

The Quick-Change Artist

*Forest Lodge
Glen Allen, Virginia
July 1928*

VANGIE AND HER brother Luke are fishing at Hidden Lake in the middle of the night. It's almost the same as day for Luke, who is blind, totally and utterly, his eyeballs having been removed long ago by Dr. Winfrey to prevent a fever and infection from spreading to his brain.

To Vangie, Luke is a slim presence on the bank, a shadow within darkness, casting out his line. They have done this many times. Sometimes they swim, careful not to make noise, afraid they'll be banished by the two sisters, Miss Amy and Miss Dorothy, who own the five lakes and the hotel. In the distance, Vangie can see tiny lights: the flames of candles strapped onto croquet wickets so hotel guests can play the game into the night. She attached the candles herself, at Miss Amy's direction.

"This lake's drying up," Luke says. "All of 'em are."

Vangie hardly hears him. She's lying on her back, propped up on her elbows. She's a chambermaid at the hotel. It's only because she's eighteen and in love that she can stay up half the night yet work the next day. She's in love with the magician who performs evenings and Saturday afternoons at the hotel. He is Vangie's lover, but she's afraid he might have other lovers, too. He's on her mind all the time, like a song.

Luke tugs at his line. He slips away often from the Home for the Blind, where he lives and goes to school, to visit with Vangie and their Grammah. He and Vangie have played in the hotel gymnasium at three in the morning, jumping rope, vaulting over a leather hurdle, swaying on rings suspended from the high ceiling, and swinging Indian clubs to make their arms strong. Now Luke brings in his fish, which flaps silver as he drags it through the water. He picks the hook out of its gills and sets it free. "I'm going soon," he says. "I'm sleepy."

"All right," Vangie says, wishing she were beautiful. She should go home herself, back to the little house where Grammah sleeps with her hair curled up in rags. If Vangie were beautiful, she believes, the magician, whose name is Jolly Erdos ("say air-dish," he always says) might train her to be a quick-change artist, waltzing onto the stage in a blue gown, then spinning once, twice, in the haze of smoke rising up in a scrim from the footlights, and lo and behold, she's wearing a yellow dress instead. Jolly has described quick-change but will not say how it's done. He will never tell his secrets. He calls tricks "effects." She has described the tricks to Luke, hoping he can figure them out, but he is baffled, too. Maybe it's impossible for a boy blind since age nine to picture a dogwood tree sprouting from a teacup in Jolly's hand, its limbs growing until it's a real tree, with buds unfurling into blossoms before the whole thing withers away, its limbs flopping

over Jolly's arm. Then Jolly rolls it all up and stuffs it back into the teacup, covering it with a scarf. When he raises the scarf, a golden toad sits in the cup, breathing so that Vangie can see the motion of its tiny throat when Jolly strides to the edge of the stage.

Luke's face always glows when Vangie describes the toad. He has asked many questions: Does Jolly allow anybody to pet it? Does it try to hop away? Where did Jolly get it?

Luke is jostling Vangie's shoulder. Dew has crept through her dress to her skin, cool and damp. From the hotel yard, she hears the croquet players' laughter and the *thwack* of mallets striking balls. "I must've fallen asleep," she mumbles, rubbing her eyes.

"What are you going to do, Vangie?" Luke asks, as he has asked since they were little.

"What do you think? Go home. Go to bed."

"I mean forever. What'll you do?"

She wishes she were in bed already, with the sweet breeze blowing over the sheets. She picks out stars she knows: the Pleiades, a bright, blurred cluster so far away. She learned about stars from reading a book in the hotel library. "I wish I could marry Jolly," she says. There. She's kept it a secret from everybody, for so long, that now she feels a rush of joy just saying Jolly's name. She imagines Jolly as a farmer, right here in Glen Allen, pitching gold hay onto a wagon, and herself the farmer's bride.

Luke is silent for a while. "And then what?"

"I'd go to all the places he goes and help him with his shows. I help him already."

"With his clothes, you mean."

"Yes." It's her job to press the black swallowtail coat Jolly wears for performances, to shine his shoes and brush his top

hat. Jolly made her promise not to examine the coat, but of course she has gone through every stitch and seam, finding only a few extra pockets where you might expect them to be, and they're always empty: not a coin or a feather. She has slipped the coat on over her dress, buttoned it debonairly, and swung her arms back and forth with a flourish so that its long tails part over her behind. She loves the smell of sweat that the ironing brings out. Jolly is not a big man, and the coat strains across her chest. She always irons the coat gently and stuffs the sleeves with paper. The other maids resent her for being chosen to take care of his room, his things. A colored girl gets to care for the rabbits and doves which he employs in his effects. The tiny golden toad lives in a bowl of water with pebbles to climb upon. The creatures are kept in clean cages on a sleeping porch off Jolly's third-floor room.

