

The Town Secrets

by Meakin Armstrong

Grace works at Minot's Drug Store. She stands at the register, beneath a giant wall clock hanging above her like a full moon. All around are little sealed packages promising so much and everything is so white and clean. When people look in the window to find out the time, they can see her in an air-cooled, sparkling place.

Grace discovers town secrets here: Mrs. Morningstar is having "female trouble." Mr. Johnston buys prepackaged enemas. Honey Hinnant's father, the pastor of Venice Springs Methodist, just bought a hernia truss. She enjoys the delicate horror: does Mr. Hinnant preach while he's wearing the truss?

Then Grace can feel his approach.

He was in the back by the toothpaste, but now he's coming close.

She knows when Mr. Wagner is near. Is that a sign? Knowing when someone is near? Mr. Wagner smiles—toothpaste, deodorant, toothpicks, plus tax, \$2.13. Mr. John Wagner. Beautiful black hair that curls like a movie star. Rock Hudson? He owns the feed store down the block. He'd lived in Charleston and only came back to take over after his father had died. His eyes glitter more than other eyes do

How old is he anyway? 35? Maybe 40? Old—but in a good and sophisticated way. Everyone says he's good-natured and generous, Mr. John-just-like-a-movie-star-Wagner.

"Remember when I used to give you a bag of boiled peanuts every time your dad was over to the store? Seems like yesterday anymore, don't it?"

Grace has already mastered the customer-service smile. "Of course, Mr. Wagner." She gives him his change, three quarters, one dime, two pennies, and a receipt. While she's giving him his change, her nails scrape at his palm. He's watching her while she gives him his change.

He fishes out the pennies from his palm and then bounces them on the counter. With his index finger, he pushes them towards her.

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“You need to come by. Could use a pretty girl in there. Usually just me and a bunch of homely types not prone to good conversation. Appalling, the level of talk going on in a feed store.”

“All right, Mr. Wagner.” They smile. She looks at the floor. He squints at the full-moon clock and makes a pretense of setting his watch. The few seconds feel like minutes. The little bells attached to the front door clang and while he holds the door, he says, “Just call me John from now on, all right Grace?”

“Okay.” Then: “John.”

“John it is.” He smiles and points his index finger at her just like Uncle Sam and he wants her for the U.S. Army: “See you around, cupcake.”

After work, Grace finds many reasons to pass John's store. She walks in for a visit, but only for minutes at a time. Whenever she's in that store, she can't breathe. She worries about what would happen, if she were to sputter or shout, or to run away. What would it be like if she—right then and there—were to take off all of her clothes. What would happen?

She goes in. John is at his usual place, leaning against the back wall. Around him are the farmers he calls a “boll weevils.” Mixed in are a few “lounge lizards”—men in shiny department-store suits. It's dark and damp. The place has many corners with people who watch her.

Grace turns to leave after a half-hello. Those weedy boll weevils and the smirky lizards are witnesses to her behavior. They see it when he pats her on the butt by way of good-bye. They hear her blurt out an “oh!”

The weevils chuckle. A lizard says, “see you now, Grace.” The lizard has a wicked, sweaty smile.

One Friday after choir practice, he's by himself. The bottles of whiskey and beer are out, but the place is empty.

“Well... Grace.” There's a certain sadness about the eyes.

His eyes—what color are his eyes? Are they black?

“Everything all right?”

“Just fine, shuge.”

“Well... Okay.” Already she's running out of subjects. The silence, the gaps, and the dizziness—it's here again. Again, too, she's lost in a flurry of observations: she notices he's left-handed, which somehow makes him vulnerable. She notices his hand has a sort-of shake, a tremor, and his forearm: is that a tattoo?

“What's it like?”

“What's what like?”

“Drinking. You know, beer.”

“Why, okay I guess. Not very ladylike.”

“Can I try?” He has it. That certain Brand X. A movie-star smile. It is a tattoo— yes—an anchor. Was he in the Navy?

