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## Should Have Known

MISS VERLEEN, HISTORY TEACHER at Calliope high, raises her arms with ruler in hand, like a conductor before an unruly orchestra. "Tea. Fireworks. Pasta. Communism on a vast scale. These are a few of the things China has given the world. It will be the country to watch in the coming millennium, your millennium." She pulls down the map and gazes over her students' heads into a future only she can see. Their loud laughter startles her.

Miss Verleen turns to the map. The couple sprawl over most of China. The naked woman's head is in Mongolia, her outstretched arms in Manchuria on the one side, Tein Shan on the other. Her feet rest in the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal. A man dressed only in cowboy boots kneels on the border of Mynamar in preparation for entry between her thighs.

Miss Verleen scrutinizes the photo, and for an ominously long time. She is a tall, thin woman with a long face and tapering hands. She might be forty, fifty. Her hair, anyway, is grey-streaked and hangs, unstyled, to the strong line of her jaw. And her clothes! What is she thinking when she puts on a tweed skirt with clogs, knots a floral scarf in a great clown bow, when she buttons her cheap satiny blouses so tightly she must be near to choking?

"Ignorance can't be used in her defense," Amelia has pointed out, voicing what their law teacher has said about tax evasion and murder. "It's a crime to make us look at her all day. Torture really."

Sparrow nodded, although she had always thought that a lack of style was something that couldn't be helped, like being blind or deaf. But how could she have argued with Amelia? As their principal Mr. Harcourt once said, Amelia was nothing but sass

and mischief. His tone had been one of reluctant admiration. He wouldn't feel the same, Sparrow vaguely suspected, if Amelia with her buttery curls and womanly curves were not the prettiest girl in school, and made prettier still, Sparrow has often thought, when they stand side by side. For Sparrow is small and has no figure to speak of. Her hair is too brown, her nose too noticeable, her lips too thin. But it is her eyes she dislikes the most. They are dark as tar and almost beady. No wonder the others have called her Sparrow since the third grade. She doesn't like the name, but prefers it to Virginia, her real name. She is a virgin, yes, but why draw attention to that?

Miss Verleen walks slowly down the rows. Robert Knowlins is the first to be singled out, Robert of the honking laugh and crooked teeth who comes smirking to the front of the class as asked.

"Since, Robert, since our lesson has been changed to human geography perhaps you can help us. Please point out *Labia majora*."

Robert's face turns a scalded red.

"Amelia, as Robert has obviously never had the opportunity to explore female topography perhaps you can help us. Where, then, is *Mons pubis*?"

Amelia glares at her desk.

"No, well then *Vulva*? *Areola*? Then perhaps you would know of *Prepuce* or of the region where the *Urethra* travels?"

No one is laughing now. Sparrow sits with arms folded and head down, trying hard for invisibility.

"Virginia? What is the matter? Do you have a stomach ache?"

"No," she whispers.

Miss Verleen throws the photo into the garbage and says with her usual briskness: "Let us now return to China."

"It's an old joke. We should have known," Sparrow says to Amelia, thinking she would agree, for 'should have known' is what she often says about others' mistakes, others' failures. They are waiting for the bus, trying not to shiver in the wet March afternoon, their sweatshirt sleeves pulled over their hands. After all, you do not go to school bundled up like a four-year-old.

"Known what?"

"Known, I guess, that she'd turn the tables."

"She hasn't turned the tables. She made a fool of herself. Dried up old spinster. We'll get her back."

"I don't know, Amy. I think she's on to us," Sparrow says, because although Miss Verleen did not accuse anyone directly, she had mentioned quietly to Sparrow and Amelia that if they felt the need again to come to class before anyone else arrived, then perhaps they could clean the blackboard for her.

"Don't tell me you feel sorry for her."

Sparrow says no, of course not. She thinks of Miss Verleen's passion for bloody revolutions, her dire warnings about exams, and of her peculiar punishments, copying out pages from a dictionary, for example, instead of the customary lines.

What Sparrow feels, she is sure, is not pity for Miss Verleen, nor for the other teachers when a sudden weariness comes upon them during a raucous class, for the frustrations and tears of a substitute. It is more like resentment for the way their humiliation seeps into her as if her skin were a sieve. She cannot not bear to witness tragedy or humiliations, not even on TV, and often leaves the room when a program becomes too sentimental. The sorrows are all somehow her fault, she believes, knowing this is irrational. Well, skin becomes thicker in time, she has heard. Practice is all that is needed to acquire a steely resolve. And hadn't she been adequately enraged the day that Miss Verleen found her crying in a corner behind the school over a boy who did not notice she existed?