"Was it a full house tonight?" Luke asks, using a phrase they both relish.

"Oh yes," says Vangie. She stands up. "Afterwards, so many women were trying to get backstage that the sheriff had to block their way." She had thought that the sheriff was handsome; the thought was a betrayal of Jolly. As she and Luke turn away from the lake, she asks, "Where are you sleeping tonight?" Sometimes he sleeps in the woods. Vangie doesn't like to think of him out there, with the owls swooping over him, the trees so thick and dark. Dr. Winfrey and the headmaster at the Home for the Blind would be furious if they knew.

Even by moonlight, she can read the expression of his mouth, his forehead, cheeks, and dark glasses. He looks stubborn.

"Come on home," she says. "Grammah's got fresh eggs and butter. Breakfast will be so good. It's so dumb they make you stay at that school."

Grammah has fought with Dr. Winfrey about this. Dr. Winfrey insists that students live at the school, “for safety’s sake,” he says. Luke is the only local student. The others come from all parts of Virginia, from Roanoke, Winchester, Christiansburg, Culpeper. From Toano, Poquoson, Falmouth, Chatham. Many, like Luke, are poor, sent on a scholarship from a church. Luke’s sponsor is Dr. Winfrey. Luke goes for free.

“I don’t mind school that much,” says Luke.

The hotel yard is empty when she and Luke reach it, the wicket candles burnt to nubbins. Vangie smells whiskey from the juleps the players drink. In the morning she’ll find glasses with mint and melted ice stuck in the crotches of the oak trees.

“We’re frying chicken tomorrow,” she tells Luke, “for the parade. I’ll bring you some.” She reaches out to hug him good-night. She knows he isn’t coming home. When she embraces him, he’s shaking, in deep, seismic waves.

“What’s the matter?” She grips his arms. “Are you sick? Oh Luke, come on home. It’s too hot to sleep in the woods, and won’t the skeeters be bad?”

“I’m fine,” he says, and the shaking calms. He reaches in his pocket and pulls out some money. “Give this to Grammah,” he says. He makes a little money caning chairs. The Home for the Blind has a workshop where the best students get to learn caning and piano tuning. There’s even an airy, high-ceilinged studio for sculpting, complete with a potter’s wheel.

Vangie takes the money. Luke turns from her, and then she’s alone on the path going back to her house. She looks back but doesn’t see him. Only once did he let her examine the pits where his eyes used to be. His easy getting around

always astonishes Vangie, Grammah, and everybody else. No cane: he can sense when the way is clear, he always says, and when it's not.

She's so tired that she's falling asleep already, though she's on her feet and walking the half-mile back to her house. She bets Jolly's still awake, lying flat on his bed with his bright black eyes open in the darkness. It's a torment to wonder if she's just his daytime girl and he has others at night. It's his stories that have reeled her in, more than passion itself: stories of his gypsy life, strange and brilliant as lightning, and the magic, which she would love to learn.

Then her vision turns ghastly. She sees Jolly dying, burning inside out with fever, his swallowtail coat flung off and crumpled on the floor like a crow. She sees Dr. Winfrey baffled, checking Jolly's pulse while he times it on his gold pocket watch. Jolly's chin juts out as if he's jumping off a cliff. His eyes are closed, and he is sunken into himself.

In terror, she plunges forward on the path. The harder she fights the picture, the clearer it is, as if she is watching the scene right in front of her. She smells a salty odor like the scent of the seashells he uses in some of his tricks, only stronger. Maybe it's the smell of tears, her own and other women's. The vision brings her the hotel yard full of parked automobiles, silent with their headlamps on, and in every car is a woman, weeping, waiting for news.

She bursts through the door of her house. Grammah never locks it. She thinks she will faint, or vomit. In bed, she prays to push the vision away. She falls asleep fighting it.

FORTY CHICKENS to cut up and fry, six pans of cobbler to bake. Miss Amy, the older and wilder of the two sisters who own the hotel, is talking about breasts. "She's got pendulums,"

she says, pointing to her sister Dorothy, “and I’ve got fried eggs.”

Vangie laughs. She has never heard anybody talk the way Miss Amy does. Her pretty sister, Miss Dorothy, is always pouting and put-upon. Dorothy likes to remind everybody that she is a widow, her sister an old maid. Before they came here from Worcester, Massachusetts, and bought the hotel from a man named Claude Revelle, they had never been to the South.

“Faithless and mean, every one of ’em,” Miss Amy says of the men she has loved. Her cleaver comes down smartly on a chicken back, splitting it.

“I shouldn’t have to do this!” Miss Dorothy complains.

“We all have to work,” her sister says. “Even you, Miss High and Mighty.”

