

Despite Eve's frequent references to the lowly neighbors as a band of half-human, half-animal strays, they did in fact have names. Their last name sounded like Payson but upon closer inspection of their mailbox, Henry had seen it was Paysin, like basin. Eve would be deep in thought working on her dissertation up in the second floor study when shrieks would assault her from outside: "Madsin Paysin, you put that back this instant!" Or worse: "Brooklin Paysin, go help your little brothah get cleaned up, NOW! Hurry it up; your Spaghetti-Os are gettin' cold!" Eve would get up to slam her window shut only to gaze upon the remarkable junkyard behind the Paysin's house: an old Ford truck that was surely never moving again; blue tarps and broken windows tossed into a huge pile; rusty tools, shovels, baby shoes, diapers, Budweiser cans, and a sinking frayed clothesline overburdened by gigantic bras and underwear. And the worst sight of all, Mrs. Paysin's positively mind-blowing bottom. Mrs. Paysin was, shall we say, a very, very large woman. Who only wore Spandex pants. Which meant when she bent over—which she was constantly doing attempting to slap one of her ten horrid children or to pull a weed from her miserable attempt at a garden—a giant black moon would rise, one so wide that it almost blocked the entire scene from Eve's view. Which would have been welcome.

The Great War had been escalating that summer between Eve and the neighbors. Plenty of grunts and groans over the fence separating the properties, Eve's side professionally manicured with lovely flower beds, the Paysin's side littered with old tires and dog bones. One, or possibly several, of the mongrel Paysin children had been throwing Budweiser cans over the fence into Eve's garden, where she was obsessively toiling against all odds to grow a rare dahlia species. A man, possibly their father or uncle, had been sitting in a fold-up chair out front of Eve's off-street parking spot, so she had to honk at him when she tried pulling in. He always took his time. Now, as the Corolla backed out onto the street, dirt-covered Kaylob Paysin leapt out from behind a tree and flipped them the bird as they sped off, little Kaylob clutching his privates for added primal impact. Ah, neighbors.

A few minutes later, the four Pendergasts were safely seated at La Forge restaurant at an outside table under the awning overlooking the grass tennis court. Lobster rolls delivered, along with cold bottles of St. Pauli Girl beer, all was right again in the world, the Paysins out of mind. That is, until Lucy decided to bring up her latest amorous adventures.

"Mom, you really should consider dating again. Don't you miss sex?"

Albert looked like he missed the Paysins.

"Why in the world would you think I'd want another man after all those years of imprisonment with your father?" Eve puffed her Pall Mall.

"But don't you miss THE SEX?"

"Keep your voice down. Not all women enjoy being on their backs the way you apparently do," Eve looked around disgusted, exhaling smoke over her shoulder.

“I think I know what your problem is,” Lucy pushed on. “Your problem is you have repressed all your physical desires for so long that you’ve become frustrated and miserable.”

“Actually, I’ve never been happier.”

“Was Dad a lousy lay?”

“Oh, please Lucy, shut up,” Albert writhed in his seat.

“Well, we can’t all be eternal virgins like you,” she shot back at her brother.

Eve had become even more dangerous now that she had crossed over from mental patient to budding psychologist. “Lucy, have you ever considered that your promiscuity is a symptom of some larger issue? That possibly you are a little too desperate for attention, which is why you throw yourself at every man who crosses your path?”

Lucy giggled. “There is nothing wrong with intimacy, Mom. God, you’re such a prude.”

“Well, if you must know, I found sex to be positively revolting.”

“See! I knew it. How many lovers have you actually had Mom? Maybe you’ve never been with a man who knew what he was doing. Have you ever even orgasmed?”

Henry blushed. Albert groaned. Mrs. Astor at the nearby table asked to be moved indoors.

“Lucy, don’t be disgusting. There was, in fact, a man I very much loved before I met your father.”

“Why didn’t you marry him, then?” Henry asked.

“It was complicated. I prefer not to discuss this with you all,” Eve bit into her lobster roll and emitted a look of pure pleasure. “It’s so wonderful to be eating at La Forge again!”

Lucy would not let it go. “Food is a very poor substitute for sex, Mom. Aren’t you concerned about how overweight you’ve become?”