Miss Verleen studied Sparrow for a few seconds, then said: "I also had the sort of looks one grew into. I also did not know what to say to boys."

Sparrow stuck out her tongue and ran off, wishing she had not first glimpsed Miss Verleen's confused, wounded expression. But it was unbearably humiliating, this suggestion of any similarities between the two of them.

When the bus pulls up, Sparrow and Amelia go directly to the back and slouch down in the seats. Not many live as far out as they do. Amelia and her mother in the My Way trailer court next to the drive-in, Sparrow and her mother in a ramshackle house in the middle of untilled fields. This journey to and from school is what has thrown them into friendship, more so than the similarity of their ages and single-mother households. Amelia often hangs out with other girls at school, but Sparrow is the one she sees on

school evenings and invites over on the weekends when nothing is going on in town. At Amelia's place they plan for the future. They are graduating soon and thought has to be given to the colour of their grad dresses and who their dates are to be.

Sparrow loves everything about Amelia's trailer, the blue velveteen furniture torn up by cats, the paintings of orange-tinged landscapes, the fridge packed with Coke and leftover Chinese food. She does not even mind being around Francy, Amelia's mother. She has the same neat, pretty features as her daughter, has kept her figure slim and her hair a bold blonde. She has been an aesthetician all her adult life and believes that anyone who becomes a teacher should have their head examined. "I never finished high school," she has reminded Sparrow and Amelia. "But I'm the one people come to, begging to look like this movie star or that. You'd never beg a teacher for anything, would you?"

Amelia dropped to her knees when her mother said this. "Please, Fran," said Amelia, "my name is Miss Verleen. I want to be beautiful."

They all giggled and Sparrow was once again envious of Amelia and Francy's sisterly relationship. In fact, Francy often says she *is* Amelia's older sister, and some people seem to believe it. What mother would bring out the gin and 7-UP on those summer nights when movies are being shown at the drive-in just beyond the fenced-in yard? What mother would they feel comfortable with while tearful dramas played out against the sky, and the lips of lovemaking couples grew big as cars?

On nights like these Sparrow swears she doesn't care if she ever returns home. Francy and Amelia nod. Who can blame her? The multi-roomed house where Sparrow has always lived is, everyone agrees, downright creepy. It had been a hotel/brothel in the thirties, and stood near the railway lines that are now long gone, ripped up during the Second World War when steel was in short supply. Cheaply built from splintery grey boards, the house rattles and mutters when the winds come, as if in cantankerous self-reproach about the drafts and poor plumbing, about the insolent mice running along the floorboards.

Sparrow's father bought the house for a song. Or so Val, Sparrow's mother, said on one of the rare occasions she spoke of him. And so Sparrow has an enduring image of a well-built man, balding and bespectacled—not standing with his arm around Val as in the only photograph of him around—but striding through the

fields singing *This Land is My Land*. He planned to grow blue potatoes, red corn, and a variety of miniature vegetables, all of which would be snapped up by connoisseurs and fine restaurants in the distant cities. He cut a long driveway to the main road, but that was as far as he touched the soil. He produced children instead, seven in all, of which Sparrow is the last. But he could not support his ever-expanding family on the dream of becoming a gentleman farmer. For years he worked at the mill, as did most men in town.

Nowadays he lives in Montreal with his second wife and her three young children. Two months ago Sparrow received her first letter from him in years.

*Come to the city when you grow up. You can learn French. Nancy is a Catholic and is trying to convince me go to church. But I say forget it, I'm not a Catholic. Guess I say that more out of habit than anything. Funny.*

*Very funny*, Sparrow wrote back, then scratched it out. *Very ironic* was what she wrote instead, proud at being able to use the word. People have always assumed that Sparrow's family is Catholic. Who else has such large families these days? But Val has no apparent religious convictions. As far as Sparrow can gather, she merely loves babies and small children. They are something of a hobby. With them she is endlessly patient, attentive, and affectionate. As for the gawky adolescents, the knowing adults, these she does not view as extensions of the children they had been, but as different creatures altogether. Perhaps this is why she speaks of Sparrow's siblings—all healthy and living, though far from Calliope—as if reciting an obituary. "Pauly was a caring, gentle boy. He is greatly missed." Or "Georgina loved dancing. People say she could have been a ballerina." It is as if any place outside of Calliope is part of the great beyond. It does not help that Sparrow's siblings rarely write and never phone. Not that Sparrow blames them. As soon as she can she will leave as well. Val will then lock her bedroom door and hang the key on the rack with the keys of her other departed children. Her bedroom will never be changed, will simply wait for a return that is never asked for, never promised.

