

AN ILL-TREATED VESSEL

Ann had removed her shoes—her feet often swelled in the evening—but now this silly death vigil for Johnny had become ridiculous and her ankles were going. She had sat down on the front porch lounge at eight, and now it was past eight-thirty and the only change in scenery had been Sara traipsing out and putting her ample rear end in the opposite lounge. What Ann needed to do was put her feet up, and whether Sara would care or not, or whether she might consider it rude, Ann could care less. Her shyness and primness and polite societal decorum fell to pieces at the realities of podiatric pain. Letting people take a gander at her ugly, swollen and bunioned feet had long ago become a price to be paid for her attention. Sara Karn could take a hike. Sara Karn would not be asked if she minded. Sara Karn would continue to be ignored. And anyway, the avoidance of conversation, whether enforced by one or the other, was going well, and both seemed fine with the apparent results. She lifted her legs with a slight groan and placed them on the wicker table.

Sara looked at the feet but not the person.

If Ann were serious, though, if she were a serious woman who was honest and caring and gave a damn, she would tell in detail the many horrid things Sara had just escaped. She would tell her that no matter what type of poor or boring or wasteful life she currently lived, having married into the Taylor family would have, in retrospect, shown these days to be a paradise of simplicity, freedom, and dignity. If she were a serious woman, she would speak the thoughts that swirled through her mind and crawled under

her skin, that shortened her breath and made her skin itch. If she were a serious woman, she would have long ago explained her hard and hurtful Taylor life to family and friends, and they would have been glad to hear the stories. They would have been glad she shared her life instead of watching her tighten up at the mere mentioning of southern Illinois. They would have known Ann Goraz and liked her because she was a real person. She was open. She was sincere. She had been through hard times and, unlike the multitude, came out the other side a better person....

Ann must have been doing something with her face, because Sara looked up in question. Ann gave her a well-practiced glance and Sara raised an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry?”

“I didn’t say anything,” Ann said.

Sara nodded and began to examine the skin of her forearm.

Ann sniffed in likewise response. Then she sighed. Then she said, “I understand your father was a banker?”

Ann somehow imparted disgust, intrigue, and sincerity, all the while keeping her intonation somewhat monotone. It impressed Sara enough that she instinctively gave Ann a small nod of acknowledgment before answering.

She raised her head and then spoke to the evening air. “Though calling him a banker is not quite accurate,” she said. “He ran the bank, but it was owned by Howard Winstanley. Howard owned another bank in Mt. Vernon. He ran that one, and my father ran the one here in Marion. Did you know the Winstanley family?”

“No. We had dirt floors in our house until I was five.”

Sara turned and considered the woman before her. Ann looked healthy, and it was

clear she was headstrong and sharp, but she also looked beaten down.

“Different circles,” Ann said. “I was the first in my family to have a bank account. Mother eventually did, but my father died on his money-filled mattress. Not that there was much there.”

Sara had no idea what to say. Ann was clearly making a point that Sara knew should be answered with silence, but Ann’s way of speaking—maybe the result of years in polite society—seemed to imply Sara should vocally commiserate. But the fact remained: Sara had no idea what to say.

Ann eventually sighed and resettled herself. The simple gesture again impressed Sara. How could someone simply sigh and move in their seat and have it come across as an insult?

“When I was five,” Ann said, “Dad brought home a load of salvaged planks. We were getting a floor. I was five, you understand. Do you know what I mean? I was five and I remember the moment as if it happened an hour ago. *We were getting a floor.* There’s been no moment in my life as exciting as that afternoon. Do you understand?”

Sara nodded that she did.

“And I mean kids and marriage and ... everything. We were going to become human. Inclusion, I guess is the word. I would take part ... be a part of ... I’m not explaining this very well. I’ve seen it in animals, like a dog, that’s grown up in a cage and is suddenly allowed out into a yard. The idea of this unexpected fortune hadn’t been considered. We lived in the dirt. I was a person who lived in the dirt. I was five and, God help me, I knew what living in dirt meant socially. Imagine a little girl in her one-room schoolhouse, praying not to sweat because her skin would begin to speckle from the dust. I dared not

invite a friend home or accept an invitation to a friend's house in town. I now often wonder how I knew so much about social devastations. Did I pick it up from my mother's eyes? I don't remember her communicating such feelings, but I'm sure they were there. Well, they had to be there; she too lived in dirt. I was five but could have been twenty-four.

“As time passed, we went from dirt and goats to floors and cows. Then a horse. Then a car. And then a regular house in Marion. With indoor plumbing I believed a regular life was possible. I was twenty-four-hours-a-day clean and pretty. I then married early, and then finally fell in love with Mike Goraz. For the majority of my life, I've lived with an excess of riches, and no one, ever, outside of this ugly little scab known as southern Illinois, knows of my upbringing.”

Sara thought of mentioning the trouble she had with Big Body Karn, and maybe also mentioning how she and Johnny, finding each other later in life, had fulfilled her desires for companionship. Though she was certain that time would have its way with her thoughts, she currently couldn't see ever going out on a date again. She felt she was loved-out, in a good way. And she was just about to offer a fond memory of Johnny—it being the basic reason they were sitting on the porch—when Mike came onto the porch, offering Ann a cardboard box about the size of a loaf of bread.

“Look at this,” he said. There was a joy in his face Sara couldn't help but smile at.

Ann looked from the box back to the yard and told him she didn't want to.

“Open it.”

“No.”

“You'll love this. Open it.”

