

TWO

SOMEBODY TO LOVE (1967)

ALL THROUGH NINTH GRADE, BILLIE PRICE PICKED half-smoked Lucky Strike cigarettes out of the living room ashtray and smoked them down to her fingertips without her parents catching on. She rarely got to smoke a whole cigarette because Bertram kept his Luckies in his shirt pocket. Sloppy seconds would do. It was easy enough to collect an almost whole cigarette from the butts that he stubbed out and abandoned, little white crooked swans in the large black swan-shaped ashtray, but in order to smoke them she had to keep out of sight.

After her drama teacher had caught Billie smoking in the girls' room back in September, her parents threatened to paddle her if it happened again. Bertram claimed to believe in "Spare the rod, spoil the child," but he was a reluctant enforcer. But though infrequent, it had happened, and Billie did not want a repeat performance. Rose relied upon logic as well as good old-fashioned Pentecostal guilt. For her part, Billie figured that what her parents did not know would not hurt them or hurt her. Their ignorance would be her bliss, or at least

help her avoid her mother's sermonizing. She wasn't worried about stunting her growth or shortening her life. She did not care about bad breath, wrinkles on her face, or worst of all, attracting the wrong kind of male attention. Rose had it all wrong. For Billie, the lure of smoking was so private, so special, a little glamorous gift that only she could give herself, a brief glimpse at the way life should be, instead of the way life was: school, chores, homework, school, church on Sunday mornings, church on Wednesday nights, homework, clothes on the line, clothes off the line, then repeat. One more endless month until the end of June when school let out.

Worst of all, Billie would need a new spot to smoke. She had been sneaking down to the crawl space under the front porch, but warmer weather meant the front porch could be occupied at any time. Other options included the spring house, a little storage pantry in the backyard dug into the steep hillside where seed potatoes and canned goods were stacked on moldy shelves, but that place was as spooky as a crypt; or the barn across the field, but too many stories about fires in barns kept Billie from smoking around dry hay in any kind of weather.

As for inside, Rose was always downstairs fussing around; upstairs, her parents' bedroom was off-limits, and that left only the girls' bedroom, a large rectangular room Bertram had divided using a three-quarter wall to create some privacy. Sound and light traveled over the divider, and smoke would too. A window in the walk-in closet could be cracked open for a few furtive puffs, but lately Dessie was always in that closet, dressing and undressing, trying on blouses, skirts, and sweaters to see what matched, dancing from the closet to the full-length mirror in the hallway, examining each outfit, pulling off rejects and piling them in a heap on the closet floor. Face it, Hurricane Dessie had blown in from some seacoast, and Billie had to keep out of the way.

Lately, every item of clothing Dessie selected contained some shade of green. "Wouldn't you just know that green is Lux's favorite

color!” Dessie said shortly after she and Lux started going out together, as if that was a positive attribute. As usual, Dessie had been standing in front of the mirror, rolling up the waistband of her skirt, securing it with safety pins. From the back, Billie saw the hem hanging crookedly above Dessie’s knees.

With Dessie upstairs, Rose roaming around downstairs, and Bertram off running Saturday errands, Billie decided to chance a quick smoke in the crawl space. When she was sure no one was looking, she selected a barely smoked cigarette, strolled down the porch stairs, pried open the rusty trapdoor near the base of the porch, slipped in, and eased it closed so it wouldn’t slam shut. On all fours, she crawled to a spot where she could peek out through diamonds of light filtering through the latticework. Billie brushed cobwebs from her hair and pebbles from her palms, reached above her head along the beams, and found the matches she’d hidden on a narrow ledge.

Sound drifted through the kitchen floorboards. The mantel clock that Bertram wound each week with a small brass key ticked. The iron skillet clanked down on the burners, the stove door slammed shut, and floorboards creaked. Rose hummed along with the *Family Hour of Praise* from New Martinsville on the kitchen radio; then the gospel choir ended, and a man with a sing-song wheezing voice crowed, “Hallelujah! Rejoice, all you sinners, for your redeemer is come.” Under the porch, Billie felt mildly sinful. Was she a for-real sinner? God, who sees all, must be observing these acts of outright theft, parental deception, and disobedience, but at the same time, once somebody gets away with something for a few months, the wages of sin seem somehow to fade away.

