

Roberta Rees / HAND OF A THIEF

Jessie's thumbs on the girl's throat. Jessie's thumbs, her thick ridged nails, the girl's Adam's apple ridged bone. Jessie's fingers under the girl's neck, squeeze the girl's spine. Her hands lift the girl's head off the ice. The girl's toque slides sideways, plops to the ice beside Jessie's right knee. Orange.

"You bitch. You goddamned bitch. You sold them, didn't you? Bitch. Bitch. Bitch."

Her hands bang the girl's head into the ice. Her voice in her chest, burns.

"Goddam son-of-a-bitch. You said you're my friend. My friend. My friend."

Her knees rise and fall with the girl's head. Thumbs on the girl's throat, Jessie rises on her knees, throws all her weight onto her thumbs. Leans over the girl staring up at her, blue circles under the girl's eyes, blue light of skate blades circling by. Swwiishhhhhh sswwiisshhhhh. Leans her face into the girl's, close, so close. The girl's lips inches from Jessie's teeth. The girl's Adam's apple cracking under Jessie's thumbs.

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Everyday for a week the girl comes into the cafe just as the jockies pick lettuce and tomato out of their teeth, throw back their fourth cups of coffee, "Can't gain weight, Jessie, gotta stay light, know what I mean," rush out the door, "See ya Jessie kid, keep a steak on ice for me kid, when ya see me sittin big in the winner's circle, throw 'er on the grill," sprint across Elbow Drive through the Stampede Grounds to the track.

Steam and burgers and onions and mustard and fries and ketchup and vinegar and horses. Horses. Jessie wipes the grey arborite tables, wipes the drips off the ketchup bottles, pockets the dimes and nickels

the jockies hide under their cups.

Warm, she rubs her thumb over their warm surfaces, breathes deep through her nose. Horses and the sweat of tight-muscled men. Boys, most of them no older than her.

"How old are you, kid?"

"Sixteen."

"Ever waitressed before?"

"Two years at the Kitama Lunch on 17th . . ."

"How old are you really, Jessie?" The owner of the Stampede Bar and Grill leans over the counter, looks in her eyes. Grey hair and his eyes soft grey.

"Sixteen in three months."

"Live at home?" His lips hardly move, his eyes soft grey, bags underneath and laugh lines.

Jessie bites her bottom lip. "Liver Lips," the kids at school called her before she left for good, left her books open on her desk, marched beside the river beside the tracks to their shack, hers and Jordie's and their old man's. "Liver Liver Lips." Heat prickles up her neck. She clenches her hands, digs her nails into her palms. Her teeth squeeze her lip inside and out, but she can't, can't stop.

"Jesus Christ," her lip slides free, "Jesus Christ, what's it to you? I want a job. I'm good at what I do, the best goddamned waitress you'll ever find." She spins, marches for the door.

Fuck the rent. Fuck her one-roomer, her hot plate, one mug one spoon one knife one can of beans one mattress too goddamn big for the goddamn bed one buck in her pocket, one lousy buck. Fuck the assholes at school in their new pants and coats and skirts and blouses. "Liver Lips, Liver Liver Lips. Jessie Morris Jessie Morris, More Ass and Tits than anything else." Fuck Armand and Roy and Walter and Steve and Jordie. Brothers, where the hell are those bastards, and the old bastard, where is he, the Cecil King Eddie St. Regis, guzzling canned heat by the tracks? Stay away from me, old bastard, keep your friggin hands off me. You shoulda kept your filthy hands off my mother.

Jessie marches for the door, heat up the back of her neck. Stares at the wood sign across the road, Welcome to the Calgary Stampede. Wood sign, wood posts, Big 4 building square and brown, and way over by the river, stretched out and floating, horses.

Horses.

Jessie reaches for the door-knob.

"You're hired, kid."

Bangs the knob with her fist. Turns and marches for the apron he holds over the counter, his eyes soft grey watching her.