That hurt. She reloaded.

“If you ask me, what you really need is a *good lay*. That’ll take off a few pounds.”

Albert was becoming interested in the stats part of this sex business. “Lucy, just exactly how many men have you slept with?”

Lucy looked thoughtful and started counting on her right hand. “One, two, three . . . let me see . . . Gerry, Luke, Joe, Mohammed, Cameron, Alan, Shaquille . . . seven, eight . . . oh, I’d say around fifty or so.”

“Fifty! Why you slut!” Albert recoiled in a look mixing disgust with intrigue.

“Actually, if you count the various women and threesomes it’s probably more like seventy.”

“Good grief,” Henry mumbled from deep within his stoned funk.

Eve looked as if she was preparing to bring out the heavy artillery, which is precisely what she did. “Lucy, let’s talk about *your problems* for a moment. Why exactly do you suppose you choose to share your body so freely with every Joe Blow who picks up your scent? I wonder why you cannot manage to

associate with someone suitable from your own social class. To enter into a relationship that lasts longer than *one night*.”

“You mean the way you did, marrying up?” Lucy shot back. “God, Mom, not everyone is a social climber like you.”

“My marriage to your father at least displayed some class and judgment on my part.”

“You mean the fact you got pregnant and then married, in *that* order? Yeah, that’s totally classy.”

“Lucy. Stop, please!” Henry would forever be the family peacemaker.

“Considering I was the outcome of that happy marriage, I fail to understand why you didn’t have an abortion,” Albert was always searching for the truth.

“Albert, really!” Eve looked apologetic as Mrs. Astor huffed off for a corner of the restaurant shaking her head in horror. Clearly more than one neighborhood had gone to hell.

“I’m serious,” Albert continued. “You and Ned are so different, and you’re Jewish and he’s preppy, I just don’t see why anyone thought having me was a good reason to get married. And now look—you’ve got the proof right in front of you!”

“Stop, you know I love you all very much. Times were different back then.”

“You even love me?” Lucy asked.

“Of course, I love you all,” Eve replied.

“Ah, but you don’t actually *like* me!” Lucy went digging where she shouldn’t.

The lack of an answer was revealing.

“Anyway, Mom, I’m being totally serious when I tell you I think you should find a lover before you’re too old. You’re still an attractive woman. An attractive *fat* woman,” Lucy chortled.

“Thanks all the same, but I’m done with men and very happy to be financially independent. Enough already. Now, how about some dessert?” she hailed the waitress. They ordered crème brûlée, chocolate pot de crème, blueberry cheesecake, and a lemon tart. Eve sat looking highly disappointed with her cheesecake and summoned the waitress.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“The menu said this was New York cheesecake. It tastes more like Milwaukee cheesecake.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. It does come from New York. I’ve seen the box it ships in.”

Eve galumphed. “Yes, possibly from Buffalo but I was hoping for that creamy, signature cheesecake that comes from *New York City*.” Henry and Albert slumped into their seats. Lucy chuckled. “I guess your cheesecake is on par with your sex life.”

“Stop it, young lady!”

The waitress looked lost. “Would you like me to take it back and get you something else, ma’am?”

“No, no. I’ll suffer through it. But you should stop calling it New York cheesecake when in fact it most certainly is not.”

“Mom, are you sure you’re not just disappointed with everyone and everything?” Henry asked.

Eve lit up a Pall Mall, exhaling over her right shoulder. “If you must know, I spent a good deal of my therapy exploring this pervasive disappointment you describe. And yes, I do tend to be more negative than I would like. I have been treated for depression, after all. But at least I’m working on my problems, whereas Lucy seems determined to ignore any attempt to engage in a serious discussion about her own areas for awareness and improvement.”

They were interrupted by a middle-aged woman. “Hello, Henry. Are you having a good summer?”

“Oh, yes. Hello, Mrs. Bennet. This is my mother, brother, and sister.”

There was a lengthy pause as they all waited for Henry to introduce the mystery woman. Lucy finally broke the awkward silence. “And you are?”

“Damn, I’m sorry,” Henry snapped back. “This is Mrs. Bennet, she’s my English teacher at Thornhill.”