Billie pinched the filterless cigarette to straighten out the bent part, lit a match, took a deep pull, and tried to keep from coughing. She hoped she wouldn’t be called to help cook, especially so she didn’t have to listen to the sermonizing on the radio. She didn’t even care what supper was. It would be something boring. She let the smoke roll between her tongue and the roof of her mouth. Maybe tonight she

could go to town with Dessie and Lux, to the new Italian pizza parlor, Martino's. Everyone at school was talking about the place. They sold pizza by the slice and served tall icy glasses of Coca-Cola. They even had a jukebox with top forty singles and a dance floor.

Billie drew smoke into her lungs, puckered her lips, and tried to flick her tongue as she exhaled, practicing smoke rings. She knew if she stayed home, she'd have to finish her sewing project for home ec and a pile of earth science homework. That almost made her wish she was the one who was quitting school in June and getting married in September, instead of Dessie. Not that Billie would ever marry Lux, the conceited jerk. All he ever did was pick on her. Lately he'd been calling her "Boney," or "Bag-a-Bones," even "Bonesy-Billie." Last night, when they were all on the porch, Lux came up to her like he was going to give her a hug around the waist. He actually seemed civilized for a moment, talking to her like a normal human being, saying, "Hey, Billie, what'ya been up to?" Then, in front of Alan Ray and Dessie, Lux acted like Billie's ribs were poking into his arms. "Ouch, ouch!" Lux said, backing away as if he was hurt. So Billie took her right elbow and jabbed him in the belly.

She couldn't win. "Watch out for Boney Billie, she'll get y'all," Lux called to Alan Ray. Alan Ray nodded. Then Lux started dancing around in front of her like a one-eyed prizefighter, black eyepatch and cowboy boots, his breath all beery and a stubble of whiskers poking out of his chin.

"Hey, Bag-a-Bones, put up your dukes," Lux called. More than anything, Billie wanted to slap Lux's cheek, eyepatch or no eyepatch. In a sly move, Alan Ray came up behind her and grabbed her wrists, holding them so tightly she could not move either of her hands, not even an inch, and before she could blink, Lux reached out with his right fist and popped her nose. Not real hard, but hard enough to make her eyes water. Alan Ray released her arms, but she wasn't sure whether to elbow Alan Ray in the gut or to punch Lux right back. Lux saw her make a fist, and quickly he called out, "Ouch, ouch, I hurt my

GOSHEN ROAD

hand on that bony nose.” He shook his right hand back and forth like it really hurt.

Alan Ray had just laughed, face all red, freckles lighting up his nose and cheeks. “Hey, Lux,” he said, “you might need to get that checked out. Bring that big paw over here, I can splint it up for you.” He took the bandana from around his neck and started to make a bandage to tie around Lux’s hand. Billie looked from Alan Ray to Lux to Dessie. She wanted them to see how unfair that was, how mad it made her, but she sensed it would backfire. Dessie had laughed along with the rest of them. Bertram would say she should probably try to be a “good sport.” Whatever that meant. Billie had choked back the lump in her throat and retreated to the porch swing. Could a girl fight back? Boys her age were easy, but older guys were not, and no matter what, it seemed like they always had to get their way. They could be nice if they wanted, but they also could turn right around and ruin everything.

Through the floor above, Billie heard the phone ring out from its cradle on the kitchen wall, then the thumping of Dessie’s feet racing to answer it before Rose could get to it. It would be Lux, phoning from Cleve’s General Store to let Dessie know when he’d be coming over. Would she be invited to come along tonight? Doubtful. Would she want to go? Possibly. Was it always going to go like this? She never saw this coming; there weren’t any tryouts for this new role: Beverlee Ellen Price, tragic and forlorn but perky and pretty, starring as *The Younger Sister Who Is a Good Sport*.

Billie twirled the cigarette between her fingertips for a last, elegant Hollywood actress inhale. If she were writing this movie, there would be a big scene at the end where a handsome cowboy rode up on a white horse, hopped off, and punched Lux right in the gut so hard that he hit the dirt, swallowed a big old wad of chewing tobacco, and everyone laughed while he sat there, his feet splayed out wide, his mouth open, drooling, stunned, and speechless.