Grabs the apron, yanks it over head, I'll show you what I'm worth buster, flips the ties around her back. Scoops the pad and pen from beside the till into her pocket, reaches for the grey rag beside the man's hand. "My mother's dead. Don't have a father." Cold, the rag is cold. She squeezes, "This place needs cleaning up. I'll start with the tables by the window."

"Merv," he says, puts out his right hand, "my name's Merv. I got a wife named Peggy, no kids." He turns back to the kitchen, whistles. Whistles all morning. All afternoon. Lili Marlene, Pack Up Your Troubles, The White Cliffs of Dover.

Three months now Jessie makes coffee, stacks cups warm from the sink, strides between tables and the order window, swipes the tables clean. The muscles in the backs of her legs, the backs of her arms, along her spine, flow with the sweet sound of Merv whistling. Tighten, relax, up down, around and around.

Jessie rings in the jockies' bills, marks down the ones who need credit in the big binder under the counter. Not finished growing and starving themselves.

"See you kid." Barney Jenkins straightens his cap, buttons his long grey coat. His hands shake. Jessie wants to say, "What you on, Barney, you taking Bennies again?" says instead, "Yeah, see you, Barney. You must be cold-blooded, eh, wearing that big coat this time of year? What you gonna do in a month or two?"

"It's a hard life," she says over her shoulder to Merv, "a hard life when you gotta sweat and starve yourself to do your job."

Merv stops whistling. Peg O'My Heart. "Most of them are on uppers, kid. Bennies. Watch their hands. But at least they got hands, jobs, at least they were too young to be shipped overseas." Starts whistling where he left off.

"How about you, Merv, you go over?" Jessie holds the salt shakers over a cardboard box, screws their tops off, drops in a few grains of rice, fills the shakers three-quarters full.

By the Light of the Moon. "Nope. Too old." The Silvery Moon. "How about your old man, Jessie, he go over?"

A few grains of rice, salt sifting into the shaker, two hard turns on the lid. A deep breath, in in in, she chews on the corner of her lip, blows out. "Missing in action, Merv, he's been missing in action for a long time."

"Hey, Jessie, you so fast you got time to take orders, sling hash, wipe up, and fill the shakers?" Rod McKenzie hands her his bill, slowly shifts a tooth-pick from one side of his mouth to the other.

"Huh, you should talk about fast." Jessie rings in \$1.25. "You eat so fast I can't see your fork, talk so fast I can't understand a word you say, and I hear you ride so fast your horse can't keep up." She presses the quarter onto the dollar-bill with her thumb, flicks it into the till, slaps the dollar into its slot, snaps the till shut.

"You haven't seen fast yet, wait 'til I get the mount Duncan promised" The tooth-pick jumps in the corner of his mouth, and his eyes, one looking straight at her right breast, the other somewhere over her left shoulder.

"Go on. Duncan's lying to you. He don't have another horse. Nothing more than's in the stable." Garth Prentiss winks at Jessie, hands her his bill. \$1.10 she writes next to his name in the book under the counter. "Don't listen to this guy, Jessie, he's nothing but a two-bit jock. Bet you can smell him from there. Smells like a goddamn horse." He hoists his arm across Rod's shoulders, both of them about her size. "Besides, never believe anyone taller than five-one. Air gets to their brains." He slaps the back of Rod's head.

Jessie crosses her arms over her chest, a year or two or three older than her, tight muscles, cigarettes, horses. Men. boys. Hair, one swoop like Jimmy Dean, one swoop like her bothers, one swoop over their foreheads down over one eye.

"I hear a horse calling your name." She nods toward the track.

"Keep out of the sweat-box," she yells at their backs, one brown bomber jacket, one navy pea, "you're getting too skinny."

"They're getting skinny, Merv," she says over her shoulder, "they're gonna get sick."

Merv whistles one more line. Auf Wiederseh'n, Sweetheart. Pokes his head out the order window. "How'd she die, Jess?"