Miss Amy has corralled chambermaids, washerwomen, and cooks, ten women including herself and her sister. Each must cut up four chickens. Vangie doesn’t mind. Miss Amy made them all wash their hands in front of her, in the big sink. The head cook is dumping flour and cornmeal into a big bowl, her brown arm shining as she shakes salt into the mixture.

“It’s an easy life,” Miss Amy declares, her cleaver flashing, “when all you have to do is chop four chickens.”

The old veterans, who will eat the chicken, are already gathered in the parlor. They’re making a day of it, with lectures in the morning. The first is on “Progress on Wartime Diseases,” given by Dr. Winfrey. Vangie finishes cutting up her chickens and goes to lean close to the parlor door, hearing the words *erysipelas*, *gangrene*, *pyaemia*, *dysentery*. Dr. Winfrey asks the men what other ills they suffered in the war, and Vangie hears a chorus of barks and creaks as respondents call out *catarrh*, *mumps!* *Scrofula*, *camp itch*, *measles*, *typhoid!*

It has been sixty-three years since the Civil War. Vangie wonders how it feels to be as old as the veterans, to have fought and to have had those diseases, to have lived through other wars since then. Grammah was born the year the war ended.

A stock-and-bond broker from Richmond will give the second talk of the day, "Investing to Make the Most of Your Money." The broker waits on a settee in the hallway, fussing with papers. He tells Vangie, "Bring me a Coca-Cola, coldest you've got."

Vangie welcomes the chance to stick her arm deep into the frosty bin in the back of the kitchen. The cold air swirls up into her hair. She lifts out a bottle, uncaps it, and takes it to the man in the hall. Miss Amy's already there, snapping a nickel out of the man's fingers.

"I'm a damyankee," Miss Amy says. "I count every cent."

The man stares at her open-mouthed. She sits down beside him and says, "Now tell me about these investments of yours."

Vangie can't help but chuckle. In her head, she's always marrying people off, coupling them like dolls: Miss Amy and this stockbroker, never mind that he's years younger than she is; Miss Dorothy and Mr. Shippen, a lawyer who helped arrange the sale of the hotel; or maybe Miss Dorothy and Dr. Winfrey. Dr. Winfrey, a widower, lives at the hotel.

She hasn't seen Jolly today. He usually sleeps late. She guesses that he was one of the croquet players last night, with a beautiful, scandalous woman named Helen Revelle, whose husband sold the hotel to Miss Amy and Miss Dorothy. Helen Revelle and her husband are divorced, and Helen rents a large suite at the hotel. Vangie knows that if Jolly falls in love with Helen Revelle, she may as well give up. She can

never compete with a black-haired beauty who spent months in a Kentucky cave being cured of TB. She loves to hear Helen talk about the patients in their nightclothes, in their beds far underground, taunting the tourists in headlamps and cave-crawling boots: "Welcome to hell. Pull up a bed and stay a while!"

Vangie feels sluggish from the heat and sick from love. A thousand thoughts of Jolly are making her sick. She looks for him on the porch. Often he's there in a rocking chair, holding court, but not today. She might go knock on his door. That was how they started, when she knocked and he invited her in and offered her round yellow sweets from Spain.

"These are *yemas*," he had said, "made of candied egg yolk and lemon."

The candy tasted sour and strange. She spat it into her hand, and Jolly laughed. He dragged a trunk from his closet and lifted several jars from it, jars containing horrible slimy snakelike creatures that pressed against the glass, thin whitish ribbons or thick gray coils with suction cups. He said they were tapeworms which he got at a stockyard. He said, "I used to claim they'd been taken out of people's stomachs, and then I'd sell them a jar of special tonic." He laughed, then reached for Vangie and kissed her with light, stinging kisses while his birds whirred on the sleeping porch, lively silhouettes with fanlike wings.

She decides she won't go to his room, now. She has always been the one to knock; he has not even had to come looking for her, and afterward, she always rises from his bed and goes back to work, while he stays there sleeping.

Already, people are crowding onto the hotel verandah, staking out rocking chairs and railings as the best seats from which to watch the parade. The old Confederates will march

and then eat their fried chicken. They'll have the cobbler too, and pimento cheese sandwiches, potato salad, devil's food cake, and lemonade.

Chicken: the glorious fried scent leads Vangie back to the kitchen. Not until she gets Miss Amy's permission does she put some into a basket covered with a towel. Miss Amy has a soft spot for Luke.

Walking up Mountain Road, she eats a drumstick, tossing the bone into the ditch and licking her fingers. She can see the glimmer of Castle Lake from the road. What was it Luke said about the lakes drying up? She pictures them parched to deep cups, filled with leaves, rustling and sifting, swallowing her up as she struggles to swim through the leaves, dry leaves crawling with spiders and ready to catch on fire. Her mother and father died in a fire soon after Luke was born. Vangie is terrified of fire. She burned a pan of popcorn one time and screamed so loud, the neighbors came. Her father gave her her fanciful name: Evangeline, after a long-ago girl who lived in the woods.

