

QUEENIE

A STORY BY

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QUEENIE said, 'Maybe you better stop calling me that,' and I said, 'What?'

'Stan doesn't like it,' she said. 'Queenie.'

It was a worse surprise to me to hear her say 'Stan' than to have her tell me to call her by her right name, which was Lena. But I could hardly expect her to go on calling him Mr Vorguilla, now that they were married, and had been for nearly two years. During that time I hadn't seen her, and for a moment when I saw her in the group of people waiting for the train at Union Station, I hadn't recognised her. Her hair was dyed black, and puffed up around her face in whatever style it was that in those days succeeded the beehive. Its beautiful corn-syrup colour – gold on top and dark underneath – as well as its silky length, was for ever lost. She wore a yellow print dress that skimmed her body and ended inches above her knees. The Cleopatra lines drawn heavily around her eyes, and the purple shadow, made her eyes seem smaller, not larger, as if they were

deliberately hiding. She had pierced ears now, gold hoops swinging from them.

I hadn't known what to say to her. I saw her look at me with some surprise as well. I tried to be bold and easy-going. I said, 'Is that a dress or a frill around your bum?' She laughed, and I said, 'Was it ever hot on the train, I'm sweating like a pig.' I could hear my own loud voice, as twangy and vulgar as Bet's. Sweating like a pig.

Now on the streetcar going to Lena's place I couldn't stop the stupidity. I said, 'Are we still downtown?' The high buildings had been quickly left behind but I didn't think you could call this area residential. The same thing went on over and over again – a dry cleaner, a florist, a grocery store, a restaurant. Boxes of fruit and vegetables out on the sidewalk, signs for dentists and dressmakers and plumbing suppliers in the second-storey windows. Hardly a building higher than that, hardly a tree.

'It's not the real downtown,' said Queenie. 'Remember I showed you where Simpson's was? Where we got on the streetcar? That's the real.'

'So are we nearly there?' I said.

She said, 'We got a ways to go yet.' Then she

said, 'Way. Stan doesn't like me saying "ways" either.'

The repetition of things, or maybe the heat, was making me feel anxious and slightly sick. We were holding my suitcase on our knees and only a couple of inches ahead of my fingers was a man's fat neck and bald head. Just a few black, rather long hairs grew out of his head here and there, and they made me feel like throwing up. For some reason I thought of Mr Vorguilla's teeth in the medicine cabinet. Two teeth sitting beside his razor and shaving-brush and the wooden bowl holding his possibly hairy and disgusting shaving-soap. I had looked in the medicine cabinet when it wasn't any of my business and I brought Queenie in and showed her.

'I know,' she said. 'It's his bridge.'

'Why isn't he wearing them?'

'He is. He's wearing his others. These are his spares.'

'Yuck,' I said. 'Aren't they yellow?'

'Shut up,' said Queenie. But she was laughing.

Mrs Vorguilla was lying on the dining-room couch with her eyes shut, but maybe not sleeping.

‘What he doesn’t like about Queenie,’ Queenie said, ‘is he says it reminds him of a horse.’

★

When we got off the streetcar at last we had to walk up a steep hill, trying awkwardly to share the weight of the suitcase. The houses were not quite all the same though at first they looked like it. Some of the roofs came down over the walls like caps, or else the whole second storey was like a roof, covered in shingles. The shingles were dark green or maroon or brown. The porches came to within a few feet of the sidewalk and the spaces between the houses seemed narrow enough for people to reach out the side windows and shake hands. Children were playing on the sidewalk, but Queenie took no more notice of them than if they were birds pecking in the cracks. A very fat man, naked from the waist up, sat on his front staring at us in such a fixed and gloomy way that I was sure he had something to say to us. But Queenie marched on past him.

She turned in partway up the hill, following a

gravel path between some garbage tins. Out of an upstairs window a woman called something that I found unintelligible. Queenie called back, 'It's just my sister, she's visiting.'

'Our landlady,' she said. 'They live in the front and upstairs. They're Greeks. She doesn't speak hardly any English.'

It turned out that Queenie and Mr Vorguilla shared a bathroom with the Greeks. You took your roll of toilet paper with you – if you forgot, there wasn't any. I had to go in there at once, because I was menstruating heavily and had to change my pad. For years afterwards, the sight of certain city streets on hot days, certain shades of brown brick and dark-painted shingles, and the noise of streetcars, would bring back to me the memory of cramps low in the belly, waves of flushing, bodily leakage and confusion.

