

All Sons and Lovers

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Sparky probably presumed I was topping off his moonshine in a motherly way, to console him. If that were the case, we both knew I was only playing the part of Mother. I alone foresaw the staging of our impending finale: the Mother would sacrifice the son. Or was he her lover's lover? In either event, there would be death, and the woman would be treasured. Typically, I empathized with Sparky's naivety, but in that moment, it had made *me* the restless one. The child, again. Because I knew the curtain was closing on another glorious aria and none of the boys would even be able to hear it. For they hadn't the culture of the tragic classics, like I, but also because Sparky was so damn quiet that morning.

The way he sat there, motionless, finally, nearly cracked me open. It was our first picnic without his follies, and the silence was unbearable. Yet his stillness prickled the soles of my feet, toes twitched in my boots. As usual, Sparky—quite an easy target for being such a small man—hadn't the slightest clue. Even though he sat beside me in the meadow, he didn't know where I was. Didn't see my mind's eye, wandering into a daydream to weep in the cemetery. My incomprehensible joy.

Of course he didn't see. Instead, Sparky was pouting.

"Francis told me, on the way down," I set the tin cup near him on the tablecloth beneath us, "about S.J." The cup overflowed and teetered on the uneven ground.

"I shoulda known better'n to trust him. Damn fool never keeps'is word," he mumbled through a mouthful of jerky.

Sparky and Francis were cousins, but they bickered like brothers. Deliciously opposite in a way that I had found too irresistible and god-given not to choreograph.

Francis had gone to the river with S.J. over an hour ago, while Sparky and I stayed behind to lunch in the tawny wheatgrass and, I hoped, gossip. For lack of a better term. Hunched over, Sparky picked from the open handkerchief in his palm.

"Try not to be cross with Francis," I squinted at him in the grey light. "He only means to help. I know S.J. best, after all, and—"

“Well, it don’t make no difference now.”

He tucked his handkerchief away and began gathering pebbles from the tall grass encircling the spot where we sat.

“Let me finish,” I said. “You give up that easily?”

Goosebumps stippled his shins, trousers cuffed to the knee. Too easy. He looked over at me from beneath his blonde bangs. Those curls grew more unruly by the day.

“Sparky, darling, you know S.J. can’t stay upset.”

A breeze carrying the perfume of wildflowers and manure wafted between us, making me grin.

“Seemed awful sore to me.” He sipped from the tin cup.

“Don’t be silly,” I said, “that’s his trick, he falls mighty fast,” I added my best impression of a sisterly wink, “but he comes around just as quick.”

“I dunno what yer talkin’ about.”

Two or three pebbles sailed past me and landed onto a narrow trail that led from the tablecloth to our cabin, on the other side of all those hills.

That morning, Francis and I hiked down the trail behind Sparky and S.J., who usually they let their hands graze, now and then, maybe a sideways glance. Today, their hands were pocketed. I didn’t see S.J.’s profile, not once. The harmony that had played between them was falling out of tune and fashion. Catchy at first, then overplayed, uninspired. *Funerary*. I felt bad for Sparky. I could imagine how he felt, entangled in love, in a chintzy way, like vaudeville—S.J. acting poorly in the role of withering beau. But I did not pity Sparky, I applauded. Their timing was impeccable.

Even the weather acquiesced. Each morning, a dry rag wiped across the landscape, leaving behind a mere black-and-white sketch. Colorlessness stalked us from our first night together in the valley. But I sensed a hint of pigment returning. It was warmer than it ought to be. Not at all in the manner of April.

“Looks like another damn storm,” Sparky groaned, motioning with his elbow to a heavy cloud.

I almost said something about a rainbow. Too precarious. He knew I wasn’t that sentimental. There was no way I could say it without breaking character.

Instead, I said, “Perhaps we’ll get lucky.”

He wasn’t listening anymore. He was staring past me. A smile tickled his face—stretching so tight, I thought about what would happen if his cheeks were to rip in the corners—then it disappeared.

I turned to see S.J. rising from the river embankment. He grew larger with each stride across the field. I hadn't witnessed him like that since our engagement party, before we left New York. A cherished memory, the shape of his knuckles left behind on the jaw of the unfortunate boy who asked me to dance.

"If I didn't set 'im off," said Sparky, "Francis sure has."

The very picture of S.J. in hysterics filled me with a fiery sensation from head to toe. My back straightened. I sat taller. I could see only green and red oils and violent brushstrokes. His upset face and pulsing veins, like those of unfinished marble, felt fiercer than any Michelangelo. Halfway to heartbreak, trembling on the edge of completeness. I yearned for the old powers. But no matter how diligently I prayed, I could not yet turn man to stone.

Trailing in S.J.'s wake, Francis toddled along bare-chested with his rolled-up shirt hanging over a pink shoulder.

