

Box of Candy

But you *can* see a mark, oh, you can see a mark all right, more like a crevice in my plaster where Billy's swordplay took its gouge. Billy with Papa's navy saber, swinging it, swinging it in the hall, coming up at my skirt with it. A scare, a scare after all his daiquiris. Good thing for Billy Papa never saw some smoking-jacketed stranger picking up his inlaid silver saber, some stranger slashing at the walls. And the bad job with the plaster and the paper.

Kneeling close on her stiff knees, she pushes a thick long thumbnail down along the surface, burnishing bubbles from the new wallpaper. She sips her sugared whiskey, glass back carefully to the floor, flattening the paper until the light begins to fade and she can no longer distinguish bubble from flower. Hem of her dress tight above her knees, a crease in the skin, she can see it, follow it with her finger, even in this light.

Greta has left her something in the dining room, the plates covered to keep warm but not warm now, the pork tepid and hard, the peas shriveled, dry and cool, brioche that won't take the hard butter, except in tiny piece by piece forced roughly with the knife.

A five-dollar whore, said Billy that time, laughed about the boys she keeps around, him and the others, and she laughed in a way and for spite she conjured up Archie, a boy much prettier, not forty even, much prettier than Billy but with a scar that could have come from a saber, like in fencing school in Germany like he told her, like Archie told her. I can generally depend on Archie for a Saturday night, a performance from some book he's brought with crumbly leather binding, then bad piano, bolt up rigid Archie banging it out like Liszt, tie still tight on his neck, only later opening the way for his handout, and his hand *is* out, cross his palm with silver, a few bob, he says, like that and I to Archie, tell me dollars and I'll give you some, fingers at my waist with

his Archie kind of promise, and I always promise too, don't I and we both make good, it's true, we both make good.

Feet straining in her satin shoes she ups and back to the kitchen, to the icebox and its lemon squashes, sugary things for Archie, but a better dessert than Greta's old cakes, gone sudden from crumbles to plaster, neither phase much better than the other, Greta banging around upstairs awhile ago, room to room, but finally settled in hers and asleep so early. Just as well.

She takes a new whiskey to the couch and the coffee tables there and the fine wooden box from Billy, some kind of apology for flaying the wall, even if lately a gift to *him* no doubt from some grand lady, yes, all right, *another* grand lady, younger than me I'll never know, where it was rings and brooches and such that filled all the little spaces in all the little fold-out levels, what happened to them all, Billy, and he'd never say but smiled as he pulled it a little open to show how all the sixty rectangles and squares now held pretty chocolates in stiff accordion paper, not stiff enough, Billy, to keep the velvet clean of chocolate inside the old mahogany box. Those square milks are marzipan, they are, and just one now, thank you, Billy, and lifted lightly between the tips of two pink nails, and my sip to go along, just one warm sip to take you down with.

Chewing behind prim lips and taking another square with soft berry inside, maybe give some color to the paste, something real under the blush, my face gone so soft it folds on itself like heavy cream. And maybe just one of these from another velvet square on the second shelf, folding out where a cameo may have rested in a mahogany box more the size for Papa's bass lures than for jewelry.

A scramble of tires on the driveway brings her up and to the glass, licking her finger to touch away a crescent smear of chocolate at the corner of her mouth, three long steps to the heavy baize curtain and a surreptitious peek. Highlights off, motor off, white, a rental. Tallish from behind, but leans in that way it's not Archie, or maybe not, but a rich jacket and tie, past her range of vision now if she ever could have seen in the way dark comes so fast under those damn oaks. The open window gives her sounds of hesitation, as if the flagstones didn't direct so obviously to the door, even with no lights burning. Who is this? Who refuses to find the door?

Through the fisheye it's a boy, no, and opening, the moustache makes him young and there may be something in his hair – dye mixed with brilliantine and he's thin in his rich coat and in the door already and it's suddenly the picture she's seeing, he's the snapshot blown up on the wall every morning, upstairs, fading but copies in the drawer when that one goes to white, and there we are and so smiling and so dancing. It's this boy and Jane he says all respectable but then it's Jane and he's around me, arms tight as his thin arms can be, him still so little but now his arms can't make it all around me like then.

Back to respectable and shy and was that all right to do, I hope it was, already toeing the fringe with eyes at her, then the floor, then up again and the little ripe fruits of my eyes, sunk deep in so much face. He's the beautiful boy and he's saying oh why Jane.

They're off from the door and in and past the leather of the hallway walls so tooled and deep and the passageway with the damaged plaster and the bubbled wallpaper and taking him into the smell of it all and then with me on the cushions and the first thing is with my hands, I can't stop or tell them no as I reach for the box.

And she folds out a wooden side of it, the shelves angling elaborately on their complex scissor hinges and he leans to look, utters oh, tackle box, and she's no oh no of course, why did I, so dim of me, but take one and I fish him out the best of my marzipans, it's a drink I should have offered, I'm sorry, and what will it, and how did you find me?

And he circles his wrist one way and the ice rattles and circles the other way. And she has the time to sip twice before he tells her, Jane, you've never left.

There it is, the same, he's marveling how time stays quiet in a house like this and fingering woodwork and opening a door and touching the backs of two fingers onto the texture of her jaw just at the ear and finally opening a drawer or two; there were playing cards here then, there was crochet work, there were keys and handkerchiefs. I see you every morning, she says, and I know you do, he says like that, I know you do. He can't stay at any distance, and she can't, he's so warm for a man so thin and when they dance to the records he's found he's warm as she is and holds her tight almost as

she holds him and it's dark still under the trees and cool on the flagstones, just a loan he tells me again and holds me and slips it in the jacket and then he's back out the driveway.

And without telling me, the sun's come up, and I'm out there, and Greta's got her head through the window upstairs and calling something about the dew and how cold it has to be.