It's fear she feels as the chicken bone settles down in the hissing ditch, grasshoppers and katydids crying out around her and springing up in the dry field grass. She cut her hand on ditch grass once, reaching for a piece of shiny tin. The grass was knife-sharp; her blood was red script on her palm. She was amazed: cut not by tin but by grass.

Fear, and why? She's in love, she's got fried chicken for her brother, and there will be a parade to celebrate the Fourth of July, though the old men say they're remembering Gettysburg, and never mind that they lost.

The Home for the Blind sits on a low rise, plain as a jail.

He's not in the dormitory, the long room with the bunk beds; not in the classroom where students look up from their Braille spellers when she knocks on the door and steps inside

with her voice rising; not in workshop or studio, kitchen or yard.

“We haven’t seen him since yesterday,” the children tell her. The teacher says, “We thought he was with you and your Grammah.”

The headmaster comes out of his office. “I have called the sheriff,” he says.

They’re all staring at her. Nobody can stare like a blind child.

“We have to go through this place from top to bottom,” Vangie says and is amazed when they do it—teacher, headmaster, students from the tiny ones to those nearly grown. The students search by calling and feeling, patting the Home down like Grammah pats pie dough. No Luke, though feathers flutter from turned-over mattresses and the hallways echo with the thumps of closet doors flung wide.

The sheriff arrives, a young man with blue eyes whose face looks like he is about to laugh, but his words come out serious. To Vangie, he says, “I remember you from the show last night. Isn’t that something, how women go for that little foreign fellow! Now when did you last see your brother?”

“We went fishing last night,” she says.

She realizes her hands are empty. Where did she put that basket of fried chicken? She must have set it down when they all searched the school. They’re in the studio with her—sheriff, headmaster, students, two teachers. Somebody has sculpted a mermaid, white plaster with a chunky, scaly tail, painted green. It has breasts. Vangie can’t believe this was allowed here, the making of this beautiful creature with breasts that look so real. Its head has plaster ringlets of hair. She gazes from the mermaid to the sheriff and says, “What if somebody took my brother?”

“A kidnapping?” The sheriff’s eyebrows shoot up. “Have you gotten a ransom note?”

“No,” Vangie says, floundering. “What if he drowned?”

“We’ll drag the lakes,” the sheriff says, “but not till we search at your Grammah’s house.”

The headmaster looks at her keenly and says, “He ran off, didn’t he. Does he dislike it here?”

She’s glad she’s able to tell him, “He doesn’t mind it. He said so.” She herself has lain on Luke’s bunk bed during visiting hours, testing it out, seeing how it feels to lie so close to the ceiling, to imagine sleeping among so many others in the long, narrow dormitory.

She feels sick with fear and dread, but she only wants him to be happy. *Run, Luke, run. Oh Luke, run, run . . .* The blind students, surrounding her, are radiant with borrowed adventure.

“We’ll find him,” the sheriff declares and then says, as if to himself, “Who could ever believe this, that a boy with no eyes could run away?” He tells Vangie to get in his car, that he will drive her home. Why, he bets they will find Luke there.

The sheriff’s car is a wonder, swift and black, and he drives too fast. When Vangie hangs her arm out the window, the wind burns it. She hears some kind of commotion and opens her mouth to ask the sheriff if he hears it too, but he’s frowning at the road, all haste and hurry.

They turn the corner onto Mountain Road and run smack into the old men’s parade, hurtling right into the marching column. Vangie feels the bump of bodies, sees men tossed sideways like crabs, rolling away from the car. The old soldiers buck and yell. The sheriff stands on his brakes, and Vangie screams. The car stops so hard she falls forward, hitting her head. For a moment, she doesn’t hear anything, and

then sounds come faintly, growing louder as she opens her eyes.

All around her, the old men are firing rifles and pistols into the air. She feels a hand on her arm, feels herself being turned around in the seat and lifted out so she can stand. Dust rises curtain-like around the car. Somewhere, horses are whinnying. She can't see; the sun's brilliant in her eyes. The sheriff is beside the car, hollering. Who was it who lifted her out of the car? A man steps forward, an old man in a gray jacket and cavalry pants. A drum beats, a cornet blares, somebody's honking the horn of the sheriff's car, on and on and on, and somehow all of it makes a tune.

The old man speaks: "Would you dance with me, miss?"

He reaches for her hands and puts them on his shoulders. His uniform feels soft as moths beneath her palms, but he's strong. They whirl in the dust while others cheer. She hears a gleeful voice call, "Nobody's killed, Sheriff! Don't you worry!"