"Slow down!" yelled Francis, trying to keep up without spilling too much of the hastily bundled knapsack he clutched.

Several paces ahead of Francis, S.J. plowed through the brush, past Sparky and me, and up the trail, certainly unable to hear a thing.

I always imagined S.J.'s head as a thick brass bell. Certain tones, changes in pace, words, and the speed at which they traveled toward his skull could cause the bell to rattle. How loud it must have been for him. How melodious it sounded to me.

"Won't y'least let me explain?" Francis shouted into S.J.'s dust.

Francis's knapsack swung as he scampered away. His other hand gripped bent sprigs of fireweed, my favorite. Of course, S.J. had seen them too. My favorite flowers, my favorite fool, and S.J.'s infamous fervor. The whole scene was hot with exposure: magenta florals, sunburnt flesh, S.J.'s red face. My feet started to itch again.

Sparky watched the two of them running off down the trail, one after the other. He fiddled with his belt buckle, glanced at me, the trail, then back at me.

"'Spose I oughta..."

I nodded, "Of course, darling."

He lingered before straightening his legs one at a time. Sighing, he brushed the crumbs from his lap, stood, and patted his pockets. A whimper escaped him when he knelt to collect the cigarettes that slipped from his trousers.

"Eh?" he angled the box toward me without looking.

I waved him off, "I'll be fine, go on."

I didn't mind being left behind. At first, it carried the usual hush of routine. I packed up the refreshments. I folded the linen. But standing there by myself, humming in the charged air, a sense of power washed over me. Observing their backs trudging into the hills, I was overwhelmed with a significance I had never noticed.

* * *

Outside the cabin window, ashy clouds loomed over the hills. I cranked the player and dropped the needle.

"They'll be back, won't they?" Asked Francis.

Nodding, I turned to the nightstand, grabbed a rag, and sat down next to him on the bed. While dabbing the blood from his split lip, I paused to brush a curl from his brow where a purplish bruise was forming.

"I've seen Sparky like this before," he said, "at the monastery. He 'bout burst when I showed up."

He recounted the story again, of the lengthy recovery from the black eye Sparky had given him. Francis had only been gone a year—was that not reasonable? A man must make a living, and the lumber trade was, after all, a fickle business, he explained. Each time he said Sparky's name, he motioned to a cabinet card of the four of us, leaning on the bedside table, stacked behind some of my old family photographs.

A breeze swept through the door, threads of twirling dust following it across the timber floors. A weight inside me sank and lifted, caught in the current, as the air passed through me and out the back window.

"All it took was a trip out West to calm 'im down," Francis said through a half smile, peering up at me from our bed.

Of course Sparky wouldn't be "coming 'round". No one would. But I couldn't tell Francis that, his ignorance was the reason why I loved him. Warmth prickled in my toes and moved upward in tremors under my skirts. One of the reasons. Did I hear the whisper of flutes and piccolos rising from the gramophone or my imagination? My eyes drooped.

Outside, a cloud parted and a momentary shaft of sunlight fell across Francis's face, accompanied by a few drops from the passing sun shower. He was illuminated like a crystal figurine. I turned feverish and reached for him without thinking. I winced. My fingertips burned upon touching his face. *Please don't break, not yet.*

"It's making you ill, here, I'll do it myself," he said and lifted his arm.

I shook my head and pushed his hand back to his chest, too intrigued by the intense color of the blood on his collar, merely a dream before today.

The door blew open in a gust of wind and slammed into the wall. A shaken oil lamp on the windowsill clinked in its glass saucer.

Shielding his face from the dust, he asked, “And us?”

I tossed the rag onto a stool that slumped in the corner of the room on one of its broken legs. Lifting the hem of my skirt, I pulled myself onto the bed and reclined into the empty half of Francis’s pillow. I rolled onto my side and kissed him.

The tremolo of a cello lilted, and the gramophone vibrated, dancing a diminutive waltz around the marble dresser top. I grabbed his hand and didn’t want to let go.

“Now you got blood on *your* lip,” he teased, baring shiny, red teeth.

The room tilted as the tremors reached my brain. Our hands separated. He brushed his thumb against his lapel and extended it toward me. But before he could wipe off the blood, I licked it from my lip, leaning in for more.

An aftertaste of salt and sugar lingered on my tongue.

“My love, what have you become?” He chuckled and gripped my shoulders, holding me back, inspecting me from too far away.

I blinked. One Francis. Two. Six Francises, wide-eyed, waiting in a kaleidoscopic ring around his face. I blinked again, and they vanished.

I smiled.

“Least you’re not upset with me.”

I could barely make out what he was saying.

“What about S.J.?”

That was odd. A tug inside my belly button pulled me backward. I adjusted my corset. I swayed.

