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The Girl

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The bones of her spine pressed into the back of a hard cedar chair, sharp pain piercing Eloise vertebra by vertebra as she pressed herself hard into her seat as if willing herself to disappear into it. An outsider might have been distracted, might have swiveled her head left and right, taking in Mary, screaming and pulling at her own hair on the floor. The outsider might have seen Andy in tears, pressed up against a wall by Nurse Alba, who was playing a convoluted game of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey with a syringe of clear liquid. She might have registered a little bit of joy in the corner, where Evelyn and Sarah passed a sunshine-colored crayon back and forth as they created a joint masterpiece.

Eloise was not distracted. She had watched these same scenes so often that she was no longer interested. She knew that Mary's world was upside down because the beans on her plate had leaked into the mashed potatoes, leaving them, to her mind, inedible. She knew that when Andy got excited about one thing or another, his hands would flap around him wildly like caged birds, and that the nurses really could not stand this. Eloise also knew that if she tried to stand up for Andy, for whose wispy gray hair and big, yellowed smiles she had a soft spot, the mystery serum would just end up in her own arm, too. She had often watched Evelyn and Sarah playing in the corner on opposite ends of a table, their mirror hunched shoulders and soft leather dimples reflecting joy from some unknown source. It felt very odd to see adult twins. Even odder to see someone happy at Cherryfield.

The hard-backed seat lurched violently as Nurse Alba kicked her hard-toed shoe at its leg, stunning Eloise out of her dissociative trance. She knew what came next and didn't feel like waiting to be told, so she got to her feet and started moving towards the Industrial Room. Eloise and the Industrial Room had a love-hate relationship. On one hand, the work— sewing patches on the boys' trousers or crocheting table covers for sale—gave her something to do with her hands other than bite at the edges of her jagged fingernails or pull apart split ends. She was a bit

conflicted about liking these tasks because she knew that every mended tear or hemmed pillow slip was another penny in the pockets of the fat old Board of Trustees. This was something that, on days when she was feeling fiery, she'd pointed out to the Industrial Room overseer or Superintendent Osborn, but this usually just resulted in her being punished in some way or another. Instead, she'd taken to cutting little holes in the items here and there, her own tiny act of protest.

On the other hand, though, the Industrial Room was a place where the steady drumming of the sewing machine needle or the laser focus required for knitting created a thick haze of inner silence that drew out her internal monologue, a voice she had been working to silence for her own sanity—ironic, considering that in the eyes of the State she had none. It was in these moments that her mind would begin to drift, each stitch drawing her further into the recesses of her own mind.

It was in these moments that, from the haze, the faces would emerge.

The face of Mr. Johnson, the stocky man in Brownsville who had offered a thirteen-year-old Eloise, recently dropped out of school to work and anxious for any chance to help her single mother feed nine mouths, 30 cents an hour to help tidy up his home in the wake of his wife's death. The man who had won her trust and then, by some cruel twist of fate or possibly by her own unintentional signals, stolen her innocence.

The face of her sister Margaret, in whom she had first confided that she had missed her monthly and that Mr. Johnson had been touching her, but that she was afraid to lose her job.

The face of her mother when she found out.

The sweet, tender face of little Benjamin, the only sweet thing to come from her days in the sickly-sweet maplewood cabin that Mr. Johnson had built with his own two hands— something he frequently reminded her of. The little boy's eyes haunted her, their deep hazelnut tint reflecting her own, as he was wrested from her fifteen-year-old arms in the hospital by a woman sent by the State. Eloise didn't remember the woman's face.

And, against the backdrop of pounding sewing machines and clicking knitting needles and Evelyn moaning in the corner, an unbearable avalanche of more faces and memories would rush in,

forcing Eloise to relive The Darkness that followed Benjamin's birth, the bout of influenza that drove her panicky mother to beg Mr. Johnson for a ride to Centerville Hospital as a last resort, the knowing glances exchanged between doctors there who learned from a well-intentioned Margaret that unmarried Eloise had recently given birth. In rushed the memories of confusing paperwork and clandestine car rides and that pudgy old matron who had pulled her from the car at Cherryfield for the first time, of *feeble-minded, immoral*, scrawled on charts and of her first look at the damned superintendent on whom she blamed her life in this hellhole.