The old man is light on his feet, and she follows his steps, dancing some reel in the road. She remembers dancing with her mother as a tiny girl, when her mother taught her how to clean a room: you do your end and I'll do mine, and we'll twirl when we meet in the middle.

Old soldiers are pressing close and clapping as her partner spins her round and round. Her hair comes loose and spills to her waist. She's thinking: Let me go, for I am wasting time. But if he lets her go, she'll shoot like a coiled spring, flying away. She thinks she hears Miss Amy's cleaver fall, sees through the aching sunlight a floating milkweed puff which catches on her cheek and stays there through the whirling. Luke was how far away by the time Miss Amy's cleaver fell, and how much farther now? He will go to the ocean. He will run to the docks. That basket of chicken: where now? Somebody'll

find it and eat it, some blind child; she hopes that's what will be and not ants and flies devouring it. Ants and flies: but she's dancing a hundred miles an hour, a dreidl, can't think for moving. She hears laughter, her own. Jolly has spoken of his childhood, of tossing dreidls in the air, singing with his family, picking the pockets of those who gathered to watch the musicians and the dreidl-throwing, a small dark boy with busy fingers digging the money out. Gold coins, he said, and silver. His parents taught him. He snickered, describing this: a thief, and she hates thieving.

Like jumping Johnnies, the men struck by the sheriff's car leap to their feet, brushing themselves off, their yells dying to hot spit in their throats. They stomp the ground, shouting, hoarse in the dryness, while she and the old dancing soldier turn to cyclones, dust devils in the road. Behind them, the train comes, its noise shutting out all the other sounds so that her ears hold only a ringing, hollow silence. Will she never see this man's face. Hair in her eyes, sun in her eyes, thirsty, her feet drumming the road, a breakneck gallop mile by mile, all in this little space. She hears Luke cry, *Hot pepper*, and his jumprope flails. Luke, come home. Come home and pet your tortoiseshell cat, the one the bluejays hector, the one that licks her pretty paws. *I'll never get over what Dr. Winfrey did.* Her breath's gone, laughter gone, her legs are hammers, the old man grasps her hands so tight she'll have to let them go, he'll slide her arms off her like sleeves. Sick at her stomach when Grammah told her: *Took out his eyes.* Grammah's wild, clawing at her hair, all in a stagger and a frenzy: *Took out his eyes and sewed 'em shut.*

HE EMERGES as a suitor: the old man. "Marry me," he says the very next day, as she sits on a stump in Grammah's yard

and he stands ramrod-straight before her. "You will get the pension. Other girls have done just this same thing."

"But you're older than my Grammah," she says, as dazed as she was when they danced.

"I don't look so old, do I?" he says, and with his proud stance and the sun behind him, she can't see the wrinkles in his shadowed face. His abundant hair is the color of light, combed in the long Western way down the back of his neck, and yes, he does look young from where she sits on the rough stump, with the sun in her eyes. He says, "I can help you find your brother. I have friends who are policemen and inventors. One is working on a device that seeks out human heat from the air. Someday, he'll get it right, and it'll pick out a person even in the dark or in the woods, finding them from their body heat as sure as a cat leaves a warm spot on a bed. What I wouldn't give to have it ready for you."

Nobody has ever wanted to give her such a thing, and her heart leaps at it, sinks again, comes back to the single truth. "But you're way up in years. I mean no disrespect. You must have children who are old too, and grandchildren about my Grammah's age."

"My folks are gone," he says, "but I've got some buddies alive to march with and a good many years ahead of me. What if I were young? Would you let me court you then, or do you love somebody else?"

"He doesn't love me back." She hears the birds' wings whirring, tries to feel Jolly's arms around her, but all she recalls is the tightness of his swallowtail coat, when she has tried it on.

"It's the sheriff, isn't it," the old man says, smacking his fist into his palm, "even though he can't drive worth a damn."

"Not the sheriff," Vangie says, her breath quickening flame-like in her throat as she yearns for Jolly.

“So you say,” he says, relaxing a little, rocking on his heels, and she sees how he might have leaned against a rail fence beside a battlefield, oh, years ago, all springing step and keen-eyed leisure, waiting for the smoke to clear and the last Yankees to retreat, while he knuckled the black powder from his eyes. “The way you rode in the sheriff’s car, with your arm out the window for the breeze: that looked to me like you belonged to him.”

“It’s Jolly Erdos,” she blurts. “The magician. But he has so many women in love with him. They give him presents and money.”

“Can he drive a car without hitting a whole parade?” The old man throws back his head and laughs.

“I have these bad thoughts about him, like dreams or bad miracles. I see him dying.”