Jessie looks for her reflection in the lid of a salt-shaker, finds her face behind all the little holes. Thick lips, and behind them the ridge of gum waiting for her to forget and smile, forget to hold her top lip down, smile and reveal all that wet that pink that naked. Flared nostrils, fierce green eyes. They narrow and jiggle, back and forth. You shoulda died instead, he shouted. Old man old father old bastard. You look like her you shoulda died instead, his fist flying through the air. Or drunk on her bed across her legs up her nightie, You look like her, don't leave me don't ever leave me, until Walter with the rifle, Keep your friggin fingers off her. She's your daughter for Christ sake. All night with the rifle on his lap.

Jessie blows on the lid, wipes with the rag. "Without the old bastard, Merv. Without me."

"Listen, Jess, why don't you come to our house for supper Saturday. Peg, she's a great cook, knows how to warm up to people."

Jessie lays her hands open on the counter, leans into her straight arms. "Thanks, Merv, but I got plans for Saturday. Tell Peg thanks, maybe some other time."

She lifts her head, sees smooth honey hair overtop the booth in the corner by the front window. "Jesus, I didn't see or hear her come in. Merv, did you see her come in?" Chop chop from the kitchen, and Merv whistling. I Don't Want To Set The World On Fire.

Smooth honey hair. Jessie licks her fingers, runs them through her perm, licks her third finger, smooths her eyebrows. Across the floor to the corner booth, her heart beat-beat-beating.

"Hi." Jessie tightens her top lip against her teeth, lets her lips pull back at the corners. "Like a menu?"

Smooth honey hair parted on the side, pulled back in two pink barrettes. "No thanks, I know what I want." The girl smiles up at Jessie. Small coral lips, small teeth, no broad pink wet. And her eyes, dark dark blue. Jessie's top lip trembles. Dark blue, deep blue, smiling at her. Blue-black when Jessie opens her door, sick-bed her mother's sisters called it, your mother's on her sick-bed, opens her mother's door, I need my mother I need my mother I need my mother. Deep blue eyes blue bruises underneath all around on hands and knees shoulders convulsing trembling trying to breathe trying to breathe trying to. Blue-black, smiling at her, arms trembling heart fluttering

shoulders shaking wheezing trying to breathe, trying, wraps Jessie in her quilt, rocks her.

you
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any
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some men
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men
just
oh Jessie
Jess

Deep deep blue. The girl looks straight up at her, does not blink, her eyes still, thin skin underneath, hint of blue.

Jessie's cheeks prickle. Her eyes focus on one of the girl's eyes, then the other. Blue shards around and around, black flecks, around and around, deeper and deeper and deeper. Outside when they sing, outside in the dark when they sing for her dead mother, outside, the sky blue-black and her eyes her eyes.

Jessie clears her throat, looks across the road across the Stampede Grounds. Two dark shadows float down the track. "Horses, she mutters, "goddamn horses."

Looks at the girl still smiling up at her, "You want to order?"

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"Jesus Christ." In the hallway outside the bathroom, Jessie shifts her weight from one foot to the other, peers down the hall at her closed door. Four times she has come out here, stood with her towel over her shoulder, soap and shampoo in her hands.

Four times. She sighs, takes two steps back toward her room. "To hell with that," spins, balances soap and shampoo on one palm, raps on the door. "If you don't get out of this bathroom in the next five minutes, I'm going to call the police, and if they don't come I'm going

to break down this goddamn door and pour every slimey drop of water you're sitting in down your slimey throat."

She slams her door behind her, "Inconsiderate asshole, two hours in a shared bathroom. Who the hell do you think you are?" Slides over the hanging end of her mattress, hangs her legs over the edge of the bed, hands shaking. Laid out beside her, her green sweater and brown pleated pants. She strokes the sweater with the back of one hand, her fingertips too rough.