Ann turned back and looked up at her husband. Sara found it funny that this Mike Goraz, this sophisticated lawyer who she had heard so many disparate things about, was just one of those boys who liked to show girls stupid things. The box would contain something moronic or gross, and Ann, just like any other girl who liked a boy, rolled her eyes and opened the box. The contents looked like cheese.

Ann put the lid back on. "It's cheese," she said.

"American cheese," Mike corrected.

"And you're going to do something important with all that cheese?"

Mike shook his head at his wife's dimness. "It's like ten pounds! I mean, here, hold it."

Now Ann completely twisted in her seat and faced her husband. "I'm having a serious discussion with Sara, and you want me to ooh and ahh over your cheese?"

"Not over the cheese itself!" Mike said, quickly exasperated. "It's that it exists. I mean come on, have you ever seen something like this? I'm just now helping Louie put away his groceries and I'm just staring at it, stunned. And he says, 'It's cheese.' Just like that. Like I didn't know what it was. 'Cheese.' Hilarious!"

"Cheese," Ann repeated. "It's almost too funny."

"You're not going to hold it?"

"No, thank you," Ann said, and twisted back in her seat. Now both Ann and Mike looked to Sara, each wearing a face that begged her to consider the ridiculousness of the other. She tried a smirk that might work for both.

"Whatever," Mike growled with disgust. He snatched away his cheese and went back inside.

After waiting the appropriate time for Mike to get inside, Ann pulled her feet off the table and twisted to face Sara full on. “This place brings out the worst in me,” she said. “I hate it here. I truly, truly hate it here.”

“I think I now understand,” Sara said. “It’s strange how you have an idea about a person.”

Ann cut her off as though Sara were not even speaking. “So I’m just going to say this. I’m just going to tell you something straight-out, and you can take it as something sour from a bitter ex-wife, or you can take it as basic information and consider the man’s death a tragedy averted. I don’t think I really care anymore, because it no longer hurts me. It’s just part of my life’s ... disappointments.”

Sara heard Nick and Peter talking from somewhere in the house and hoped to hell they were on their way to the porch. She had known for a while Ann Goraz would be involved in her life, but, of course, that was no longer the case. There was no need for Ann to tell her anything at all. They were, in fact, two strangers who were going to stay that way. This conversation was pointless and, as Sara had heard again and again, contact with the woman usually did no one any good, except Ann.

“It was about two years before Johnny was arrested on conspiracy charges—I don’t know how much you know about that, but we’ll leave it alone for right now. Anyway, I had the good fortune—or bad fortune—I guess it’s how a depressed and pregnant housewife looks at it—to listen in on a phone call Johnny made to this girl he was seeing in Kentucky. The bizarre thing was, I didn’t need to listen. I knew he was seeing this woman. Hell, he was seeing quite a few women, but it just happened I accidentally picked up the receiver and started listening. I remember thinking at the time that I might

be able to figure out what I was doing wrong. Do you know what I mean? Maybe I wasn't fulfilling his needs. I'd never slept with anyone else. I'd never kissed anyone else. At the time, I was sure it was my fault. So I listened.

"She was dumb, a bozo. It didn't make any sense to me. I guessed she was pretty, but I was pretty too. I don't know, maybe she was a different type of pretty. But then she started asking about me. He skirted the subject at first, but when she began suggesting he didn't have a wife and was just giving her the runaround, he told her I was trash.

"He told her I grew up in a shack with a dirt floor and slept with a pet goat. He told her, with a chuckle, my first clothes were unwashed potato sacks and my feet were a mess for not having a decent pair of shoes until I was ten. He then told her if he'd known I was going to stay a hillbilly, he'd have left me bent over the hay bale that first night and snuck out of the barn."

Sara again didn't know what to say, except, "There was no reason to tell me that."

Ann looked at her hands. "I don't think a man like that changes."

"My memories of Johnny are sweet and loving," Sara told her. "There was no reason to do that. What's in you to do that?"

Ann looked to Sara, to her hips, her large breasts, to her now-angry eyes. "Maybe there was no reason except continued revenge, or that I think a person should be remembered as he was in life. Maybe I just think deathbed conversions get belly laughs in heaven."

"Deathbed?"

Ann flipped her hand as if to say *whatever*.

"Wow. Okay. This isn't worth dealing with," Sara said, "so I'll just acknowledge

your hurt. I can understand you're angry, and I'm sure I would be too. But maybe for the sake of Nick and Calvin, you should realize your feelings for Johnny have nothing to do with them and only with you. He raised them the best he could, and now he's dead; we should try to forget the bad things. I think the better idea is to take the best of what he offered and see if we can't do something good with it."

Ann looked to the evening sky and smiled.

"Again," Sara said, "I don't really know you, and I don't want to demean your feelings, but I feel you are unnecessarily cruel. You pass it off as mothering, or—"

Ann cut her off again. "I guess listening into that phone conversation taught me two things: first, to never again care a fuck about what people think about you—it's too wearing and it isn't worth it. Second, to never be vulnerable, to never confide anything that can be used against you ... as in our little conversation here."

When Sara was again going to speak, Ann held up a hand. "Dear Sara, a never-been-kissed, sixteen-year-old girl who grew up in the dirt has no idea about sex. I was raped, Sara. Of course, at the time, I didn't know the word or its meaning. I do now.... So you're right; it shouldn't be about me. And maybe if you knew me better, you'd see that it usually isn't, but I'll be damned—literally damned—if it's going to be about him." Ann let a long moment pass before speaking again:

"Those three boys were not my idea. I was an ill-treated vessel. I'm sorry, but John Taylor's life deserves belly laughs."

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