

## Ellie Scott / ONE NIGHT IN SMELTERVILLE

### LOU

It was Friday night when they came into Smelterville. I watched them from a stool at the end of the bar. That great big man; a tall, leggy blonde with nice bazooms; and a delicate, dark haired lady wearing a black hat. No one knew them. They sat in a booth and the blonde told a story. They were too young for me. I like them older, more experienced, not so likely to collapse and cry afterward. I turned back to my beer.

### HELEN

I was surprised when Roger said he'd like to pick up his cousin. I'd been looking forward to going out with him, and I thought we'd be alone. We drove to a small white house. She was standing in the doorway holding a baby and wearing a black hat that shaded her face. An older woman came and took the child, held the screen open and squinted at us.

### ROGER

Lisha was trying to turn the kid's face toward me. It was hard to look at them. Helen said, "What are you looking at?" and I wanted to say my whole life.

Lisha said something into the dark of the house and her mother appeared at the door. After our mothers found out Lisha was pregnant, they cried for a month. I couldn't stand to see my own mother hunched over and miserable because of something I'd done, so I quit dropping by. Lisha is my first cousin. The family was furious when they found out we'd made a baby together. I wound up promising I would stop seeing Lisha. There's too much pressure around here. Weird pressure.

I thought we could do all right someplace where nobody knew us. "We could go to New Orleans," Lisha said, all excited. She always talked about going there to live. Mardi Gras. Wrought iron railings on big, white houses. Lisha liked to wear sequins and black lipstick. She'd fit right in with the spirit of Mardi Gras. I don't care where I live, just so it doesn't take too much energy.

We did stop seeing each other for a while. I nailed baseboards in condominiums for twelve hours a day trying to keep from thinking about it. I smoked pot, took speed and ate Tums to get through each day. But at night my thoughts echoed like the sound of a chair scraping across the floor in an empty room.

Nobody told me when the kid was born. It seemed like someone would have mentioned it. I was eating my lunch on a patch of grass out at the project when I read it in a newspaper. It was like catching a two-by-four between the eyes. I went to the hospital because I figured I might never see the kid otherwise.

She looked strange through the green glass of the nursery. She didn't cry or move. I asked the nurse if the baby was okay. "You fathers are all alike," she said. But she leaned over the baby for a moment as if she were listening for the baby's breathing.

Lisha was sleeping when I got to her room. She had dark circles under her eyes. I looked at her red polished fingernails, her plastic hospital bracelet. She didn't know I was there.

At Duke's bar that night I pretended nothing happened. But I got real drunk and spent a bundle on cocaine. I can't seem to save money anyhow.

A couple months later, we started seeing each other on the sly. Last week her mother caught us coming out of a bar, so I made up a story about how I was in love with a gal named Helen. She ran the office for the construction business where I work. She seemed sweet and even-tempered. What the hell? As long as I had her along, I figured I could pick up Lisha anytime I wanted.

## LISHA

Roger keeps saying that he'll save his money but he'll never change that much. I can't stand this life. I tend to sober up when I would least like to. I was real stoned when they came for me. I'd made a special trip to the store for black stockings. It was imperative that I dress in black that night. I'd been in mourning for my mind for about a week.

I'd intended to buy a wreath for Roger, like the kind you take to

funerals to lay on the coffin. I was going to hang it off the hood ornament of his car. A wreath of carnations, roses and evergreens. But they were too expensive. So I bought a black rose instead and pinned it on my collar. It was going to be hard to tell him my plans. He would cry, argue, and then he'd try suicide. We'd been there before. That's how we ended up with a baby.

I handed her to Mama and walked down to the car. The blonde opened the door for me on her side. I knew Roger brought her so Mama would feel better. Roger would do almost anything to avoid upsetting people.

"You must be Helen," I said, as I got in the car. The way she nodded, she seemed shy or maybe ashamed of something. She was well-built but plain. Should have learned how to put on mascara. "I'm Lisha," I said, "and I'm proud to meet you." She wouldn't look me in the eye. I wondered what Roger had told her.

## HELEN

Roger's shiny hair hangs over his shoulders like a cape, and his beard comes down as long in front. Lisha looked like Roger, only smaller and without all that hair. Roger leaned over the steering wheel so he could see around me. Something, the way he looked at her.