"Green's the colour of leaves and river grass, Jess, they're jealous they don't have green eyes. Here, help me wring out these sheets." Her mother's eyes blue-black in their sockets. Blacker and blacker. The bones in her wrists when she wrings the clothes, her collar bones when the soft spot in her throat caves in wheezing coughing shaking. Black in the night when they carry her out on the stretcher, Jessie on top of the stairs, head back, shouting.

I

hate

hate

I hate

Jessie reaches under her bed, slides out a can of tobacco and some papers. One two three, sifts tobacco onto a paper, rolls the paper back and forth, licks the glued edge, presses, tamps the cigarette on her palm, twists one end. Don't think don't think don't think. One two three, flicks a match with her thumbnail, holds the flame in her cupped palm. Breathe in in in, Sweet Virginia sweet crackle Sweet Jesus and hot hot in her throat her lungs.

"Got any brothers and sisters, Jess?"

"You're the nosiest old fart, Merv."

"Just curious, Jess, just curious." His eyes sad grey. He purses his lips, sighs.

"My oldest sister died a year after Mom, Merv. Started with a headache, by night she was burning up. Started baby-talking, couldn't walk. Called the doctor, but he wouldn't come, said put her to bed with an aspirin. She died during the night, crying in a baby voice for Mom. Meningitis, the doctor said. He could've cured her, Merv, but he wouldn't come. No friggin money."

"Jesus, Jess."

"Yeah, twenty-one years old. She was going to get married, a guy named Lester. He really loved her, Merv, you could tell by the way he listened. They were going to take me and Jordie home with them. After Mom died, Elona'd leave pennies around the house. In drawers, behind jars, on her dresser. Jordie and me took them, bought candy. I was a thief, Merv, stole from my own sister. An ugly no-good thief."

"Jesus, Jess, you were a little kid."

"Yeah, some kid."

Don't' think don't think don't. Jessie lays her head back, flicks her tongue, flicks out perfect doughnuts floating up up to the ceiling.

"I'll come by at seven," the girl said. Her voice soft, soft as her pink cashmere sweater.

"No, don't." Jessie chewed the corner of her bottom lip, how to make her voice less gravelly, how to take the fight out of her voice. "I'll meet you there." The cords in her throat tight, but a shout wanting out, Me, She Likes Me, She Asked Me.

"My name's Laurel." the girl laughed. "Means some kind of tree. Not a nice name-name like yours, Jessie."

Jessie closes her eyes, draws on her smoke, hot and sweet on her tongue her throat in her lungs. Holds the heat, sweet burning in her chest.

Mom.

Elona.

In the night, blue-black in the night. Thin skin, bones, him pissed, always pissed. Jordie eight and hanging onto my hand, Don't squeeze so hard, Jordie. In the night, both of you in the night, my hand on your forehead, She can't breathe, Mom can't breathe, get the doctor for Christ sake. My hand on your head burning up tossing side to side crying for Mom, Don't die Elona, I'll be good, I promise I'll be good. My hand on your head, Don't leave don't leave.

Don't.

Laurel.

Some kind of tree.

Some kind of tree.

Jesus, some kind of tree.

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Jessie makes herself slow down. her skates, brown speed-skates from Walter, Walter walking twenty miles last Christmas from a ranch outside town where he worked, You're the best damn skater I know Jess, thump her chest and back, gentle thump thump through her jacket. Past Dench's truck yards beside the tracks, fresh snow on top the boxes. Fresh snow on the train cars, the shack where Glen Hubert keeps inventory, where the men go in to warm up between loads.

Jessie laughs out loud. Her muscles warm and ticklish. "Hi Glen," she shouts, though she knows they don't load or unload at night. "You old bugger," she shouts, laughs, spins a circle, her skates spinning around her. "I know what you were up to, you old bugger," she shouts at the empty shack, "you could've sent the broken chocolate back, but you gave it to us because you knew we'd sell it, didn't you? You knew we needed the money for Mom's medicine, didn't you?" Jessie laughs, wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. "I have a new friend, Glen, a friend." Her voice echoes between the cars. "Friend friend friend."