There was one bedroom where Queenie slept with Mr Vorguilla, and another bedroom turned into a small living-room, and a narrow kitchen, and a sun porch. The cot in the sun porch was where I was to sleep. Close outside the windows the landlord and another man were fixing a motorcycle. The

smell of oil, of metal and machinery mixed with the smell of ripe tomatoes in the sun. There was a radio blaring music out of an upstairs window.

‘One thing Stan can’t stand,’ said Queenie. ‘That radio.’ She pulled the flowered curtains close, but the noise and sun still came through. ‘I wish I could’ve afforded lining,’ she said.

I had the old pad wrapped up in toilet paper, in my hand. She brought me a paper bag and directed me to the outdoor garbage pail. ‘Every one of them,’ she said. ‘Out there right away. You won’t forget, will you?’

I still tried to be nonchalant, and act as if I felt welcome. ‘I need to get a nice cool dress like yours,’ I said.

‘Maybe I could make you one,’ said Queenie, with her head in the fridge. ‘I want a Coke, do you? I just go to this place they sell remnants. I made this whole dress for around three dollars. What size are you now, anyway?’

‘Fourteen,’ I said. ‘But I’m trying to lose.’

‘Still. We could maybe find something.’

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‘I am going to marry a lady that has a little girl about your age,’ my father had said. ‘And this little girl has not got any father. So you have to promise me one thing and that is that you will never tease her or say anything mean to her about that. There’ll be times when you may get in a fight and disagree with each other the way sisters do but that is one thing you never must say. And if other kids say it you never take their side.’

For the sake of argument, I said that I did not have a mother and nobody said anything mean to me.

My father said, ‘That’s different.’

He was wrong about everything. We did not seem anywhere near the same age, because Queenie was nine, when my father married Bet, and I was six. Though later, after I had skipped a grade and Queenie had failed one, we came closer together in school. And I never knew anyone to try to be mean to Queenie. She was somebody everybody wanted to be friends with. She was chosen first for a baseball team even though she was a careless baseball player, and first for a spelling team though she was a poor speller. Also, she and

I did not get into fights. Not once. She showed plenty of kindness towards me and I had plenty of admiration for her. I would have worshipped her for her dark-gold hair and her sleepy-looking dark eyes and her giggly easy-going confidence, even if she had not been kind. But for a pretty girl she had an extraordinarily sweet nature.

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As soon as I woke up on the morning of Queenie's disappearance, that morning in early winter, I felt her absence.

It was still dark, between six and seven o'clock. The house was cold. I pulled on the big woolly brown bathrobe that Queenie and I shared. We called it Buffalo Bill and whichever of us got out of bed first in the morning would grab it. A mystery where it came from. 'Maybe a friend of Bet's before she married your Dad,' Queenie said. 'But don't say anything, she'd kill me.'

Her bed was empty and she wasn't in the bathroom. I went down the stairs not turning any lights on, not wanting to wake Bet. I looked out the little

window in the front door. The hard pavement, the sidewalk, and the flat grass in the front yard all glittering with frost. The snow was late. I turned up the hall thermostat and the furnace rolled over in the dark, gave its reliable growl. We had just got the oil furnace and my father said he still woke up at five every morning, thinking it was time to go down to the cellar and build up the fire.

My father slept in what had been a pantry, off the kitchen. He had an iron bed and a broken-backed chair he kept his stack of old *National Geographics* on, to read when he couldn't sleep. He turned the ceiling light off and on by a cord tied to the bed-frame. This whole arrangement seemed to me quite natural and proper for the man of the house, the father. He should sleep like a sentry with a coarse blanket for cover and an unhousebroken smell about him, of engines and tobacco. Reading and wakeful till all hours and alert all through his sleep.

Even so, he hadn't heard Queenie. He said she must be somewhere in the house. 'Did you look in the bathroom?'

I said, 'She's not there.'

‘Maybe in with her mother. Case of the heebie-jeebies.’

My father called it the heebie-jeebies when Bet woke up – or didn’t quite wake up – from a bad dream. She would come blundering out of her room unable to say what had frightened her, and Queenie had to be the one to guide her back to bed. Queenie would curl against her back making comforting noises like a puppy lapping milk, and Bet would not remember anything in the morning.

I had turned the kitchen light on.

‘I didn’t want to wake her,’ I said. ‘Bet.’

I looked at the rusty-bottomed bread tin swiped too often by the dishcloth, and the pots sitting on the stove, washed but not put away, and the motto supplied by Fairholme Dairy: The Lord is the Heart of Our House. All these things stupidly waiting for the day to begin and not knowing that it had been hollowed out by catastrophe.

The door to the side porch had been unlocked.

‘Somebody came in,’ I said. ‘Somebody came in and took Queenie.’

My father came out with his trousers on over his long underwear. Bet was slapping downstairs in