“He just needs some poker, a drink ... he’ll be fine.” He stared out the open doorway, talking to himself. “A tumble in the sheets with Sparky,” he shrugged, “if they buried the hatchet by now, ‘n all.”

Was I ready? His chest rose and fell while the strings swelled. Was I worthy?

“I reckon we’ll be back at the creek come Saturday. Right as rain.”

Francis’s words reverberated around me from odd angles, as if he were whispering to me from the other side of an auditorium.

How could it get any better?

“But if I’m wrong ...” His voice was snatched by the breeze—hitched breath as he inhaled—before it vanished through the window.

That’s how.

Words clogged my throat. I tried to breathe, I tried to move. The room was no longer spinning, my vision spun with it. I heard nothing but the howling of the wind.

It was already so exquisite. I deserved nothing more. Lord help us, we were twins.

Whoosh.

Air rushed back into my lungs. Honey light poured through the window above the bed until the room overflowed. Francis lay on his back. Lip trembling, eyes locked on our cabinet card. I could only see Sparky in the picture with the way the card was stacked behind the others.

Utterly insufferable. I feared a button might pop off my shirt cuff. Within the span of an instant, I gagged and I gasped and I shrieked, all at once. Then, a curious sensation: wet, icy tingling in my chest.

In Sparky’s tiny, printed face, I saw the grotesque nymph who daydreamed in the back of my family photographs, her card covering ours on the nightstand. That wretch of a girl who yearned for this, and now she flinched. Fell to her knees. Begged me not to. She knew what was coming, and still. Still, she wanted more. To me, to anyone, she was nothing but fragile temptation, a child sobbing at her lovers’ graves.

I gazed across the pillow at Francis. He rested lifelessly in the folds of our red-freckled bed linens. Burgundy forehead furrowed, mouth of vermilion agape. His portrait was framed in timber, half-obsured by pillowcases, and askew in a bright gallery filled with still air and sun rays, the scent of rain. I had the urge to tear the painting from the wall and dash away with it, hiding it among my petticoats and sweaty chemise, never turning back.

Intermission—

What was that in the background? Were those faces I saw, painted into the darkest parts of the canvas? A memory, a word, my handsome schoolteacher lecturing in the Louvre, *Chiaroscuro*, a noun: *light and shadow*, canonical, Caravaggio, Raphael, the nymph; unity balance mastery—Sparky?

At last, percussion. And strings, winds, brass—the whole symphony, blooming from the horn of the gramophone.

It was clear, crystal. I did not have to run, nor taint my honest reputation. A woman answers to no one but fate. And an artist does not steal what was hers all along.

The girl cast the painting to the cabin floor, and I heard birdsong as the pieces shattered like glass.

“Don’t be dramatic,” I said.

She does with her own as she wishes.

* * *

Long before S.J., Francis, and Sparky were executed, one by one, before they slept under the earth, before they were lovers or even sons—there was a nightwalk, four nearly strangers, and a palanquin.

From the lantern, a golden square shone, quartered like windowpanes, bouncing over the path that wiggled off into the distance. On either side of the divide, an endless expanse of silvery grass lay out across the hills. And further still, barely visible against the black sky, a serrated horizon, fringed with the sharp ridges of surrounding mountains. Starlight beyond the peaks twinkled at their sharpest points. The peaks joined together to form a ring around the valley.

The landscape seemed to shimmer that night through frozen tears forced by the breeze. Swirling above me like pigment in unmixed oil, a wrinkly sheet of clouds hung low in the sky. Moonlight bled through them, blending with yellow lantern light, and dusting the footpath in a champagne-colored wash.

On my right was the wind and my swinging arm. On my left, much-needed heat emanated through S.J.’s wrinkled work shirt, warming our linked arms. I clung tightly as we walked. My shoulders raised high around my neck to block the wind. I pushed my cheek into my shoulder and tipped my face up at S.J. Twin plumes rose like vapor from his nostrils with every other step. His head pointed forward and did not budge.

For a moment, I thought I saw tendrils of steam writhing in his dark hair. I thought I smelled hot coals or cooking. An unusual combination of heat and pheromone wafted from deep within his shirt. The upturned angle of light from the lantern, wagging on a chain in his fist, seemed to spark a luminance in our proximate fields of air. It was glorious, but I doubted any of the boys noticed.

The glint of lantern light flashed across the tips of my boots. Behind me, I heard the burping and chortling of schoolboys. I wiped my eyes with the flat of my hand and craned my neck, stiff and short.

Francis, in mid-laugh, was handing a near-empty jug to Sparky. Sparky was limp-wristed and, for undisclosed reasons, dragging a barstool—back outside the saloon, he refused to tell us why. The jug fell with a dull ding onto Sparky’s boot.

“Youch!”

I snapped my eyes up to S.J. The suggestion of a tight-lipped smile curled beneath his mustache. But he did not turn around nor slow his pace.

