

Boucher Alley

My brother called today. The town finally demolished Shirley's house – neighborhood revitalization in action. Shirley, my co-conspirator in nothing more than being a nosey kid, a fellow traveler on the Appian way of the world.

There was something peculiar about Shirley's house and not just that it was in an alley, which in those days meant the guts of a town, not some chichi moniker for a cul de sac in an over fifty-five community. Boucher Alley, to be more precise, was named for one of the earliest inhabitants of the area – Jacque Boucher, a French fur trapper. A messy business it must have been – skinning beaver. People said the house was log under the ugly pea green siding, that it went all the way back to the Revolution, no farther, the French and Indian, the Seven Years' War. Something happened there and now the witness has vanished, planks, glass, plaster, just a grave of dust and soot.

I wasn't supposed to go there, to be there, at Shirley's place. Her folks didn't want it, mine neither. I can still see the pink draining from my mother's face when I mentioned her last name – Dunne.

"Damn it girl, the part that hurts the most is you don't care if you disappoint me," she snapped. But Shirley, she'd sneak me inside. We'd sit, ignoring homework, watching soap operas in the first-floor room off the kitchen – her Gram's sewing room. Funny thing was, I never saw any fabric, patterns, thread. There was a machine though with a wooden case and iron legs, probably fifty or sixty years old.

Before I knew Shirley my brother and I used to prank call her Gram – Miss Emma Dunne. The number was in the phone book. When we could muscle in on the party line

that is. The year was 1966. One day Shirley approached me on the playground, at the merry go round with its peeling red paint.

“I know you’re the person who calls. Why do you do that?” She raised her wooly bear brows.

“It’s fun I guess,” I shrugged. She glanced down at the ground and kicked a stone out of the way with her shoe like my mother would boot our toys if they were in the path of suction while she was vacuuming.

She looked up, fixing my gaze. “I think my cat’s in your garage. That’s as silly as, your refrigerator is running.” She shook her head. “The kids from the high school usually ask if John is there.”

“Huh?”

“You really don’t have any friends, do you?”

“I do,” I maintained indignantly. “I have a friend named Samantha and she has a Welsh pony and a swimming pool.”

“No, you don’t.”

Shirley had several older “cousins” or at least that’s how she referred to them. They dressed lightly, even in the winter. Not that it mattered. Shirley’s Gram didn’t spare the coal, kept it downright tropical in there. The windows would fog up. When they weren’t entertaining their boyfriends, the cousins were lounging and smoking in what Shirley called the parlor – old fashioned lingo for living room.

Shirley was lectured about steering clear of the parlor while the cousins were socializing. I peeked out from the sewing room once and saw my dentist being led upstairs by Suzette,

a boyishly thin brunette who favored teased hair and headbands. Oh, and filmy nightgowns. Memories are like a painting you're working on slowly, some things change with time and perspective, the color, the intensity, the mood. But I seem to recall Suzette in peach or apricot which she set off with a coral lipstick.

The dentist, it was like seeing somebody famous. That's how it is when you're a kid. My parents took me to a dairy bar once and my 4th grade teacher was enjoying a chocolate cone. It might as well have been Doris Day. With the dentist, I couldn't believe my eyes. He was elderly, fifty at least, and his office was full of mementos from his travels – a camel saddle, a basket that had supposedly belonged to a snake charmer, sombreros, that kind of stuff. In the warmer months he and his younger wife zipped around town in a red Triumph convertible. So how could Suzette be his girlfriend I wondered?

The story went that Miss Emma was part Indian, Chiricahua Apache, same as Geronimo, who had passed through our modest burg en route to Teddy Roosevelt's inauguration in 1905. Going back to Miss Emma's mother, reputedly she'd been a student at the Indian boarding school in town and had been knocked up by a staff member. The baby, Miss Emma, had been given to a farm family to raise, but farming was not in her nature, her blood. She ran off at sixteen and found a vocation that paid better than collecting eggs and milking cows.

Miss Emma bought Shirley real gold jewelry, not the costume junk from Woolworth's. At school, before Christmas break, we exchanged names for gifts. My recipient was a female roughneck from the notorious Dillon clan. The men of the family were auto mechanics and stock car drivers, heavily inked when only sailors and convicts had tattoos. Nancy Dillon was none too happy with the pink plastic beads my mother had purchased

and threatened to relocate my teeth to the back of my throat. Shirley stepped in, yanking an aquamarine ring from her finger, her birthstone, and tossing it at the thug's feet.