Then he started driving fast, in and out of traffic, squealing around corners. "Hey, Roger," she said, "we want to live, don't we?" He looked at her for a long time, considering he was driving. He slowed down. She stared out the windshield and blinked when buildings came up. "Jesus," she said, "you're scaring me."

"I'm not speeding now," he said. He parked the car in front of a tavern somewhere out in the sticks. It was called the Lighthouse, even though the nearest coast was three hundred miles away. There was a huge pile of coal slag beside the parking lot and the air was filled with grit. From the car we could see a handwritten sign on the door that said, "No Freaks, Creeps or Dingbats."

"Roger, do you think you might qualify?" I was referring to his hair and meant it as a joke. But no one laughed.

## ROGER

Lisha opened the glove compartment and took the baggie out. "Where'd you get the money for this?" She was real irritated.

"I work," I said.

“You’re supposed to be saving the money,” she said.

“Why don’t you get a job and help out?” I asked.

“Who’d take care of the baby?”

That question must be hundreds of years old and she looked so strained, wasted, I was sorry I brought it up. I wanted to hug her, but there was Helen, between us. I got the glass and razor out from under the seat and took the baggie from her.

Helen held the glass level. I stretched the coke with baking soda and Lisha and I took a snort. Helen watched. Then she surprised me and said she’d try it. Afterwards, I dusted what was left on the glass carefully back into the baggie and put everything away.

I was feeling fine. That damn black hat blocked my view of Lisha’s face, but I could see she was stoned. “Where’d you get the money for the stuff you’ve been into?” I asked her.

## LISHA

The juke box had rainbow lights at the side, “Delta Dawn, what’s that flower you have on?” I danced with Roger, draped myself over him, loving the feel of his body, his hair drifting in waves around my face. If I could only spend my life buried in that hair. I ran my hands over his shoulders, trying to memorize the way his muscles lay beneath his skin, trying to fill my fingertips.

## LOU

The two women seemed to be competing for the big man’s attentions. Clearly, he was fascinated by the small one, indifferent to the big blonde. I decided it wouldn’t hurt to buy the table a round. I went over and started the introductions. “You’re not from this area,” I said, after everyone told me their names.

“Actually, I was born in Korea,” Roger said.

The one called Lisha laughed. I pulled a chair up beside Roger and sat down. He was a real handsome man. Beautiful hair.

“You two are cousins?” Helen asked, looking at Roger and Lisha.

Lisha’s eyes seemed out of focus. She lit a cigarette. Roger drank the rest of his beer. They didn’t answer the question.

“They don’t dance like cousins,” I said.

“How are you related?” Helen asked.

“Our mothers are sisters,” Roger said.

I put my hand down on his knee, pretending it was an accident.

He was so attractive and I don't mind boys now and then, though I do like them smaller. Roger slapped my hand away so hard he knocked my chair over.

## HELEN

The little man got up, put the chair right and sat down again. No one said anything for a long time. Little streams of sweat ran out of Roger's hair and down the side of his face.

"I'll buy another round," Lou said. He took a roll of bills out of his pocket, shakily peeled off two and then he started to move away.

Roger put his hand down on Lou's. "Sit down and keep your hands to yourself," he said. "I never meant to hurt you."

I couldn't stand the tension so I looked away. One wall leaned in and was braced with two-by-fours. Crooked booths surrounded a dance floor covered with ragged linoleum. Large holes in the floor had been randomly patched with pieces of wood. "What a dump," I said.

"I spend a lot of time here," Lou said.

"I feel sorry for you," I said.

Lou waved his hand at Roger and Lisha. "If your mothers are sisters, you're not supposed to be fucking each other."

Lisha laughed. "They're gonna put us in jail."

"That's incest," I said.

"Yeah," Lisha said, and giggled. "Mama tells me that all the time."

"What's going on here?" I asked Roger. The cocaine, the yellow light fading behind nicotine stained windows made me feel as if I was watching a movie. Roger tried to pull Lisha up by her wrists, as if he wanted her to dance. Lou was smiling at me and I didn't want to be left alone with him so I said, "No, Roger. C'mon, you haven't danced with me once. I'm your date. Remember?" He was being an ass.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Lisha said.