Billie snuffed the cigarette on the ground, crawled out of the trap door, inspected her clothes and knees for dirt, and made her

way around the back of the house. Passing her mother's salad garden, she picked some mint leaves to freshen her breath. With luck, she could slip upstairs past the kitchen when Rose's back was turned. Dessie would know something about tonight's plans by now. Billie wondered whether Alan Ray was going, too, and whether Alan Ray even cared if she went. Oh, just let Dessie marry Lux Cranfield, Billie thought. Then they can see each other all they want, and they can all keep away from me.

"HEY, WATCH where you sit," Dessie said when Billie settled onto an empty spot on the foot of the bed. The quilt smelled of Johnson's Baby Oil. Dessie still wore her pink nightshirt, her high school gym shorts underneath, and a white bath towel was coiled on her head like the turban of the Queen of Sheba. She was shaving her legs with Bertram's straight razor, scraping against her pale shin with choppy strokes, holding a piece of broken mirror in her hand to see the back of her calf. Her right foot was propped up on a math book, and her toenails were freshly painted rose pink. Dessie's radio, louder than usual, played the Jefferson Airplane's newest single, "Somebody to Love." Only on Saturdays, over Rose's repeated protests, Bertram allowed the girls to listen to rock and roll.

"Hey, yourself," Billie said, standing up cautiously to keep from shaking the bed. Setting the *Seventeen* magazine and textbooks on the desk, she spread out her home ec project, an apron she was supposed to have already given Rose for Mother's Day.

Billie lifted the roughed-out apron; then she pinned a cutout shape of pattern paper somewhat like an apron pocket where she thought a pocket should go. "I picked this material for Mom. How does this look?" Billie asked.

Dessie nodded approval at the fabric. "It's coming out nice. She'll like those large roses." She paused, and took a second look. "Maybe use a wide red fabric for the pocket and sash? And red thread?" Billie nodded back. She was glad she had not sewn it together yet. She

might find the perfect sash material in Rose's sewing box. Billie set it carefully back on the bed, then looked over at her sister.

"Hey, Des," she started. "Did Lux say I if could come along to-night?" Billie tried to sound unconcerned.

Dessie shook her head, said, "Nope. It didn't come up," and turned to scrape the razor at a spot under her knee. Something about Dessie's voice made it pretty clear that she should drop that subject. The music on the radio wailed and swelled, then ended, all the instruments stopping on the same beat. Billie thought that listening to each new song on the top forty countdown made Saturday afternoons feel like being at a party. Carefully, Billie took straight pins out of Rose's little red hen pincushion and folded the hem for the apron.

"Did you know that right after dark tonight, the bright orange spot in the sky next to the moon will be the planet Jupiter, which is 365 million miles from earth?" Billie asked. "My earth science teacher said that."

"Nope," Dessie said, and then, "Did you know that Lux said he could not decide if I was prettier in the sunlight or in the moonlight?"

Billie yawned. "Nope," she said, and turned away. Did everything have to begin and end with Lux? The cover of *Seventeen* caught her eye. She could see the full lips and high cheekbones of the model, long straight brown hair blowing back behind her, long slender legs in a short plaid skirt and knee socks, strolling right off the cover and into an active, fun life, with her long eyelashes and her bright red lips. Thin models were showing up on ads and magazine covers, though everyone at school poked fun at them, said they were flat-chested and undoubtedly undernourished. This could be a part that she, Billie, could try out for someday, The Actress Who Is Also a Cover Girl. She would have radiant and alive black hair that hung down to her waist, high-heeled boots in every color, skirts so short that if she wasn't so famous, so rich, and so popular, she'd be grounded for years. When Dessie set the piece of mirror down, Billie picked it up off the bed and stared at her lips, practicing smiles.

“I hate Lux,” Billie mouthed silently, watching the lips in the mirror make words too terrible to say out loud. She looked over at Dessie to see if she’d noticed, but thank goodness, she didn’t. Her sister had finished shaving and had begun wiping her legs with baby oil, rubbing her toes, and working her way slowly up past her ankles, calves, knees, way to the top of her thighs and under her gym shorts. Billie caught herself staring and turned back her own reflection, sticking her tongue way out, close enough to almost touch the mirror, moving it around. From that angle, her tongue looked like a slimy sea creature, her face looked like a cartoon, neck stretched behind like a long skinny balloon that some clown would twist into the shape of a wiener dog.