“And also a novelist,” she added with pride.

“Oh, my! A novelist!” It was difficult to tell whether Eve was impressed or mocking her. The woman spoke in a hushed voice full of self-importance.

“Yes, my debut novel was recently published by Random House,” the woman went on. She was nodding and bobbing, teeming with personal self-congratulation.

“How wonderful!” Eve’s tone was shifting toward derision if indeed it had ever been positioned anywhere near flattery. “Do tell. What’s it about?”

“It concerns a young English lady who must choose between true love and making a proper, suitable marriage.”

“Oh, my, what a truly *original* idea!” Eve was revving up her engines. “And you say your last name is Bennet?” Eve exhaled a condescending flood of smoke into Henry’s face, winking at him. “Well, aren’t we so fortunate to have our little Henry being taught by such a special young lady! An author, my, my.”

Mrs. Bennet, the newly anointed author, was too in love with herself to realize she was being mocked, and continued undeterred, leaning in toward Eve speaking in a barely audible voice. “Yes, the novel was pre-empted in a *bidding war* by one of the top editors at Random House.”

“Well, isn’t that simply grand,” Eve shot Henry another knowing wink. “Please, write the title down on this napkin so I can be sure to pick up a copy.”

Mrs. Bennet beamed as she jotted down the title, thanking them all and encouraging Henry to complete his summer reading assignments.

Eve did her best not to bubble over in hysterics, hacking into her napkin as the promising young author strode off. Once she was beyond earshot, Eve let out an audible gasp that startled those nearby.

“What is it?” Henry returned from some distant region.

“Good grief! Your English teacher has written a novel about a young woman who must choose between true love and finding a proper man to marry, and the title is *Proudly Sensible*.”

“Point?” Henry looked lost.

“Dear, let’s hope that expensive boarding school you attend requires you to read Jane Austen at some point. I assume there are other English teachers there besides Mrs. Bennet? Hope?”

Albert turned to Lucy. “I hear you visited Grandpa’s former servants Louise and Mary in Florida over your spring break. How are they enjoying all that newfound wealth?”

“Oh . . . my . . . God! You should have seen their home. They live in this lavish old Florida-style mansion on Captiva Island. I barely recognized them. Mary is *thin* and Louise has a polo playing boyfriend from West Palm Beach. And he’s white, wears an ascot, and adores her. We hung out by the pool all day. They have Cuban servants. I think they’re homosexuals and man can they cook! Have you ever had a Cubano sandwich?”

“No,” Albert replied, looking thoughtful. “You know, there has been recent research out of Harvard pointing to the likelihood that mulattos have superior genetic make-ups to the rest of the population.

“Say what?” Henry looked lost.

“That’s bullshit,” Eve shot back. “What kind of quack conducted that research?”

“No, it’s true,” Albert continued. “And if you were able to understand the science behind the study you would realize it makes sense.”

Lucy continued. “Mary and Louise really want to see you, Henry. You should visit for spring break. You were always their favorite.”

Henry sat up straight in his seat. “I might just do that. I’m not sure if I told you I finally tracked down our Jewish relatives from Canada. There’s a branch in South Florida.”

“Good God, really?” Eve spritzed beer from her lips.

“Yeah, I did a bunch of research based on some information Grandpa gave me before he died, plus what you told me after I bludgeoned it out of you, and was able to locate two branches: one that emigrated back in 1882, escaping the pogroms of the Russian Pale; the other from Germany during the Second World War.”

“What in God’s name is the Russian Pale?” Albert’s lack of knowledge about Jewish history was revealing given he knew so much about everything else.

“The Russian Pale was the area the Russians set aside for the Jews in the nineteenth century. Ghettoes. In 1881, Alexander II was murdered and mass hysteria falsely blamed a Jewish girl. All hell

broke loose and the Jews were once again tragically dispersed around the globe. Our maternal Rabinowitz ancestors then fled Russia for Germany, and their children fled the Second World War and came through Ellis Island on their way to Montreal, and now I've tracked down your Uncle Murray in Fort Myers."

"Rabinowitz?" Eve looked up, quizzically. "My ancestors were Miskins."