Past the furniture warehouse, square brick in the snow. Run, the muscles in her legs tell her. Run.

She makes her legs take long slow steps toward the Glacier. Snow wets her lashes, melts on her cheeks. She smiles, lets her top lip slide up over her teeth, over her gum. Naked pink in the dark, a cool wind. A friend, I have a friend. She hums, *There'll be bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover, tomorrow, just you wait and see.*

She arrives before the music starts, slips into the bathroom in the warm-up house, looks for her reflection in the wavy tin mirror over the sink. Same thick lips, flared nostrils, green eyes. She wets her finger, traces her pencilled brows, runs Cool Coral over her mouth. MMMMMuuugh, blots her lips on a piece of toilet paper. A friend, if I don't blow it, if I don't tell too much, if I don't do something wrong. Laurel.

Walks toward her, smiling, a soft pink tam angled on her hair, snow on her lashes. Jessie's hands shake and she wishes she could light a smoke. She yanks the orange toque off her head, shoves it in her pocket, leans against the boards.

"Sorry I'm late, Jessie, I lost track of time." Laurel stops a couple of feet away, smiles. Pink, her lips pink as her sweater, her tam, her cheeks in the falling snow. "You look wonderful, Jessie. You should

always wear green.”

Jessie hooks her fingernails under her laces, tightens the criss-crosses two at a time up to her ankle. Beside her on the bench, Laurel holds her laces between thumb and finger, pulls slowly. Slowly up her foot, over her ankle. Bent way over, Jessie watches Laurel’s fingers, thin and pointed, Laurel’s skates, clean white figure skates. Jessie straightens up, clenches her hands into her pockets.

“What kind of skates are those Jessie? The blades are so long. And look where the boot ends, you don’t have any ankle support.” Bent over her skates, Laurel smiles up at Jessie. “You must be a good skater.” Smooth and shining under the big electric light, Laurel’s hair falls across her cheek, cups her chin. “Why don’t you go around a few times without me. I don’t want to slow you down.”

Push glide push glide push glide bent over push glide hands behind her back warm thighs hot push glide push cold through her teeth hot her lungs push glide push ache up her shins push push glide push her mother cold in the ground Elona cold in the ground not far not far from push glide bent over hands behind her own breath hhhhhuuuuuuhhhhh hhhhhhhhuuuuuhhhh push push dead in the ground behind the Stampede up the hill push push glide glide cold in the ground dead in the ground curled in the push push her heart beat beat beats glide her hand on her mother’s head her mother’s eyes blue under her skin all around can’t breathe when the horses can’t breathe when push glide her voice in the night hint of death her hand on Elona’s head burning in the night push push glide push snow falling through the dark skaters’ waltz through the speakers up on the light pole and not far not far from push glide her palm on her mother’s head Elona’s head her mother’s hand on her head glide don’t worry Jessie Elona’s palm on her forehead don’t worry push push her mother’s hand Elona’s hand her hand.

“You’re a beautiful skater, Jessie.” Laurel hooks her arm through Jessie’s, squeezes her wrist. Jessie’s top lip twitches, she tries, tries to tighten it, twitches, glides over her teeth, up and up, cold air and falling snow on her gum. Her hand flies for her mouth.

“No. Don’t.” Laurel’s smooth fingers around her wrist. “Don’t cover your mouth, Jess. You have a special smile.”

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"I need a place to live, Jess." Laurel drops her head over her plate of fries. Her hair swings forward, covers her face.

Jessie grips the pen with one hand, the pad with the other. Laurel's smooth honey hair.