And what will Val say of her when she is also gone? Perhaps: "Sparrow was such a quiet child." Or "I hardly noticed she was there." Sparrow knows this is not wholly fair. Val does give Sparrow regular doses of affection. It is written down, most likely, as part of her daily list—clean windows, organize bills, put arm around

Sparrow, sweep floor. A drudge's list. Sparrow cannot believe that her mother had been pretty in her youth, as some of the older people claim. "Gone to seed. You can't blame him for leaving," Amelia has said, as if Sparrow were disagreeing with her. Her own father had made an honourable exit, having been killed in a bar-room brawl after someone had insulted Francy. Sparrow cannot imagine anyone battling over Val, at least as she is now—overweight, with blotchy skin and lank, greying hair. Her pale blue eyes are red and watery, as if she is perpetually verging on tears. But Sparrow has never seen her cry and certainly does not wish to, lest her mother's heavy footsteps become her own. Better to think of her sisters and brothers, if they still remember her. She remembers them. When people ask how many siblings she has she doesn't merely say, "six, but all older and gone," she recites their names—Pauly, Beatrice, James, Georgina, Lucinda, Debra—and tags her own on at the end. On first meeting Sparrow, older people inevitably exclaim: "There are more of you! More Hesslblads?" And what of the whispering then? No one recalls that one mysterious visit from her father by which Val claims Sparrow was conceived. Why would he come back for one night, ten years after he had gone? And Sparrow is apparently so unlike her sturdy siblings, known for yelling in the school ground, for all trooping home together, because in their time the bus did not pass the house. Never was one Hesslblad seen without another. Sparrow hears these anecdotes and for some reason pictures her siblings in the overalls and flowery print dresses of the Depression, pictures them jeering and thumbing their noses at the old-style black cars that rattle by without picking them up.

When she told Amelia about this, Amelia said, "The Waltons, that old TV show."

Sparrow agreed, relieved. That was it. That was why.

But what of her dream that in the backyard is a graveyard with Hallowe'en tombstones, moonlit, cracked and cobwebbed? Carved there are the names of her siblings, a hyphen between the dates of birth and death the only record of the life lived in between. All have died of typhus, polio, tuberculosis, and the like. In the mornings Sparrow looks out and is relieved to see an empty yard. Of course, her siblings are still alive, though scattered over the country. They have not died of antique diseases. Car accidents are how young people go these days, and alcohol poisoning on occasion.

What Sparrow fears most, as she recently confessed to Amelia and Francy, is that she will soon see her own name on those tombstones. Their response was to take her shopping. Amelia had seen a jean jacket on sale that would suit Sparrow to a tee. She would pay half as a birthday present. Francy gave Sparrow some makeup and a lesson on application. She stressed deep reds and smoky blues as Sparrow was a winter, a winter all the way.

The jacket, the makeup, these are Sparrow's new talismans. She is safe from harm, she feels, when wearing this proof that people care for her. But when she arrives home two days after the China geography lesson, her jacket suddenly feels thin and useless, her makeup the powder, grease, and pencil that it is. For there is Miss Verleen's car, a blue Toyota, parked in the driveway. Sparrow almost walks back over the fields to Amelia's, except she and Francy are going to dinner tonight with Russell, Francy's latest. And so it is resignation, not courage that finally propels her inside to walk as quietly as possible past the kitchen where her mother and Miss Verleen are at the table, sipping tea.

"Oh, Virginia, come here a minute," Val says.

Sparrow shuffles before them, ready to give out only stony silence.

"Tasha is going to be boarding with us."

"Tasha? Who? Oh. Boarding? You mean staying?"

"If that's okay with Virginia," Miss Verleen put in.

Sparrow is too surprised to protest. Her mother has never had a boarder, has never had friends come by. She goes to work at the grocery store and promptly returns home. On the rare occasions when she goes to the movies or bingo, she does so alone.

"You can pick any room you want, Tasha," Val says. "I think the best one after Sparrow's is Lucinda and Debra's room. My, they were such giggly girls."

"Why is she staying here?" Sparrow whispers after Miss Verleen has gone upstairs with her suitcases.

"She's in a bind. They're tearing her apartment down to put in a mall. Besides she likes the country. That's what she said. She grew up in Nova Scotia. Out on some rocky peninsula. She misses the wind of all things. I said we got plenty of it out here."

"I don't get it. Nobody's ever stayed here before."

"It won't be for long, just until she gets on her feet. She's had some bad luck."

"Why her?"