“My toe!”

The harsh lines in S.J.'s face softened once more. His stubbly Adam's Apple dipped and rose as he swallowed. He reminded me of his younger self, early in our courtship, gulping nervously in the drawing room of my parents' manor. How silly Sparky would have looked in my engagement gown. I let out an unnoticed chuckle.

I turned back to see Sparky had halted and was bent over, reaching to the ground to retrieve the bottle. Francis stood cocked at the waist, hands on his knees, still laughing. The jug had left a dimple in the toe box of Sparky's boot before rolling away and spilling into a dark halo onto the gravel.

I tugged on S.J.'s arm with the inside of my elbow, but he resisted. Our arms were nearly unlinked. Then he slowed to a stop, squeezed my arm, and turned his head.

"My lady," said Sparky, bowing low. He flourished his arm and stumbled aside to reveal the upright barstool. Streaks of light gleamed in the varnish along the curved edges of the seat. "You gotta be tired, 'n the night's gettin' late." He staggered a bit more before steadying himself.

"For heaven's sake," said Francis, voice muffled under his splayed fingers.

"Pay'im no mind, madam, please," said Sparky, wiggling his stubby fingers above the stool, "have a seat."

"Why thank you, Mr. Sparks," I said in my most aristocratic tenor, grasping his outstretched hand with my middle finger and thumb.

"Call me Sparky, ma'am, everyone does," one eye closed, the other wide and wet.

I was surprised to feel the softness of his skin, more surprised that S.J. did not protest when I glanced over at him.

Once I had settled into the seat, I brushed off my skirts and sighed. Sparky was pulling matches and a few cigarettes from his pants pocket. He stuck a cigarette into the corner of his lips, offering the other few to Francis, S.J., and me. I shook my head.

"Francis, give the lady yer coat, it's freezin' cold," Sparky mumbled, striking a match. He looked up at S.J. through the flame before tossing him the matchbook.

Francis shook off the jacket to reveal his bony frame. He swam in his traveling suit, shirtsleeves past his knuckles. He shuffled over to me. As he approached, he turned several times to shoot peevish looks at Sparky, but wouldn't make eye contact with me for longer than a blink. I could tell Francis had been nervous around S.J. since they met at the poker table—and peculiarly, it was mutual for S.J. They hadn't yet even looked at each other at the same time. Francis bit the inside of his lip as he draped the jacket across my shoulders. I could hear his teeth chattering.

"Get on the other side," Sparky whispered, stepping nearer to nudge Francis with an elbow.

When they were both in place, Sparky bit the cigarette in his teeth, squatted down, and gripped one leg of the tall wooden chair. Francis took the other. S.J. stood there as if he wasn't sure what to do.

"1, 2—"

I gasped. The chair rose and tilted. I closed my eyes and grabbed the seat of the stool.

I opened them to lurching shadows and the sound of the lantern clattering to the ground. I blinked again. Only moonlight. S.J. was at my back, between Sparky and Francis, steadying the stool. I think S.J. and Sparky's fingers might have met under the seat, neither moving for a moment. Then they shifted their hands. Maybe not.

"Sure are quick," said Sparky with a raised brow, "what's yer name again?"

S.J. huffed and took a long drag of his cigarette.

"His name is S.J.," I answered through a laugh, "S.J. Roberts."

I felt what must have been S.J.'s forehead bumping against wood as he tried to nip at my shirtwaist through the open slats of the backrest. It tickled.

"Well, then, we 'ppreciate your hospitality, Mr. Roberts—" Sparky winked once, then again, rapidly, "and Mrs. Roberts."

I giggled, waving at S.J.'s fangs behind my back, certain Francis was watching that time, but when I looked down, he was toying with his bowtie, barely touching the chair leg.

And so we moved, together, in a procession under the silver light. I couldn't help but envision us from afar, from the train tracks in the East, by way of which we'd all ridden to this place.

The foreground was a sea of rippling brush, divided by the path. The backdrop, layered: more hills, the onyx daggers of the mountains, and a deep emptiness sprinkled with stars. The last lantern post on Main Street glowed far behind us. The profiles of our faces aimed at a fuzzy square of light hovering ahead. Around it, the cabin uncovered its silhouette for us hesitantly, as if adjusting its presence to the darkness, much like eyes do. A flame enclosed in pink milk glass flickered in the front window.

A misshapen shadow prowled through the valley that night. The width of three men and the height of two. It crept along the path to S.J. Roberts' little shack outside of town. The embers on the boys' cigarettes were its three eyes. My unpinned hair was its mane. On six legs, it hobbled toward a rosy beacon in the darkness. The cloud of our exhaled breath and nicotine was smoke rising from the fire raging within its belly.

And I bounced atop, like something precious. Ancient, a priestess perhaps; wobbly, willing, and carved in stone.