“Can't say as I think it'd hurt anybody, but your daddy....”

Or is he more like Errol Flynn? Mysterious how he looks a little different every time. Did he have a girl in every port?

“Maybe I should go.”

“Pretty quick visit, don't you think?” His eyes—now they're blue
“Brightens up my day, you coming by.”

She smiles and stumbles a little bit toward the door and laughs just so slightly.

“No strangers in Venice Springs.”

“Huh?”

“Town's too small. So don't be a stranger. Okay? After all, can't keep coming in for toothpaste every ten minutes just to talk at you.”

What would it be like, to be in those arms? Still, she heads for the door. She reaches for the knob, then remembers Honey Hinnant's advice: When you don't know what to say, just pretend you're Bette Davis.

“Just half a glass. A girl's got to experiment.”

After a few whiskies, everything floats nicely. Somehow, he kisses her. His rough skin is like sandpaper across her face. He smells of cigarettes. She laughs: Grace is a tee-totaling Methodist now drinking alcohol in the back of a feed store with Mr. Wagner. John locks up for privacy. He pulls out another bottle.

“Were you in the Navy?”

“Merchant Marine. Saw the world from the side of a ship. During the war I worked the convoys. Dangerous stuff. U-boats.” He rubs at the anchor tattoo.

“Did it hurt?”

“What?”

She points at the tattoo. “That.”

He smiles.

Grace keeps on drinking. Then she pees in the dirty little bathroom with manly smells. It's a man's room with pictures of Vargas girls pinned to its walls. Dizzy, her head spins. It then runs together: She's on a cot. It's in the backroom and John says, “Let me take these off.”

Time passes, until sick, groaning, and naked and under a single sheet, she wakes up.

The cot, the room: an unwashed little window looks onto the back. Weeds the size of bushes grow there and lost among the weeds is a rusted-out tractor.

John Wagner is sitting at the foot of the bed. He's naked. He's holding his head in his arms.

“You need to be anywhere?”

“What time is it?”

“About five. You been here from about one or thereabouts. Didn't you have school?”

She can't hear him. This is a lot to take—a naked man at the foot of some strange and squeaky bed. Muscular with black chest hair. What about the rest of him?

“Shuge, school?”

The bed: did it squeak like this?

“You all right?”

“School's out. It's summer.” Her stomach is in a tumble.

He's beautiful. He's naked but he's naked in a way not at all like the boys she'd seen before. He lies down next to her. She's under the sheet and he looks at her with what must be a smirk. “Your daddy—is he expecting you for dinner?”

Then a flash of memory: him on top of her.

And then she has another: His head is down there and he's doing something she'd never heard about; and she's saying things, screaming things, and he puts it by her mouth and she turns away, but then it's in her mouth, until there's only the smell and the taste.

Grace pulls the sheet over herself. The bed—did it make noises? Was there really only just this one sheet, and this filthy mattress? “I guess maybe I should go.” She gets up quickly and scrambles around the floor for her clothes: her panties are balled up and inside out. And she's naked. In front of John Wagner, she's naked. She makes herself as small as she can while she struggles to put on her underwear.

The walls: they're yellow, and the paint is peeling. A warm breeze comes through the little window. Who left a tractor to the weeds?

His pants—she's standing on them. She jumps away. Her own pants are in the corner. As she lifts her leg to put on her pants, she can feel a roll of fat forming at her waist. He must see it. She can see him at the side of her eye, looking at her with that smirk. She thinks: He's laughing at me. Her eyes dart everywhere—the window and the tractor, the peeling paint, the brand of shirt he wears, and then she looks right at him. He's not wearing a smirk at all.

He's scared.

Was this where they all took their girls? Was this where those farmers and those shiny-suited men would take their girls and get them drunk?

Peripherally, she notices his burned-dark face against his pale chest. She can see the line where he'd worn an undershirt while working in the sun. And there's a deep line on his forehead, a cavernous line straight across, like a scar. Maybe he's not some movie star at all. Maybe he's just scared. And maybe he's just watching her because he's scared. He's scared of her father, Hezekiah Shortly.