“Lux hates me,” Billie said out loud, watching her tongue, lips, dark eyelashes, and the dimple in her chin with each syllable, then smiling into the mirror, not a good sport smile, exactly, but not a grimace of self-pity either. She checked her nose, to see if it was bruised from where Lux had punched her. It wasn’t, but it hurt if she wiggled it back and forth with her fingers.

“Huh?” Dessie said. “For the love of Pete! Don’t be such a little idiot.” She reached out her hand to take back the mirror. “What made you say that?”

Billie tried to come up with an answer, but the words were not in the script. What does the Younger Sister Who Gets Picked On say to the Older Sister Who Loves the Hillbilly-Pirate Bad Guy? “Oh, you know, it’s probably nothing,” Billie answered, watching her lips make these light and breezy words, words that seemed to miss the point entirely. She remembered how startled she was when Lux pretended that he hurt his hand. As if that was true. He was the one who hit her in the nose. She shook her head and turned away.

Handing the mirror back, Billie rolled down her own ankle socks. Dessie had blonde hair, blonde arm and leg hairs. Billie thought Dessie didn’t even need to shave her legs. Her own legs had black hairs, each one thicker, more obvious. No matter what Rose said, these legs

of hers would have to get shaved. That way Lux and Alan Ray would have one less thing to tease her about.

“OK, I’ll tell you what made me say it. Lux is always picking on me,” Billie said.

“Are you ticked about last night on the porch?” Dessie was smiling like she thought it was funny. Dessie’s bottom teeth were crooked, actually the two center ones overlapped. Experts from *Seventeen* would agree that Dessie’s best smile would be with her lips closed. But Dessie’s lips kept on moving. “Oh, he’s just ornery. If he devils you, it means he likes you,” Dessie’s lips were saying. Her head tilted as if it might be a concept a younger sister could not fathom. “Guys want to get close to girls, but they don’t know what to do when they get around them.”

Lux? Not know what to do? How could Dessie say that about the best pitcher, maybe in the history of Fairchance High, or Alan Ray, who had traveled all over the country in the national guard? “Oh, sure,” Billie said. She stood up, held out her sewing project, imagined a finished apron tied around her mother’s waist. She checked the hem to see if it was even.

“I really mean it.” Dessie said. “You need to act different. Show you don’t care about them, and they’ll come over and sweet-talk you,” she said. Then Dessie lowered her voice. “If you promise not to tell Mama, I’ll show you what he does to me.” Billie nodded.

Dessie got up out of the bed, and her fingers opened the top buttons on her nightgown. Billie leaned in, stood on tiptoes to see what Dessie was talking about. A few inches below the neckline was a circular pinkish-red blotchy bruise the size of a small peach. Billie gasped. “Did he punch you or pinch you? Did it hurt?”

“No, stupid, it was fun. He did it with his mouth.” Dessie’s eyes darted back and forth, checking to see if anyone else was listening. “Don’t you dare breathe a word.” Dessie turned back, her eyes piercing into Billie’s. “Promise me. Swear you won’t.”

Billie knew about kissing, she had heard jokes about sex, but she was not sure how this fit in. This was different than other types

of secrets, like faking a headache to skip school. She began thinking about how it felt kind of grown up to share a part of Dessie's new life, like she just peeked through a doorway to a place that she would soon be able to enter.

Billie looked up at Dessie's eyes and made her most solemn promise. "I won't. I swear to God as He is my witness, so help me," she answered, wondering if God heard her say this, if keeping this secret was another of God's tests she had just failed. But Dessie did not seem to be the least bit concerned about God. She seemed more worried about Rose, and for that reason, this felt like useful information, though Billie didn't even know why she thought that.

"Hey, Billie," Dessie called out from the walk-in closet. "Will you look outside and tell me if you see Lux?"

Before she knew what she was doing, Billie lifted the sash of Dessie's window and stuck out her head. Past the walk, past the dog box, midway up the grass of the yard, sat Lux's jeep, the top down and fresh mud splattered halfway up the sides. Billie could see Alan Ray's red hair and long white arms. He was in the driver's seat, shirtless, wearing his army vest with a red, white, and blue bandana around his neck. The Jeep's hood was up. Lux wore his A-1 cap and a black T-shirt. He and Bertram were standing over the engine with tools in their hands while Alan Ray was giving it more gas.