Roger and I danced. The floor seemed to billow and slant, the walls tilted in and out. When I loosened the collar on my blouse, I noticed that Roger was looking at me. Something in his eyes dared me. I unbuttoned my blouse, pulled it off and pitched it toward the bar. Some guy picked it up. There was whistling. A crowd of men appeared on the edge of the dance floor. They stamped their feet, clapped and cheered. I wiggled out of my jeans.

## LISHA

In the ladies room an old lady in a blue crocheted dress stood behind the door. When I came out of the toilet cubicle, she was still there. "I'm sorry," I said. "I thought you already used the toilet."

"I have," she said. "I was waiting for you."

That stopped me. Why would she wait for me? Her dress made concentric circles on her big, cinched-up breasts.

"You have beautiful hair," she said. She put her hand on my hair and stroked it. Then she let her hand rest on my breast.

I pushed it away. "Let's go out to the bar and talk." I said. She still didn't move. "I'll buy you a drink," I said. She didn't move. "I don't want you touching me."

When she edged toward me, I grabbed her arm and tried to pull her away from the door. She pulled back and I lost patience. I hit her hard in the eye and pushed her head against the towel dispenser. She leaned over the sink in pain. I threw the door open and stepped out.

## ROGER

I knew somehow that she was going to do it. She threw her clothes all over, big breasts bouncing. The guys moved closer and closer. The circle kept getting smaller and smaller. I said, "Helen, let's go and have a little beer. Aren't you thirsty?"

She was sweating like a horse, kicking her legs high. The crowd of guys watching were squirreling. One of them stepped forward and put his hands on her breasts. Where the hell did Lisha go? I took the guy's hands off Helen. "What did you have in mind?" I yelled at her. I nodded toward the men coming closer. She bolted for the door. I followed.

Helen slid behind the wheel and I tossed her the keys. I was going back to find Lisha. But the men coming out of the bar weren't friendly. If Helen got away, they'd beat the shit out of me. Helen pulled out. As the car went by, I opened a back door and dragged myself inside.

## LOU

I sat at the table alone, thinking they were gone when Lisha appeared. She didn't have her hat anymore. She came over and sat down. I couldn't believe my luck. She must have seen Roger leave

with Helen. I folded the blonde's bra and put it down in the middle of the table. "Did you see that?" I asked.

She unpinned the squashed black rose bud in her lapel. "Do you have a car? I need a ride home."

"Maybe they'll come back."

She laid the rosebud on the table. "I'd rather not be here."

We got in the car and drove a few miles. She told me what road to get on and then she stopped talking. The headlights sliced through darkness. "Why don't you come over here and sit by me?" She glared. I lit a cigarette. I couldn't see what she was so uptight about. "I should get a little attention for driving you home."

"Stop the car," she said, "let me out."

"If you'll sleep with your cousin," I said, "seems like you're not too picky." I pulled over because she had the door open.

"Bastard," she said, as she slammed it.

I watched her walk along the road until all I could see was the big white collar on her dress. Then I pulled out and passed her, tried to spray gravel on her. It was dark, isolated. I could do what I wanted. I could hit her a couple of times, just hard enough so she wouldn't run off screaming.

I put the car in reverse and careened back up the road. She must've seen me coming because she ran like a deer. By the time I got to where she left her shoes lying on the road, I couldn't even see her white collar bobbing around in the darkness.

## HELEN

I drove that rattley old car so fast, it fish-tailed and spewed gravel. I don't know why I took my clothes off. My bra flew across the room like a bird. The air flowing over me, felt so cool. But you can't do things like that.

The road was bumpy and curvy. Roger leaned over the seat to tell me he thought we should slow down. "You want to go to jail for indecent exposure?" he asked. He was real drunk. After a while, he stopped talking. I started feeling cold.

"Hey, Rog," I said. "Can I have your shirt?" He didn't answer. "Where do you live?" I pulled over and got in the back seat with him. He seemed to be out but he would not let me take his shirt. When I tried to unbutton it, he clutched at it. I got his wallet out of his back pocket, then I found a gritty blanket in the trunk and draped it over my shoulders.

All I could do was drive to the address on his driver's license and pray that it was current. I turned the heat as high as it would go. When I got to the house I thought was his, I pulled into the driveway and double-checked the address.