"She asked. Nobody's ever asked is all. The money will help put food on the table. Help pay for your clothes, too. I can't believe the way you things grow." Val puts her hands in the sink. The bubbles rise over her elbows. The water steams. Her mother can do things like that, put her hands in scalding water and not flinch.

"How do you know her?"

"From the store, Miss Nosy. She comes in and orders chicken with the skin trimmed off."

What more can be said? But Sparrow will not be going to school with her, will not be seen riding side-by-side with Miss Verleen and getting out of her car. And she keeps that vow, except for a day or two when she slept late and another day or two when the rain was coming in sheets. On those days, Miss Verleen let her out around the corner from school. "Of course you do not want to be seen with me," she said.

But Sparrow is seen soon enough, is known to be sharing her house with Miss Virulent, as she is sometimes called.

Amelia sympathizes. "You can spend the night anytime. We'll sit up late and watch movies from my window and eat popcorn. I saw half of *Blade Runner* yesterday."

"Did you fall asleep?"

"No, I mean I could only see half the screen. It was still pretty good though."

"I might as well. She doesn't notice one way or another if I'm home, now that she's got company."

But Sparrow cannot stay every night at Amelia's. The trailer is small and Sparrow has to sleep on the couch, or on the floor in Amelia's room when Francy comes home with Russell and friends. More often than not she has to go home and face Miss Verleen's attempts at friendship. "What are you reading these days, Virginia?" she asks. Or "I think you're growing." Or the worst, "I hope you know I haven't moved in just to check up on your homework. This is your home. I respect that."

Sparrow's answers are evasive, but she sometimes shows Miss Verleen the novels she is reading, once asks if Nova Scotia is as cold as Calliope, once tells Miss Verleen, and truthfully, that a new sweater suits her. Miss Verleen's overly pleased reactions suggest triumph. And so every day Sparrow vows to be as uncommunicative and sullen as a teenager should; but it is easier all in all to agree, for example, that she has potential to go to university, even



though this has never crossed her mind. University is some far-off, palatial structure, the studies of incalculable difficulty, the access a labyrinth of formalities. She has never heard of anyone going there, except her brother James perhaps. Yes, James must have gone to Business University. For he is an accountant according to his Christmas cards.

At nights Miss Verleen and Val talk in the kitchen, and their words, lent an echoing, clanging resonance, travel up through the vents to Sparrow's bedroom. Sometimes their conversations are as clear as if she were sitting at the table with them. Other times their voices drop and the conversation becomes disjointed, shuffled.

"If there was a strong wind I got knocked up."

"That Amelia is fearless. And I've heard her math is exemplary. She could be a pilot like her namesake. I should mention that next time, instead of giving her a detention."

"Their father'd come at me like a starving man."

"Virginia could go far. She reads."

"I'll sell the house, then. Won't be anything left for me here. He's never darkening the door again."

"I taught in Brazil once and almost died of a tropical fever. The children brought me tea. Here they'd laugh at you if you dropped dead."

Several times Sparrow is about to tell one or the other that she can hear them. It would be the perfect thing to say when Miss Verleen attempts to give her advice, to tell her how it is, as when she says on the way home from school one day: "Your mother is lonely, Virginia. And she feels she is losing you."

Sparrow is in the front seat of the Toyota when Miss Verleen says this, Amelia in the back. She also cannot resist the offer of a lift, but feels the shame even more keenly than Sparrow does.

Sparrow unrolls the window even though the day is cold. "Did she say that? I've never heard her say that."

"Well, it's obvious, don't you think?"

Amelia stifles a laugh. After they get out of the car, she says, "Maybe they're lezzies."

"What?"

"She's giving you clues, dummy. Lonely. Hah! That's what Fran always says before she starts on another one. 'Oh, I'm so lonely.' She means horny. But at least my mom is horny for guys."

"That's not true. Don't go spreading it around. Don't you dare, Amelia."

"Temper, temper. I'm not spreading it. Mike saw them yesterday at the store. Miss Verleen was rubbing your mom's feet right there in full view. And Tilly saw them at the movies. She said it looked like Verleen had her arm around her."

"Verleen and Mom are friends that's all. Verleen's crazy about some guy."

A look of sheer delight passes over Amelia's face.

Sparrow has no choice now. What she overheard several nights ago is this: His name is Mich Tabot and he owns a mail-order stationary business. Twice a month he comes to Calliope on business. He and Miss Verleen met for the first time in the park, at the bench by the birdbath. He knows all about birds. There they kissed for the first time, and more, Sparrow gathered.

Amelia makes retching noises.

"They read poetry to each other and talked about getting married. He said he hoped she didn't mind if his mother lived with them. Can you believe it?"

