps."

"Why didn't you tell me right away when you saw it was gone?"

"I didn't want Adam to know. He'd have taken it out of my hide twice." She summoned up a frown of irritation and turned around. "I gave you my statement. I don't see why you're standing here making me repeat myself. You still want this coffee?"

"Sure." He backed off and sat down. She poured their cups, put one on the table in front of him and sat down with the other.

Weiss touched the side of the mug but made no move to pick it up and drink. "How do you think those boys feel? Probably get sent up for ten years. A lousy knife. Coulda been anybody's. Or yours. Don't matter. They say they never took it. Say they

was never even in your house, just outside. No evidence they was, 'cept your word you recognized 'em from feedin' 'em lunch earlier that day. Jury's a strange animal. Not always swayed by reason. Sometimes swayed by a pretty face. A young widow's tears. Those two don't have a prayer, even if all the facts was on their side."

"But the facts are on my side."

"Say ten years from now they come outa prison. What are you gonna do out there on that old farm all by yourself? Imagine two little black scratches at the end of the lane. Your eye picks up the gait, somethin' between a gimp and a lope that comes from walkin' long miles and sleepin' rough. Even at a distance, you know they've come for more than a meal. You feel a chill jump up your back. What happens then? Who's gonna care ten years from now when the farm's wrung all the sap out of you and your hair's the color of dust?"

"A woman alone never sees strangers coming that she doesn't feel dread hanging in the air. But you learn not to make trouble if they don't bring it. You check the load in the shotgun and wait and see. That's what happens."

Weiss drew his fingertips across the oilcloth and thought a minute. "I'm gonna tell you plain how it is. I don't think you appreciate your position here. You don't see what I'm sayin'."

"You're saying you don't believe those tramps killed Adam."

"I'm sayin' you gotta make me believe it. I'm saying you got the means to make all my doubts disappear. Now I already told you what that is. All you gotta do is decide.

Do I want to take old Jasper upstairs or do I want him to maybe keep workin' this case, lookin' for new evidence.

Claire felt her skin stiffen. "What new evidence?"

"S'pose I found out what happened to that money? S'pose I could show that those two old boys never took it, that you stole it yourself. That would put the rest of your story in doubt, wouldn't it?" He smiled. "Now Claire, money ain't no good unless you can spend it. The take from this store that Adam had squirreled away is a damn sight more than you could ever put by workin' the old James place. You'll be lucky you don't starve out there. So tell me, Claire, how are you ever gonna spend that money without people askin' how you got it? How you gonna support your two kids without you have a little extra to use for gas and groceries? But let me tell you somethin'. You spend a dime that ain't egg money and I'll bring down the law on you so fast you won't have time to change your panties.

"See, Claire, there's lots of criminals a lot smarter than you who still haven't figur'd out how to put over a murder. They always make some sort of mistake. They tip their hand." He paused and finally took a sip of coffee. "They got Capone on income tax evasion. You smarter than him? Hell, you're just a woman. Not even that. A little girl, still playin' around with your store-window dolls. You think I'm as gullible as a jury, think you can arrange things to look a certain way and I'll buy it? No, sir, sister. I spotted the truth of it a mile off."

“It hurts me that you think I’m capable of, such a thing. I don’t know how you can think that and want to have anything to do with me. You’re saying we should marry, but how can there be love between us while you harbor such suspicions?”

“I said nothin’ about love, darlin’. I said marriage would suit us both. That’s in the way of a contract between two people who see things clear, my needs met in exchange for your stayin’ outa jail.”

“Won’t it linger in the back of your mind that maybe someday you’ll be sitting at the table and I’ll get up to dish you a second helping and get my knife instead? Wouldn’t you be afraid whenever I picked it up to cut you a slice of pie?”

“I thought about that,” he said. “I got what you might call insurance.”

“What kind of insurance?”

“Lawman kind.”

“If that’s true, I got very little choice here,” she said.

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Myrt Vaughn sipped her coffee and glanced around Claire’s kitchen. “You’ve certainly fixed it up nice,” she said. She tugged the front of her dress several times to air it. “Every time I take a mouthful nowadays I get a hot flash. The change of life. I swear.”

“How times goes by,” Claire said. She stroked the fine wrinkles around her eyes that had deepened some since she and Jasper had moved out to the James place. She had

aged, but there was no privation there, nothing to suggest life had been as hard as everyone had predicted.

“And every year seems to bring a new misery around here. It started when Elmo Tate and Ola got killed out on the railroad track at the first grade cross. Then the next year old Mrs. Hale fell and died waiting for somebody to find her. And Doc Jones overdosing.” She sighed and shook her head. “And I surely didn’t expect to see you widowed twice in ten years.”

Claire half smiled. “This rate I’ll wear out my mourning.”

“It’s terrible to think he spent all that time as a sheriff only to retire and then get himself killed. And worse to think he waited all those years for an invalid wife to pass, God rest her, so he could marry again, only to have it all end before he could comb gray hair. Course, some folks say he changed from what he was and that’s what did him in. Flashing all that cash whenever he came to town. Never behaved that way when he was a lawman. But I expect he never had it back then.” Claire said nothing in response. “No disrespect intended.”

“Of course not.”

“You all did well dry farming,” Myrt said. “Still, with the price of wheat these last few years it was puzzling to see Jasper drive into town in that silver Cadillac of his and peel off tens like they was toilet tissue. I told Harry he must have had something from Marjorie, some inheritance he came into after she died or maybe he had some insurance on her.”

“Jasper wasn’t talkative about where his money came from,” Claire said, “and I never asked. I never have been good with money myself. Adam kept the accounts at the store, you know. I never knew how much we made or what those tramps took when they cleaned out the safe. It’s a foolish way to be, I guess.” She gazed at the brown hairline crack on the side of her cup and remembered doling out Adam’s money, Jasper holding up a wad as thick as your foot saying it wasn’t enough. *“I don’t care if it’s all gone tomorrow. These two kids of yours are of an age to start working. Let them take care of you if you run short.”* She couldn’t recall precisely when it struck her, maybe something the cow hands at the Saturday night dance had said, talking about drifters and dangerous men and getting together to hire somebody to come in and clean out the wolves that had been taking so many sheep.

“So what do you intend to do now?” Myrt asked. “Somebody told me you want to find a buyer for your place. I sure would move back into town if I was you. Your two boys will be grown and gone soon. It don’t make any sense for a parent to try to hold onto property for the children nowadays. Folks is too footloose. That’s changed since I was a kid. We always expected to stay on the homeplace, but that’s not how young people think. You ask me, that’s one reason why there’s as much violence as we have now. Nobody knows their neighbors. Strangers wander into town and go to the dance on Saturday night and see a rich guy driving a fancy car. They get him to buying drinks and first thing you know the car’s nosed over in a ditch and the poor man drug out onto the road and killed with his own tire iron. Have they managed to find out anything at all about who did it?”

Claire studied her coffee cup and shook her head. “I don’t hold out much hope.”

“So what *are* you going to do?”

“The boys want to start a feed lot,” Claire said. “They’ve been talking to Jack Flynn about it. He might go in with them, being a cattle broker. It makes sense.”

“I spose it does,” Myrt said. “You’ll be fine and you’ll never want for meat. It was me, I’d be lonely, though. I’d want the company of a man.”

It was on the tip of Claire’s tongue to say something cautionary about company and strangers, but instead she sipped her coffee and looked down toward the end of the lane, half expecting to spy two little black scratches coming toward the door, tramps, with that gait they have, something between a gimp and a lope that comes from walking long miles and sleeping rough.

The End