"Yeah, they're here," Billie said. She could hear them calling back and forth to each other over the rush and snort of the engine and the sound of Lux's old-timey country music.

Dessie called out from the closet, "Oh, shoot, I better find something to wear. Can you be an angel and tell 'em I'll be right down?"

DOWNSTAIRS, BESIDE the porch door, Billie halted. She had things to consider before walking over there. Was she just the messenger, the angel? without any other part in this play? What would she do when she got there, say hi? Maybe not to Lux, but to Alan Ray, who usually seemed happy to see her? She wanted to deliver the message, but

GOSHEN ROAD

something made her hang back, to stop and weigh things before she opened the screen door. Angel, devil, devil, angel. She wasn't even sure whether to head down to the Jeep or yell out from the porch to tell them Dessie was coming.

But then it didn't matter. Like a barefooted green flash, Dessie shot downstairs, past the kitchen, straight through the living room. Billie reached to open the door for her sister.

"One moment, Dorothy," Rose called out, walking in from the kitchen, the smell of cornbread trailing after her. Dessie stopped and turned back. She wore a green pleated skirt, hiked up inches higher than Rose would allow, and a green-and-white print blouse with a high ruffled neck. She was carrying her shoes in her left hand, and her wet hair was gathered up with a wide stylish leather clip. Dessie looked at Billie, as if Billie should have known this would happen, as if she should have done something to distract their mother.

"Sit with me a moment, Dorothy, over here," Rose said, wiping her hands on a dish towel and settling onto the piano bench in the living room. Billie could see Dessie's right hand quickly unravel the waistband of her skirt so the hem hung down to the bottom of her knees; then, she sat down beside Rose and pulled her skirt down even lower over her knees, crossing her ankles below the bench. Her eyes were fixed on the outside door.

Rose smoothed her apron and sat up straight, facing her elder daughter who was already taller than she was. She took each of Dessie's hands in each of her hands, bowed her head, closed her eyes, and said, "Dorothy, dear, let us pray. Heavenly Father, please protect my daughter this evening and bring her safely home to her family." Rose blinked her eyes, but kept her head bowed.

"Amen," said Dessie, her eyes cast down at the floor, and Billie said, "Amen," out of habit more than out of conviction. From where she stood beside the doorway to the porch, Billie could hear both the gospel radio in the kitchen and the voices of the guys outside. Billie knew Dessie was ready to bolt. Rose seemed to know this too. Rose

continued to clutch each of Dessie's hands in her own trembling hands. On the wall above Rose's silver, braided hair hung a framed print of a painting of Christ kneeling in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. Rose said, "Father, you have blessed this home with two daughters, and I pray with all my heart that you do not see fit to take them before they can do Your work." Rose's eyes seemed to be about to well up with tears, and the trembling of her hands seemed to increase with each tick of the clock on the mantel. Billie wondered how long Rose would clutch at Dessie's hands. It seemed like she was about to start crying.

"Mother," Dessie said after she could no longer keep silent. "We're going into town. We are going to have something to eat. Then we are going to come right back home."

Rose sighed, her voice hushed. "May it be Your Will," she said, and reluctantly released her hold. She peered above her glasses into her Dessie's eyes. "Stand up now. Let's see that skirt. You know that the Lord has given mothers eyes to follow their daughters wherever they choose to go."

Dessie stood, swirled around, and Billie could see her tummy suck in, letting the skirt's hem fall as low as possible. "That's a pretty blouse," Rose said. "Right proper."

When she had her back to her mother and only Billie could see, Dessie rolled her eyes at the ceiling. Billie tried not to laugh. "May the heavenly Father protect us all," Rose said. She walked Dessie onto the porch, offering her cheek for a good-bye kiss. Then, she added, "Be home before 11."

"We will," Dessie called, dashing down the porch stairs, not turning around.

FOR ONE last brief second, Billie wondered what would happen if she just skipped on down there, following her sister to the Jeep, and in a friendly way flat out asked them all if she could come along. But it was clear as day that she should not do that. Dessie did not invite her to go. And Rose could start in all over again.