"I know which one now," Amelia says; "I saw them together once this summer. Christ, didn't even cross my mind. I mean, he's way shorter than her, even with the funny hat he was wearing. He's fat, too. And he's got one of those wispy little moustaches. He's, like, sixty at least."

He stopped coming. Sparrow says that seemed to be what happened because she heard Miss Verleen say: "I'll miss him until the end of my days."

"Dumped her," says Amelia

"Like a hot potato."

"Like a ton of bricks."

They laugh. Then Amelia says, "I know the perfect revenge."

Several days later Miss Verleen stops Sparrow as she is going up the stairs to her room. Her voice is casual, but higher than normal. "I heard the others talking about some man in the park. A stocky man with a moustache and an old-fashioned hat, a fedora by the sounds of it. I'm just wondering if he's a problem."

"No, no problem." She turns to go upstairs but Miss Verleen grabs her forearm.

"Did he speak?"

"No, nobody heard him anyway."

"Was he reading?"

Sparrow wants the conversation to end. She resolves to tell Miss Verleen right then and there that it is all a joke, no one has seen anything, but there is Amelia to think of. Sparrow promised her she'd do her part. And had to do so in front of Tilly who has been spending more and more time at Amelia's trailer.

"I heard it looked like a book of poetry."

"Ah, Rabelais."

"Something French, yeah."

"He's come back. He said he would. I didn't believe him." The intensity in her voice frightens Sparrow. She pulls her arm away.

"Maybe his hat was black, I think so."

"Yes, black. He sometimes preferred black. And black makes more sense, in this case."

"And he wasn't stocky, really. Almost skinny I heard."

"He would be, yes," Miss Verleen says, smiling faintly.

The next day Miss Verleen comes to class late, and later still the next day. The students assigned to spy on her report that she sits on the bench every morning and afternoon. She feeds the birds and clutches a battered book. They take bets on how long she will wait.

One night Sparrow hears Miss Verleen come home, her tread slow and heavy. She hears her mother put the kettle on, and then the slow, plaintive whistle of it. Their voices are so quiet that Sparrow has to put her ear to the vent.

"Do you miss him?" Miss Verleen asks.

"Miss the money he brought in, and, oh, sometimes the sex."

"I wonder if it's the same, when they die or when they just leave."

"It's much the same as far as I'm concerned."

"I gave him all my savings, you know. To put in an investment."

"Well, Tasha dear, at least he can't take it with him."

After six weeks Miss Verleen stops going to the park and starts coming on time again. She marks homework even more severely and offers only limited conversation to Sparrow on their drives home together. She and Val take up playing cards in the evenings or watching the new TV Val has bought. Often Sparrow joins them. She is going to Amelia's less and less as Amelia is often

out with Tilly or with Mike. He is five years older than Amelia but will be escorting her to grad. He has escorted someone every year and boasts that he is now such an expert that if Sparrow doesn't find a date he could easily escort them both.

One Saturday as they are doing the dishes together, Miss Verleen casually says: "It was a joke, wasn't it? You heard us from upstairs."

All the Ds blow into Sparrow, all the Ds she had written out one day as a punishment for chewing gum in Miss Verleen's class: despair, disappointment, dismay, disaster, and: "We didn't know he was dead. We didn't know that until the night when you and Mom were talking about it."

She waits for the righteous anger, but Miss Verleen only stares at her calmly. Sparrow is compelled to stare back. Miss Verleen's eyes are very large and rich brown, her lashes long fans. They are beautiful. This must be what he fell in love with, Sparrow realizes. It is possible then, that people can fall in love with pieces of others, or see them always from a certain angle, in a gentle light.

"I should have known," Miss Verleen says. "Why would anyone come back from the dead for me?"

Sparrow looks away, suddenly annoyed. An adult is not to be like this. Self-pity should be outgrown. Even Sparrow knows it is a useless indulgence.

Miss Verleen continues: "You see, after Mich died I saw his face everywhere, in the street, on the TV. I even saw him in that picture you girls put on my map. It was the man's moustache, I think."

"I don't see ghosts," Sparrow says and shrugs.

"Well, if the living don't bother to come back what can we expect of the dead?" Miss Verleen smiles and places her hand on Sparrow's head. Sparrow escapes its full weight by bending to put away a pan. The gesture seemed one of transference and there is nothing of Miss Verleen Sparrow wants transferred to her. What she wants at that moment is to head to Montreal and turn up unannounced on her father's doorstep and then on the doorsteps of all her siblings. They will take a moment to recognize the young woman who is small and pale but solid as the trees, and then they will say: "So there you are. We knew you'd come."