He reaches out and touches her cheek. His hand is soft and does not shake. He says, “How long now since your brother’s been gone? About two days?”

“He’s fine, I know it. The sheriff dragged the lakes today and didn’t find him.”

“I was blind during the war,” he says, “but only at night. It was scurvy. A whole corps of us were sick that way and had to be led around by the hand after dark. But in the day, we kept on fighting.”

SHE’S EMBARRASSED yet proud when Miss Amy says, “You’ve got Major *Raymond* interested in you,” in a scolding tone, which shows that she’s impressed. And Grammah says, “Honey, you’re an orphan, and I won’t live forever,” to which Vangie says, “Aren’t I supposed to notice that he’s about a hundred?”

“He’s still good-looking,” Grammah says. “He’s the youngest old fellow I’ve ever seen.”

Old as he is, does he still count as a suitor? Vangie feels mean-spirited for wondering. Yes, other girls have married old men, yet their reasons are always suspect, tainted. Her vanity's the quick-change artist; one minute she's queenly, the next she's appalled, for he is just too old. But who is she to send him away? She's a chambermaid, and he is a major. She had never noticed him before they danced in the road, though she knew his name, the way she knew the names of Mountain Road and North Run Creek and of his farm, Sunning Hill.

He named the place for his wife, who sunned herself there on the lawn while the house was being built, fifty years ago. His wife used to sit beneath a tent made of canvas and arm-chairs while carpenters hammered and whistled, and in the late afternoon she would step out of the tent, lie down on the grass, and sleep.

How quiet it is in the Major's house, though Vangie senses eyes upon her, for he has servants to polish his mahogany sideboards and dust his porcelain figurines, servants who must be hiding behind the painted Oriental screens and potted ferns. Proudly, the Major shows her a gallery of photographs: there he is with other men having supper at a table crowded with candelabra and silver platters, their heads crowned with wreaths.

"Don't we look silly," the Major says, leaning over her shoulder. "That's how you get gout. That was the nineties, all excess and pride."

And there's the sunning wife on that very lawn that Vangie sees out the window, a green lawn rendered in black and white in the photograph. She's young, sprawling on her back in a long dress, holding an infant high above her, laughing. The child's head blocks out the sun so that its rays fan out around the bright filaments of his hair.

“This would all be yours,” the Major says. Vangie hears the words as if she’s dreaming them. She and Grammah are in the Major’s library, on a day so hot that ghosts of heat shimmer above the green grass beyond the windows. He tells her, as if Grammah’s not even there (avid, too excited to sip her glass of sweet tea), “You don’t have to love me.”

Yesterday, sitting on the stump, she’d believed that the pension he spoke of was what he would give to her, and that had not been of any interest to her. The very word *pension* sounds paltry to her, a trickle, something squeezed out of sorrow and want. This estate, this bounty, is too much. She and Grammah are accustomed to meals of batterbread and plain fish. Here, there would be Christmas food year round.

She gazes into the Major’s face, searching for the young person who aged into this one, sensing kindness has always resided in his heart. “Why me?” she says, humble enough to wonder. She’s only asking.

He takes that as a “yes,” lifts her hand to his lips and kisses it, his mustache grazing her knuckles. “My dear,” he says, “I’ve waited all my life for you. You’re so beautiful, and you dance like you’re on fire. You don’t see how fine you are.”

She had not meant yes, but now it’s too late. She has never been so hugely misunderstood, and her jaw drops as Grammah, behind the old man’s back, raises both her arms in triumph, her worn face a study in glee.

“You won’t change your mind, now, will you?” the Major says. “Young girls are always hoping for better. Waiting and dreaming.” And he shakes his head. “I had enough of that, oh plenty of that, back when I fought in the war.”

“A FRIEND of mine loved violets so much that her whole wedding was made out of them,” says Helen Revelle that af-

ternoon, working on Vangie's hair, cutting it short and sleek like her own. "She had violets twined on the banister, violets in the chandelier, violets in the bridesmaids' sashes, even though it was wintertime. Her mother and father had violets shipped in from wherever they grew."

Swaths of Vangie's cut hair lie across her feet like dozing minks. She kicks them away and tosses her head, loving the fresh windy feeling around her neck. Since Luke disappeared, she has lain awake with her long, hot hair strangling her. Grammah believes he is dead. She says he'll be found in the woods some day, curled up and cold, and then she cries.

Smiling her beautiful smile, Helen says, "You'll have a place in society now. Your short hair won't get in the way of the games you'll play. You should take lessons in tennis and golf."

But it was enough to swing the Indian clubs with Luke in the hotel gym, her muscles tight as a bow-and-arrow. *Run, Luke, run, get where you want to go.* She's had moments of forgetting Luke. She has been distracted by the Major, while Luke is maybe not eating or sleeping; he might be wandering in confusion in some strange place, unable to make people understand who he is. She hates herself for taking the money he gave her that night at the lake.