"I know, but I discovered the Miskins married the Rabinowitzs and the family I tracked down in Florida is like our second cousins, or something close to it."

"Uncle Murray?" Lucy giggled

"When did Henry become the little scholar?" Albert looked perplexed.

"Excuse me, but I wanted to know the truth about where we came from. Unlike the rest of you, who prefer to pretend we're not Jewish. They've invited me to visit over spring break and I figure where Captiva and Fort Myers are so close, I'll also visit Mary and Louise."

"I'd rather you not go digging into our family closet," Eve looked uncomfortable.

"Why?" Lucy asked. "I've actually been thinking about doing a semester abroad in Israel. Going to help out on a kibbutz."

Albert snorted. "How? By killing off all the Arabs with gonorrhea?"

"Funny, asshole," Lucy kicked him.

Eve stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray. "I don't know. It's just all that therapy I did, all the time digging into my past. Looking back is just so terribly exhausting."

Lucy was skeptical. "Are you sure you don't already know about your family and are shielding us from them, either because you're anti-Semitic or trying to protect us?"

It was the question they all wanted to ask. There was a prolonged silence.

"I am not anti-Semitic," Eve replied. "I am not a fan of people in general, a fact I realize you all appreciate."

"I just naturally assumed you didn't want others to know we are Jewish because you feared for our lives. Given the history of Jew-hating around the globe, I could understand that," Albert chimed in.

"There is truth in that," Eve replied. "But you are in fact half-Jews, just to clarify. And your father and I certainly did not raise you to be Jewish. Now let's get the check and go shopping!" She had had enough of this conversation.

"No, we're Jewish because *you're Jewish*," Lucy wasn't going to let it go. "I'm glad Henry has tracked down our relatives. You can count me in if you visit them, Henry."

They were in a jovial mood. The lobster rolls had been fabulous, and Eve had eagerly dispatched two St. Pauli Girls (and one budding author). They crossed the street to Almac's Supermarket to buy groceries for the week. Eve let them each pick out whatever they wanted, so they would be eating very well that week.

Steak. Crab. Swordfish. Fresh garden greens. Wine. Beer. Albert was surprised she could afford to live so luxuriously, but Eve assured them she had done very well in the stock market that year. "Henry has been a good little spy and told me everything your father has been investing in. I shorted them all and made over \$15,000 this year!" Eve looked happy, so free, and the children could see it. They were very happy for her and in a sense were meeting their new mother for the first time, the reconstructed improved version following years of therapy and life changes.

They were in rare good spirits as the Toyota rounded the corner and approached the paved driveway, unaware the unfortunate BAG INCIDENT was about to change their summer and beyond. They parked the car and began bringing the groceries inside. Henry and Lucy were in the kitchen when they heard screams out front. The unknown older man who lived next door was pounding Albert with a baseball bat. "Just who the fuck do you think you are, asshole!" the man landed a couple of blows to Albert's shins. "Who you callin' an ignorant hick?" Albert was far too weak and removed from the physical world to defend himself. Eve raced over in a rage and started bashing the man with her overstuffed handbag, which had a large metal clasp on the front. "You worthless piece of shit, get your filthy hands off my son!" she wailed away. "You white trash jerk, you have no idea what a brilliant person you're assaulting!"

"Fuck you, twat," he swung the bat at her while Albert limped off for the porch.

Eve continued flailing away in a rage, tears streaming down her cheeks, as Kaylob, Madsin, River, Brooklin, and the entire Paysin family descended upon her, armed with plungers, rakes, and headless Barbie dolls. Eve landed a blow to little Kaylob who tumbled backwards onto the curb, hitting his head, screaming as blood gushed from his forehead. They all stopped except for Eve who went over and whacked Kaylob one more time with her purse: "You stupid brat, you can't even spell your goddamned name right! Go read the Bible, assuming you can even read!" She finally backed off and ran inside visibly shaken. A few minutes later a police car and ambulance arrived on the scene. A small crowd had gathered out front. "That crazy lady was beatin' on my Kaylob!" Mrs. Paysin was holding a frying pan. The police managed to get all the Paysins back inside their house and little Kaylob was carted off in the ambulance. A police report was filed, pictures taken, lawyers hired. The WAR was on.