1999

The chair groaned as it leaned forward, and Eloise's feet hit the floor. She shuffled across the yellow laminate flooring that Henry had painstakingly laid down some twenty years earlier. She had seen it in a catalogue and fallen in love with the bright color but knowing that they could not afford it on the salaries of a schoolteacher and a lumberman, she'd put a slip of paper in between the shiny pages and set the magazine aside. Eloise could never forget the morning of her 60th birthday, when she'd returned from the field behind their house with a basket of fresh raspberries under her arm to find boxes of that sunshine laminate sitting in boxes in the kitchen. Henry had stood there with one of the boxes tucked between his bare bicep and his white tank top, wearing the goofy grin that had never disappeared, even as his youth tiptoed away.

Now the flooring had faded a bit—it was a natural hazard given the light that shone in at all angles. Eloise couldn't stand darkness, and when they built the little house so many years ago, she had had only one thing on her wish list: as many windows as its walls could hold. The sun still shone in, but the house was almost unbearably quiet. Henry's booming laughter no longer echoed against those pine walls that he had cut and milled with his own two hands, that the two of them, young and full of energy, had sanded and polished for hours as they built their simple dream home. Now there was nothing but the steady symphony of Eloise's labored breathing and shuffling slippers punctuated by the swinging tail of the Kit-Cat Klock that hung on the wall, a relic of days past.

Today she would deliver the socks. At eighty-three years old, her days had gotten less and less busy, something that drove her crazy. She hated sitting still and yearned for the years when she spent her mornings preparing lesson plans and her days in the classroom. She longed for her afternoons in the cafeteria filling State Meal Assistance lunch bags for the next day, her evenings in PTA meetings, for the nights when she could come home into her husband's firm embrace and sit alongside him on the couch reading or tuning in to "Little House on the Prairie" or "Happy Days". When a woman turns eighty, people stop giving her things to do, expecting her to be content sitting alone in a worn living room La-Z-Boy. But Eloise did not do well with silence because it brought back the darker memories, so instead, today she would deliver the socks.

Two hundred and fifteen pairs of stockings were lined up with painstaking precision on the kitchen and dining room tables. The rows of stitches were perfectly aligned, and it was clear that the hands that had knitted them had done so by a muscle memory honed over decades. The first pairs were yellow, Eloise's favorite, and when she had exhausted that first margarine-tinted skein she had moved to a sky blue, then to a deep scarlet that her friend Amelia had gifted her for Christmas. The number of socks that she made necessitated the use of many colors, and the rainbow of gifts gave Eloise the sense of purpose that had so often evaded her since Henry died.

Three hours later, she had painstakingly folded over the tops of each pair of socks so that they were bound together in neat little bundles, her arthritic fingers cramping in a cruel reminder of her age. They could now be delivered to the long list of group homes, pediatric hospitals, and schools in the area that Eloise had compiled over the years. She began packing them into boxes that she would attempt to lug out to Henry's old 1974 F-150 that sat, its now-dull powder blue spotted with rust, sedentary in the dooryard.

As she stood in a staring contest with the heavy boxes, the mechanical trill of the phone interrupted. Eloise hated the damn thing and the telemarketers who rang her at all hours of the day, but Jennifer had begged that she have it installed, "just in case." Though she would insist until the day she died that she didn't need it— "if people want to

call on me, they can come knock on the door like they've always done. And if I drop dead, they'll find me eventually"— the phone did make Eloise feel just a little safer.

"Coming, coming," she muttered, shuffling to the little lieutenant's post on the kitchen wall. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's Jen. Just calling to say hi."

It was almost always Jen.

"Hello, dear. How are you doing? How are John and the kids?"

"Oh, they're good. Abby's got ballet in an hour and Tucker just finished throwing an absolute wailer because his sandwich was cut in triangles. John's at work. What's going on in your neck of the woods today?"

Although she sometimes nagged, Eloise loved her niece. Jen was a good woman, and smart, too. She was an ER nurse at Redding Hospital and, despite the fact that she was constantly so busy with work and the kids, she found time every week to give Eloise a call or swing by to say hello. If she had had children of her own, Eloise would have hoped for them to turn out as good as Jennifer.

"I'm just boxing up stockings. I'm about to take them out—"

"Aunt Ellie. You can't do that again. It's too much."

"Respectfully, dear, I can do whatever I please. I'm not senile yet."

"I know that. Obviously. You're as sharp as a whip. But your eyesight isn't what it used to be and you're going to hurt yourself hauling those boxes around. People love your gifts and they're so grateful for them but give me your list and let me deliver them. I'll bring the kids. It'll be fun."