"Major Raymond will buy you a car," Helen goes on, "a convertible, and you can learn to drive. You can go to horse shows. You can go to Hot Springs, with the Major or without him. I'll go with you. I love it there."

Vangie sees herself driving an open car, goggles over her eyes, a scarf on her head. No more ironing Jolly's coat. She's a maid no longer, can't believe she's being treated like a friend by Helen Revelle, Helen who muses: "The day my husband sold the hotel was the day our divorce came through. I sat with him in this hotel parlor while he sold it to Amy and Dorothy.

He was drunk as hell, and so was their lawyer.” She laughs, drawing the brush through Vangie’s hair, and goes on, “It was fall, warmer outside than inside, and the leaves were coming down fast. In the hour it took to sign the papers, the leaves piled up higher than the wheels of my car. But I hadn’t been out of the cave very long, and the whole world looked beautiful then.”

“I have to tell Jolly,” Vangie says, to Helen and to this short-haired stranger in the mirror, “tell him about the Major.”

“I told him. He’s happy for you. He’ll still have me. Here, try my lipstick. There’s no little gypsy baby on the way, is there?”

“No.” She turns and confronts Helen Revelle. “You should have let me tell him myself.”

“Jolly said your brother’s done the greatest trick of all, a blind boy disappearing. What color did his eyes used to be?”

She has to remember a long way, to bring that back, and then the image of his child-face with hazel eyes intact almost makes her cry. “I’ve got to go look for him. Nobody’s looking.” Yet she just stands there, gazing at herself in the mirror, her reflection diamond-sharp.

“Be my guest,” Helen says. “Listen,” she says. “When I was in the cave, I fell in love. He and I used to paint each other’s teeth with stuff that glowed in the dark, and then we’d pace away from each other and see how far apart we could be and still see each other smile. It was so dark, his smile was all I could see.”

Vangie can’t help but ask, “What happened to him?”

Helen shrugs, taking the lipstick from Vangie’s hand and leaning toward the mirror to use it. “I don’t know. He might still be down there. He might be dead.”

“How could you leave, when you loved him?”

“You’re thinking how mean I am. You’re thinking you’d have stayed,” Helen says, “but you wouldn’t have.”

“WHAT HAVE you done?” cries Grammah, her hands flying to her mouth. “Hair chopped off and paint on your lips. Does the Major know about this?”

“Here he comes,” Vangie says, seeing the tall, straight figure pegging toward the door. “We’re going to the magic show. I just came back so you could see my hair.”

“Don’t run him off, child,” Grammah says.

“What about Luke?” Vangie says, her voice rising to a shout. “Don’t forget about him, Grammah, just because of the Major.”

“Maybe he’ll hear about you getting married and come on home,” Grammah says, in a voice too hearty for truth. “We might get a letter or a telegram. Why, there’s a telephone at Sunning Hill. He’ll call you and be so proud you married Major Raymond.”

Vangie opens the door and greets the Major, but her mind is on Luke and Jolly. Is she really surprised about Helen, or is the dust in her throat only from the dry evening and the effort of walking home from the hotel and now back again with the Major, who says it’s too nice out to take the car? He says, “I’ll test myself and you. I’ll be watching you while the magician puts on his show.”

She says, “I don’t want you getting tired.” It’s how she would talk to a grandfather if she had one, yet this is the man she will marry. The Major buys the tickets and leads her to a seat in the auditorium. She feels people watching them, gossiping about the chambermaid who turned an old man’s head, marrying him for his money, and she wants to yell, “It’s not that way!”

There's Jolly, up on stage, but the lights are on him and the audience sits in near-darkness, so she knows he can't see her. The Major whispers that he likes her hair short. May he hold her hand? His hand feels as strong as a young man's and she thinks, He'll take care of Grammah and me. When she pictures living at Sunning Hill, she feels the way she did when she fell off the suspension rings in the hotel gym one night and lay with the wind knocked out of her. The Major is spry and clean, and his skin still fits him well, but she can't imagine how long his life has been, and here she is at the tail end of it, with him saying he's waited all those years for her. Pity fills her, pity for his tumultuous heart.

Jolly's got something new in his act: ventriloquism. He makes a teakettle talk, makes songs come from a fat man's stomach, and carries on a funny, rude conversation with a corner of the ceiling.

"He won't stay in Glen Allen," the Major whispers. "He'll go to big cities and make lots of money. He has stayed here because of you."

"Just try to enjoy the show," Vangie whispers back.

"Promise me you won't go to him any more."

She wants to agree, to make him happy, but grief rises like floodwater in her heart.