It was a struggle, getting Roger out of the back seat. He leaned on me. I staggered and clutched at the blanket with one hand. I wanted to get him up the steps. I planned to ring the doorbell and drive away before anyone saw me. A bunch of dogs barked. Then the door opened and a tall, white haired woman said, "Who are you?"

"My name is Helen," I said. "This," I lifted an arm and shook the blanket, "has nothing to do with him." I waited for her to say something. "Tell Roger I have his car," I said. I adjusted the blanket. I was trying to seem dignified but the fringe on the blanket tickled the backs of my calves.

#### LISHA

I slid through the dirt in that field. I ran until I couldn't anymore, stumbling over rocks and thistles in my black stockings. Then I sat behind a tree and tried to listen. I heard a car. That bastard. I saw headlights moving down the road and realized I'd run a long ways. He couldn't even walk this far, much less run fast enough to catch me.

I walked all night, looking at the moon and watching the wind blow through the leaves in the dark. You can hear it and you see changes of texture more than you see motion. I didn't want to get on a road because Lou probably knew where I'd come out.

When it started to get light, I walked back to town to call Mama. She said she'd feed the baby and come to get me. She sounded discouraged and unhappy.

#### LOU

I drove to the road Lisha would've come out on, parked the car in some brush and waited. I can't keep waiting. I'm fifty-three years old. I leaned against the fender and listened for her. The mating calls of a million bull frogs filled my head.

#### LISHA

When I got in the car, Mama said, "What happened to you?"



Where've you been all night? How did you get so dirty? Where are your shoes? Are you all right?"

"Roger and his date left me." I looked at the baby, strapped in her seat.

"Maybe he's trying to tell you something," Mama said, "You can't keep on."

The baby smiled at me. I stroked her cheek. "You don't know if this baby's okay," Mama said. "She may have bad genes. You don't know."

"Dammit, would you quit saying that? I want to scream when you say that."

"You need to face reality," she said.

"That's another thing you can quit saying. I can't stand it."

"Look at you," she said. "Another baby. Your tears are making mud on your face." She dropped us off and went to work.

I took a shower and then sat on the bed and held the baby. She tried to pick up the flowers on my bathrobe. "We don't have a chance," I told her.

## HELEN

Roger came for the car a few days later, then I never saw him again. The bartender in Smeltonville mailed my purse. He said I could have a job out there dancing anytime. There were several guys who asked about me. I thought someone should drop a bomb out there and level it, leaving no survivors, not even a pillar of salt. I'll never sniff coke again. I've been frightened ever since that night. I wish I could forget it ever happened.

## LISHA

It wasn't just that Roger left me and took off with Helen. It wasn't just that Lou knew ways to hurt me. It wasn't just my mother or that lady in the blue dress in the bathroom. It was the whole night in an empty field listening to the wind and watching the trees, thinking about Roger and me and the baby and her salvation.

I packed everything I could into a brown suitcase and went to the bank. The money I withdrew had originally been put there for my college education. I went to the bus depot and studied the maps on the walls. I bought a ticket to Milk River, Montana, because I liked the sound of it and no one would guess I'd gone there.

## ROGER

I figured she went to New Orleans so I went there and spent six months looking for her. Every day I went into grocery stores and beauty shops and showed her picture to people. When every cent was gone. I hitchhiked home. Now I think she's in San Francisco so I'm trying to save my money.

## LISHA

I got a job as a waitress in the only restaurant in town and rented a room from a widow who takes care of the baby. The baby is very beautiful and very tall for her age. Sometimes, when I look in her eyes I see the same changes of texture the wind makes when it blows through the leaves in the dark. There's nothing wrong with her genes.

The widow asked me once why I never got married and I said I didn't need it. I sleep with the bartender now and then. When I think about Roger, I make myself remember Smeltonville. It's a matter of learning to recognize what is threatening in the world.

Sometimes at night I sit in the restaurant after it's closed. The Pepsi machine glows red. Outside, snow falls softly through the circles of light from the street lamps. Beyond that, the whole world is dark.

I dream of a handsome trucker coming through here one night. He is very tall, has long, beautiful hair. But he is not Roger. He has to be a stranger, someone I have never met before. He will pull his truck up in front of the darkened restaurant, leave the motor running and knock on the door.