"My dad kicked me out, said he's sick of me coming home all hours, said he doesn't have to put with a no-good tramp. My mom didn't say anything, just stood there, wouldn't even look at me." Laurel's voice from inside her hair, her hands open beside her plate. She raises a shaking hand, runs her fingers through her hair. "I have no place to go, Jess, no place to sleep. I've been wandering around all day not knowing what to do."

Jessie slides her key across the table, under the edge of Laurel's plate, pulls her hand away fast, "We're pretty busy today," crosses to the far booth. The soft spot in her throat aches.

"You done?" She reaches for a plate, a fork. Wads a napkin, throws it into a glass. The backs of her eyes burn.

"Hey Jess, how is a fast woman like a fast horse?"

Jessie straightens up, looks down at them, boys, three boys, toothpicks in the corners of their mouth. "I don't want to know." She listens for Merv's whistling in the kitchen. Whistle, Merv, for Christ sake, whistle like you do every other goddamn day. She slaps the bill onto the table, "Didn't your teacher tell you whore and horse don't rhyme?"

"Jesus, Jess, can't you take a joke?"

Jessie bangs the plates into a stack, slaps the cutlery on top. "This ain't no joke, boys. This ain't no joke."

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Out of the dark into the dark. Jessie stands still in the foyer, takes a deep breath. Dust, onions, beer, piss.

Slowly up the dark stairway, the soft dip in her throat aches and aches. Slowly down the hallway, hands in her pockets. I did not touch her, did not put my hand on her forehead, did not push her hair away from her eyes.

Stops in front of her door, thin light underneath. Behind her the

floor sighs. She wipes her palms on her sweater, knocks quickly, one two.

"Who is it?" Laurel inside. Laurel her friend, Laurel strong and healthy.

In the dark, Jessie smiles. Big. Laughs, clears her throat. "A speed-skating waitress." Smiles as the door opens and light frames her in the doorway.

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On her back in the dark, hands tight against her thighs. The radiator click click hisses. Jessie clenches the muscles in her left shoulder arm buttock, keeps from sliding down the mattress hanging over her side of the bed.

"Did you ever have a boyfriend, Jess?"

Jessie turns her face toward Laurel's voice, feels Laurel's eyes watching her in the dark. "Kind of."

Laurel laughs, softly. "What do you mean, kind of?"

Jessie closes her eyes. the Elbow River, the boy on his bike ahead of her, rocks and grass under her tires and she leans over her handlebars, pump pump pumps, her front tire beside his back tire, turning into, nudging. Crazy, he shouts over his shoulder, his bike flying off the bank, you're crazy Morris. Her bike flying, arcing, splash into the river, her arm locked around his neck, dunks his head underwater, pulls him up, kisses him cold wet on the mouth. Liver Lips. Liver Liver Lips. The back of Jessie's neck prickles.

"Come on, Jess, I want to hear."

Jessie's cheeks burn in the dark. "Why?"

"Because we're friends. I want to know everything about you."

"You can't know everything."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't tell you everything."

"Why not, Jess, why can't you tell me everything?" Laurel shifts closer, her breath on Jessie's cheek.

Jessie clenches and unclenches her hands. "There isn't time."

"Of course there's time, Jess. Years of time. Friends last years and years." Her hand reaching for Jessie's shoulder.

Jessie flinches. "Don't."

Laurel's hand smooth on her shoulder. "I like you, Jess, I want to be your friend."

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"Thief. You goddamn lying thief."

Blue. The girl's lips puffy and blue. blue light blue skate blades. Flash flash flash.

"She stole my skates," Jessie yells as they hoist under her arms, pry her fingers from the girl's throat, "she stole my goddamn skates."

"Get your friggin fingers off me," she yells as they drag her, back arched, heels banging, across the rink, "I've had enough of people fucking touching me, lifting my stuff."

"I trusted her," she yells, head back to the stars as the girl stands, brushes off her brown pleated pants, her green sweater, skates straight for Jessie held up against the boards.

"Goddamn friggin trust," Jessie yells as the girl's picks aim for her right thigh.