She sees the way her breasts fall when she leans down to pick up her bra; they must look ridiculous. She cups them into her bra and soon she's dressed. He's still on the bed and he's naked, barely

covered by the only sheet on the mattress. If only he would stand before her. If only he would show her who and what she was with.

"Bye."

"You're not sore or anything, right?"

"No."

"You'll still come by?"

She looks at him confused. Bette Davis, Bette Davis, Bette Davis.

"Just to talk, mind. Talk. I like talking at you."

She lets her eyes glide over his body, hidden under the sheet.

When this man was young he must have been so handsome.

As if she knew was what going through her mind, he shrugs.

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Then daylight.

It's blistering-bright. People are following-through on whatever their agendas are. It's strange; these people—all of them—are going on with their lives and it's got nothing to do with what's just happened. Nothing: nothing is going on; nothing at all is going on that has anything at all to do with Grace.

It's crowded and hot, even though according to the drug store wall clock it's 5:15. All around, there's the too-bright sun and the bright colors that make up downtown: the greens of the grocery store signs and the reds-and-whites of the five-and-ten. There's the searing glare of reflected light on the shop windows. All of this is mixed in with the blues and pinks of the floral dresses of the ladies shopping before they rush home, late, to fix their meals.

She sees her brother loafing across the street, friendless and eating a Popsicle. He's dawdling and aimless, just outside of Poodle's. Strange, seeing Merrill out of context, and not at the dinner table or at the house. Is this how others see him too— tic-filled and too-tall?

"Merrill!" She crosses the street. Suddenly he's nervous, like he's just been caught.

"Where you been? They been looking for you," he says. Merrill's Popsicle is melting onto the street. His arms, Grace notices, seem

independent of him; they jerk and flutter in little spurts. The Popsicle melts down his hand.

“Better watch that.”

He sucks at it and licks his hand. “What happened?”

Grace realizes that Merrill is here a shadow of their father's anger. In Merrill's distraction, she sees the coming fireworks.

“Nothing. Just lost track, it being half-day and all. They mad, Mom and Dad?”

“Dad yelled. We got meatloaf. I left because I wanted to get me a Popsicle before the store done closed.”

Done closed. She hates her brother's redneck pretensions.

“They mad?”

“You know. Dad. Et. Cetera. Blah blah.”

They walk home together. For Grace the mental image of her father grows. She looks at Merrill as he struggles with the Popsicle. He's trying to get it all before it falls in icy cherry chunks onto the street. Merrill is a favorite of Dad's. A tinge of jealousy courses through her—what's so special about this boy with a melting Popsicle? Merrill sucks at it and makes slurping sounds as a chunk falls to the street.

“Damn!”

They're at the corner and before they turn she sneaks a glance at John Wagner's store. From this distance it looks so small and shamby. The town itself seems smaller, too. This town, she thinks: pathetic. From this distance she can see his store windows clearly, but they appear dark from here. She just knows he's at those windows, watching. His eyes are on her.

Just then she notices her blouse is a awry. She adjusts it and pats down her hair. She's going to be okay, she tells herself; she's going to be fine; everything will be okay. Again she looks back at the shop. She tells herself it's so small and far away—even just two blocks away, it's so small. Its windows are dark but she can see him; he must be there.

A little too brightly Grace says, “my Lord, it's warm” and soon they're at their house. Their lawn is green, so green, greener than

any others in town. Little stones painted white are at the edging. The bushes are neatly trimmed. They come in under the carport and her house is reflecting heat, but it looks so inviting nonetheless. She knows tonight there'll be the humidity and sticky night heat. She'll stick to the sheets. Tonight she'll read her book and she will look out at the stars as she lies in bed. She'll situate herself as close to the fan as possible and she'll pretend as she always does, that the fan is bringing her cool breezes from somewhere exotic, where such winds originate.