Eloise's end of the line went silent, the only sound her shallow breathing. Outside the window, she watched as life went on, Eliza Green (a former student) walking her yippy little white dog down the gravel drive, while her son did wheelies on a red bicycle behind her. Eliza, while a little yippy and overenthusiastic herself, was a sweet woman and had often joined Eloise on Friday night PTA meetings and the women's hiking group on Sunday.

"Aunt Ellie?"

Eloise took a breath and turned from the window. “Alright, Jennifer. I’m sure you’re right. Come by when you can and I’ll give you the list and the boxes.”

“Hey, Aunt Ellie, I’ve got to go. I have to take Abby to dance. But I love you, okay?” “I love you too, dear. Bye-bye.”

Eloise clicked the phone into its receiver and set herself into her chair, a deep sigh wracking her body. Now, her to-do list wiped clean by her well-meaning niece, she was faced with the kind of silence she had dreaded since her days at Cherryfield, where she had become accustomed to constant noise. Eloise pressed herself into her chair as if trying to disappear and the memories that she had so long tried to drown out rushed back in.

Her eyes fell on the little keepsakes of her life that were scattered about the house, sweet and painful reminders of a long life: two framed photos on the mantle, one of her and her siblings as children, squished together on the porch of their little home in Brownsville in 1925 and then the same photo recreated fifty years later, short two siblings and a scruffy brown dog. A binder tucked under the coffee table, filled with documents acquired in a fruitless search for the son she would never know. Scotch-taped to the refrigerator, countless cards from students throughout the years.

For a moment, she was no longer the frail old woman whose existence she had denied for as long as she could. For a moment, she was back in that ominous Model T on her way to God-knows where. She was that teenaged girl alone at Cherryfield again, her body strong and her mind sharp but her will wavering.

Then she was that girl again, but a little older, a little more jaded after eight years in Hell. She was a girl condemned as sinful, ruined, for reasons she could not fully understand. A woman, really, but one cheated of all the wonderful parts of becoming a woman. Robbed of her family, her adolescence, her innocence. Her child. Gifted instead with an intimate understanding of the darkest crevices of the world, with knowledge of how easy it was for a poor girl from the sticks to be cast aside by society and of what the State did with the people it deemed unworthy of personhood.

She was that woman, jolting to consciousness on the cold steel of an operating table, an ache below her waist and a desperate lump in her throat. Understanding that her consent to the Operation would allow her at last to go home—where was no longer at the risk of propagating more of her own kind, according to the State—but not quite understanding how much she was giving up.

She was that woman smiling in white on her wedding day, having buried the dark parts of herself down where nobody would find them.

The woman who learned to adopt a polite smile and an ambiguous shrug when people began asking when she would have children, to ignore the whispers about her when it became clear that she would not. Who, on a dark night when the winds howled in agony, finally broke down to Henry—the only person she ever told why she could not bear a child—and set free the thought that haunted her:

Why did the State take away from me the best years of my life and butcher me, too?

But she was a woman who counted her blessings every day and, for all the darkness that she had faced, found ways to draw out the sunshine. Who looked back at eighty-three years and did not despair so much at the losses she'd faced in her youth. Instead, she knew now that there were

new Best Days after those the State had taken and smiled at memories of little bodies wrapping themselves around her legs at the end of each school day, of building a dream home alongside a man who made her feel safe, of the smell of the pines that embraced her as she knelt in the raspberry fields, of days on the beach with her niece, of the friends she had found and the smiles she had left.

Eloise at eighty-three was a woman who was, all things considered, happy. *Eloise Wilson, 83, died Saturday, January 12, asleep in at her home in Milton.*

She was born to John and Emily Sinclair in Brownsville on August 16th, 1915, and had eight siblings (John, Robert, Margaret, Charles, Mabel, Elizabeth, George, and Ruth).

She married Henry Wilson in 1945 and the two lived together happily in the home they built together. Eloise worked for forty years as a schoolteacher and was beloved in her community, by whom she will be dearly missed. She loved children and dedicated her spare time to the

school as well as many other children's organizations in the area until her death.

Her other hobbies included fishing, exploring the woods, crochet, and collecting raspberries to make her famous raspberry jam.

Eloise and Henry had no children, but she leaves to her family and all those who knew and loved her an example of tireless love, indomitable strength, courage, hard work, and a spirit of adventure. She is predeceased by her husband, Henry Wilson, her parents, and her siblings. She leaves behind her beloved niece, Jennifer Taft, and her grandniece and nephew, Abby and Tucker.

Eloise knitted hundreds of pairs of socks each year to be delivered to local schools, community centers, and hospitals, and this year's were just finished. They will be delivered to the community in the coming weeks.