"I'll put him on the next train out of town. I won't have him near you," the Major says in a voice loud enough to lead a cavalry charge. "We'll be married tomorrow."

"Hush! Would y'all be quiet," hisses a woman beside them, a harsh whiff of tobacco on her breath. Vangie looks at the Major, but it's so dark, all she can make out is the shape of his shoulder. If Jolly can make a tree grow in a teacup, then she can learn to love the Major.

Jolly holds a hoop of fire while a little dog hops through it. He will tell a story of his childhood, he says, and Vangie could swear he looks straight at her over the footlights. He says, "Farmers were reaping in the fields when a little boy and girl came climbing out of pits where wolves were thought to live. They were wild, these children, with green skin and green clothes. Yes, green skin, and they spoke a strange language. The farmers took them into town and showed them to the others. They would eat only beans and water. After many months, they were able to say they'd been lying in a valley in their homeland when they heard lovely music and were transported to those fields."

Back and forth leaps the dog. Moments ago, he was a spotted puppy; by jumping through the ring of fire, he has grown into a setter with long red fur. "This happened in my village in the Old Country," Jolly goes on, a droll droop to his mouth. "So these green children were baptized, but the boy died. The girl lived to grow up. The green faded from her skin, and she got married just like any other girl in the village. She's beautiful, and her children are happy."

Jolly blows on the blazing hoop and the fire sizzles out, leaving pink smoke. The dog leans against his knee. The auditorium is quiet for an instant, then people clap and whistle. Even the Major is on his feet, applauding. Women rise from their seats and charge toward the small man in the swallow-tail coat, who doffs his top hat and turns to run, just as the lights come up.

"I'll rip off his clothes if I get him alone," says the tobacco-breathed woman beside Vangie. "I'll make parts of *him* talk, all right," and the woman flashes lean, hairy calves as she hikes up her skirt and leaps onto the stage.

Behind Vangie, a man laughs, the sound rich and relaxed over the din. It's the sheriff. He leans over Vangie's shoulder to say, "I've given up protecting him. He's the luckiest damned man on Earth. I love this show and the ruckus after, love it."

The Major sighs and sinks into his seat, his cheeks showing a grape-colored flush. He says, "I can't imagine how those tricks are done, and I liked the story. I concede that much."

She lays her hand against the Major's face. He is burning up. She feels his wrist, finds a light, unruly pulse in his veins, and turns to the sheriff to say, "He's sick. Get the doctor."

People swoop down on them. Vangie fans the Major's face with her palm. By the time Dr. Winfrey bumbles in with his black bag, the Major is dead, a lock of long hair falling over his forehead, her old bridegroom and cavalier.

THE SHERIFF'S two dogs, King Dan and Rebel Sue, sniff the shirt Vangie hands them—Luke's shirt—and take off, lolling so low to the ground they might be plowing with their noses. They snuffle and tumble down the hill from the Home for the Blind and follow a path along the woods.

"They've picked up cold trails before," says the sheriff with pride. "I wish I'd done this the day your brother took off. When I ran into that parade, it knocked the wits right out of me."

"I've got to look for him. I've waited too long already. But I don't have much time," Vangie says. There's the funeral to go to, the Major's funeral, where she'll wear a black veil Grammah made for her. The world will pass through the parlor at Sunning Hill to say good-bye to him. She was too late in coming to him, in being found by him, and she's late again, for the funeral is now. She had the veil over her face when the sheriff came with his dogs and said they would look for Luke. She set the veil aside, though Grammah wrung her hands.

“Oh, we’ve got enough time,” the sheriff says, guiding her toward the sound of the dogs. “I saw that magician getting on the train. He said it’s bad luck if anybody dies at a show. That Mrs. Revelle went with him. They deserve each other, those two.”

“What about the birds? The critters he used in his shows, did he take them too?”

The sheriff grins. “They were traveling light. Why, you want that trick toad?”

“My brother likes it. I want it for him.” It’s a misty morning, yet she detects some movement in the trees up ahead, where the dogs are, and she squints, pointing. “Look.”

The sheriff says, “They found something, all right. They’re going wild.”

“Luke!” she says, straining her eyes for a human shape. It’s too much to lose them all at once, Luke and the Major and Jolly. “I didn’t try hard enough.”

“Who ever does?” the sheriff says, as if she’s making sense. “Well, I don’t see anybody, but we’ll catch up with the dogs. Might be just a possum.”

“He said he was sleepy,” she says with a shock of happiness. Weren’t his last words about sleep? She should have known all along that he lay down in the woods and is only now waking up. He’ll be hungry, brushing leaves out of his hair and yawning. She makes herself walk slowly beside the sheriff so she can believe it, for this one step and then another. *I have so much to tell you.* The sheriff slips his arm around her waist, warm and easy, like it belongs there.