Bookie. I recall the first time I heard that word. There was a man who came into my dad's news stand, Lamar Kistler was the name he went by.

"Why are you always talking to that awful toad of a man?" my mother complained. "He runs numbers. He's a lowlife, a bookie. You better not be giving him our money."

Lamar Kistler, I can picture a rangy, rabbit man with quick jerky movements. He wore jeans but liked fancy shoes – black patent leather with matching belts. And he kept his hair long for the era, for a little out of the limelight place like ours. This wasn't New York or Boston, far from it. Our town looked its best at Christmas, strands of multi-colored lights festooned the main streets, the red and green reflecting off the buildings in the evenings from the car's headlights, especially in the rain or snow – magic for an eleven-year old. Like your mother painted up and bejeweled for a night on the town.

The dentist wasn't the only gentleman I caught sight of at Shirley's. There was Lamar Kistler. It was the back of his head, the brown curls bouncing away from me when I craned my head out of the sewing room, worrying how quickly Shirley would be back from her reconnaissance mission for pretzels and soda. I knew it was him not just because of his hair but the shiny belt. And I couldn't let him see me. A short time later we heard music ringing out from the parlor – a show tune – Robert Goulet. My grandmother had his albums in her wood paneled stereo console.

Life was easier for a kid in the nineteen sixties. You could trick or treat by yourself or go door to door selling cookies, candy for school fundraisers. Nobody fretted you were going to get strangled and thrown in a ditch. It wasn't until I was more mature that I understood that the folks who ran our town (and the police) tolerated an enterprise like Miss Emma's believing that it kept the perverts occupied. That and it preserved the institution of holy matrimony once the women weren't as interested in their old men anymore. Back then when a woman hit forty, the doctors yanked out all her female apparatus whether it was necessary or not.

It was Saturday and possibly going to snow, the gray threat hanging in the sky like a cape of doom.

"Going out to sell some chocolate," I yelled at my mother.

"If I'm not here when you get back, I ran down to the Food Fair for some hamburger. It's Swedish meatballs tonight." My mother had a meal for every day of the week. It was very regimental. There was meatloaf Tuesday, spaghetti Wednesday, stroganoff Thursday and it all revolved around ground meat. That's the way it was unless you were from the south side of town – or Shirley. She got pork chops. Two pork chops. On the rare occasions, New Year's Day being one, that my mother bought pork, it was a single chop for my brother and me, skillet butter browned with a splash of orange juice for extra flavor. That's how she fixed them.

But then it was no secret that Shirley's Gram had money.

"Want to see something?" she asked when we were playing cards on the floor of the sewing room.

"What?"

She crawled on her hands and knees to the bottom drawer of a looming walnut wardrobe. Inside was a hat box and within, a pink felt hat with a wide white ribbon – a church hat. She removed the hat and I guess I was expecting a rabbit, but she held out a brown paper bag. She unwrapped the end to reveal a brick of cash, of bills.

“Where did that come from?” I blurted out. She put her index finger to her lips to shush me and hastily stuffed it back into the bottom of the box, covered it with the hat and shut the drawer.

Mom dragged us to church on Sundays. Usually we were late so up to the balcony we went.

Reverend Kreitzer was given to passionate windy sermons referencing wayward movie stars.

“The Liz Taylor’s of this world are not to be admired,” he’d bellow. The seven deadly sins were a target as well. Wrath! Greed! Lust! Gluttony! I can’t remember the other three.

I had a habit of cracking my ankle. I did it so often, I could do it on cue – a loud pop, a snap, similar to a twig breaking. But the acoustics in the faux Byzantine structure amplified the noise and people would lean out from their place in the pew seeking the source of this pagan affront. Mom would swat my hand and I would default to scratching my initials in the wood with a metal nail file.

It was a blustery afternoon in late March when Shirley ushered me in the back door, herding me to our sanctuary in the sewing room. We were going to swap horse books

purchased from the Scholastic Book Club at school. When we grew up and made our fortunes, we were going to buy show jumpers and exhibit them at the big horse show in the state capitol.