GOSHEN ROAD

Oh well, welcome back to boring. Billie crossed the living room, peeked into the kitchen. Supper was still not ready to set out. Since Rose was unable to see her, Billie searched the swan ashtray, pulled out a medium-sized Lucky, and headed back upstairs.

From the window in Dessie's part of the bedroom, Billie watched Lux ease down the hood of the Jeep, wipe the grease off his hands, and help Dessie up into the passenger seat. Alan Ray sat in the back, a bottle of Coke in one hand, a cigarette in the other, his long legs in green army fatigues stretched out across the whole backseat. Bertram stood on the footbridge watching, his hands idly tapping a pack of Luckies to settle the tobacco. The Jeep turned and splashed across the creek, climbing onto the main road. Black exhaust smoke hung in the air, the rumble and sputter of the engine mixed with the twang of pedal-steel guitars. And then only the wide, wet tire tracks remained.

Billie found the apron, trying to remember where she'd left the needle, thread, and pins. They were half hidden under Dessie's quilt. She'd have to find Rose's sewing box, finish hemming the apron, set the pocket, and then show it to her teacher for grading, so she could bring it home to surprise Rose. The idea came to Billie that since she already had a pattern, she could start another apron as an engagement present for Dessie in green fabric, with some pretty stitching. She could cut out a heart-shaped pocket to make it special.

Though she'd been living in this house for her entire life, sitting on the foot of Dessie's bed, her sister's half of the bedroom suddenly seemed different. It felt like the scenery in a school play, everything almost like real life, but instead, props rolled into place, waiting for the actors. Billie pictured the original room without a dividing wall. Big. Big enough that she could push both beds together and have one double bed. What if she could have that whole closet, which was very likely as big as a model's closet? Billie looked down at the *Seventeen* magazine on the desk, the model's big oval eyes, her smile wide and friendly. *I'm a model*, the model said, sort of telepathically. "I'm an actress," Billie answered back. "Would you like my autograph?"

Yes, please, the model answered. Billie took a pen and wrote her signature, *Beverlee Ellen Price*, diagonally across the cover of the magazine, making sure to place a large swirl for each of the capital letters, so they hooked together in a sort of alphabet chain.

She switched Dessie's radio back on. "Next up," the announcer was saying, "Light My Fire." Billie hurried to close the door, so she could make the radio louder. If Rose heard what she was listening to, she would be horrified. Of all the bands out there, Rose despised The Doors the most, declaring Jim Morrison a demon who'd made a pact with Satan for the souls of girls, although no one explained to Billie how that could be possible.

If only Dessie was there, they could sing along. Dessie could hit the high notes, and she'd take the lower ones. They'd be the performers as well as the audience. Now though, Dessie was further and further out of reach, like the moon, but circling a whole different planet, some different world she could barely glimpse with the naked eye, planet Lux, with his Jeep and his country music. Country boys, Billie thought. Who even cares about being popular with those guys? There are other guys out there. The Jim Morrison type—wild, enticing, too handsome, too shocking—or maybe the kind of guys in *Seventeen*, clean-shaven guys who wore polo shirts, who had sports cars, not Jeeps. Billie sat down on the top of Dessie's desk, opened up the window a bit wider, checked to see if anyone could be watching, and lit up the half-size Lucky.

Across the yard, she could see her father's shape as he walked toward the barn in the twilight. He would clean up the tools, sweep the workshop, come back to the house, and be ready to eat. If she stayed upstairs too long, Rose would come looking for her. Soon, after another puff or two on the cigarette, another chance to practice her smoke rings, soon, when this song was over, she would turn off the radio, wash her face, rinse her mouth, and head downstairs to help set out whatever Rose had cooked up for an ordinary Saturday night supper to the tune of the Family Gospel Quartet.

GOSHEN ROAD

But not yet. Billie reached for the piece of mirror that Dessie had set on the desk. Her head tipped back, her dark hair settled along her neck, and she parted her lips ever so slightly, rehearsing her most mysterious smile. Her outstretched hand with the cigarette swayed to the music, back and forth in the chilly air. the last few beats of the organ and guitar, the final chords of the number one song in America. The music swirled and drifted like the warm strands of smoke, like those wraith-like, almost O's in the cool evening air, out toward the vast universe, toward the distant planets, then gone.