My father bought me a riding lesson at the public stable for my tenth birthday. I rode an ancient buckskin named Ben and bounced along around the ring, a taller, more confident version of me. But when I wanted nothing more than to continue riding, the money well went dry. No dough for such frivolity. Thinking back, I wonder if gambling had anything to do with it, with the bookie, Lamar.

The dentist was at the stable the day of the lesson. His pretty wife boarded a white Arabian, a mare called Layla who snorted a lot. The dentist's wife was riding English and posting, the dentist's head bobbing in unison, observing her ass grazing the saddle. He had a silly mustache that looked like it was drawn with an eyeliner pencil and he was smoking a cigarette which he held with his thumb and index finger. Quite the fussy dresser he was, in his houndstooth jackets and matching caps. Driving gloves for jaunts in the Triumph.

Shirley and I were sitting on the floor. I was showing her a picture of a Lipizzaner stallion. Even with the door closed we could hear voices rising, growling, then the sound of something ceramic – a vase of flowers, china that sort of thing – crashing to the floor. Shirley was scared, that much I knew. She turned on the television, a game show, to drown it out and to distract me. Footsteps padding down the hall came next.

“Lamar, you can't go back there,” Suzette screeched.

“Get off me, whore.” A masculine grunt and a thud followed. Had she jumped him and been thrown free?

“I want to go home,” I whispered to Shirley.

“No time. Quick, get in the wardrobe,” she ordered. It was a spacious Victorian piece with two paneled doors, but reeked of mothballs. The door to the room flew open with enough force to take some plaster off the wall, something we would observe later.

I was holding the wardrobe door shut by the inside hardware of the lock but it was cracked, just a hair. Suzette had a two-handed grip on Lamar’s arm until he shook her off like a toy, into an upholstered chair. He stomped over to a cedar chest that did double duty as a coffee table, a resting place for ladies’ magazines and tabloids.

Popping open the lid, he was tossing out blankets and pillow cases, doilies and even a few girdles and other undergarments. That’s when Miss Emma, all one hundred pounds of her, quietly entered the room with a baseball bat. And she brought that hunk of wood down plenty hard over the back of his skull, enough force to put him on his knees and then face plant in the carpet. He was stone cold out.

Suzette and the other cousins dragged him into the kitchen. There wasn’t as much blood on the floor as I would have expected given it was a head wound or maybe the ugly floral pattern of the rug absorbed and camouflaged it. Miss Emma made a call. “As soon as you can, get over here, do it.”

Within ten minutes we could hear a vehicle of some sort backing up to the rear of the house. Shortly thereafter a man’s voice asked, “You ready, one, two, three?” Shirley and I stay put.

“Shirley, where are you, girl,” Miss Emma called. We temporarily stopped breathing. “You seen her, Suzette?”

“Can’t say I have.” There was some huffing and puffing, water running, scrubbing, then silence until the stereo in the parlor was cranked up – country music with yodeling. My mother was fond of a good yodeler. Jimmy Rodgers was her absolute favorite.

When the coast was clear, I couldn’t wait to make my exit. I ran full-out the entire route home, across intersections, in front of cars and everything. People were blaring their horns at me, yelling “You stupid kid, what’s wrong with you?”

A few days later the paper ran a story saying a person named Lamar Kistler had been found unconscious and seriously injured in the state forest by a man who had a cabin up there. The doctors would eventually declare him brain damaged and he was taken to the county home, what had once been known as the alms house – the poor house.

It was never the same between Shirley and me following that afternoon. My mother got a job as a secretary with a company that made potato chips and we moved to a small cape cod on the other side of town near a park and the YMCA. I never told anyone about Miss Emma and Lamar, no person, nobody until I got married and was living in Louisiana and my husband didn’t believe me anyhow.

“Always looking for attention, aren’t you?”

My brother likes to say I’ve married my way around the country. Not really, Baton Rouge was as far west as I got. Never trust a man who spoils you in the beginning. That’s my advice to young women. Because they’ll beat you down in the end. I tried the marriage game again in Tennessee and in Georgia, had a little gallery outside of Savannah where I sold some of my oils and watercolors of the antebellum homes. But now I’m back up north where I belong.

Some folks talk about a sense of place. What exactly does that mean? Because about a decade ago a history buff wanted the town to put up a plaque commemorating its notorious brothel. The borough promptly declined.

There is no place for what isn't fit for the best light, that which lives in the alleys, in the smoldering pile of yesterday, because you don't want it to jump out and take you down with it.

THE END

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