

The Rembrandt Journals
1926

This is Hanssem van Rijn writing. I am fourteen years old and the son of Jurrian van Rijn, or Owen Black as he goes by. I go by the name Ivey.

Father and I had just sat down to dinner. An orange glow was spreading across the sky to the east of the long stretch of brown pasture behind the farm when a knock sounded on the door.

Father was used to people calling on him at odd hours but his patients usually didn't bother him at supper time. He sighed, pulled the napkin from the front of his shirt and laid it on the table in a heap. He got up to answer the door.

I cut into a nearly bloody piece of beef and took a bite, ignoring the soggy carrots on my plate. I heard him answer the door, followed by the low murmur of conversation. Then, to my surprise, two wet, shivering people I'd never seen before stood in the dining room and father was inviting them to eat with us. At the same table where he'd dissected Mother Superior and pulled out her heart and womb. Blood from the beef trickled down my chin and I wiped it away with my napkin.

"This is my son, Ivey," father said. "Ivey, this is Philip and his new bride Hattie. Their auto broke down just up the hill a ways, so before I go take a gander at it, I asked them if they wanted to join us for supper."

The man and the woman both smiled at me and neither expressed disgust at the sight of the scarred, mottled flesh of my face. I could not take my eyes off the woman. She was the most exotic creature I'd ever seen.

She took off her coat and a cloche hat and father took them and placed them by the fire in the hearth. She wore heeled shoes with buckles, stockings, a short skirt, and a chemise. Her shoes and stockings were wet from walking in the snow. Her blonde hair was cut short in a bob. The man was tall and wore a dark and expensive-looking suit, white shirt, and tie. His shoes were shiny and wet. He was muscular with sandy brown hair and blue eyes. "I left my coat in the car," he said. "Didn't want to carry it. And now I'm paying the price. I'm freezing."

"Go on, warm your feet by the fire," father said.

They took off their shoes and warmed their feet and hands by the hearth, and when they were ready to join us at table, I stood and adjusted the straps of my

suspenders, my face flushing. Before Philip could take hold of her chair, I pulled it out for Hattie. Philip sat down and father got two more plates and some utensils from the kitchen.

"Why, how chivalrous," Hattie said, sitting down. "Thank you, Ivey."

We don't stand on ceremony here," father said. "Make yourself at home. Help yourself to the food, please. You can call me Owen."

Bowls and plates were passed. "Where are you from?" my father said. "What brings you to these parts?"

Hattie nudged him playfully. "Go on, Philip, don't be ashamed to tell them we're on our honeymoon."

Philip smiled. "Why ever would I be ashamed, darling?"

"Because they're probably wondering why we didn't go to Niagara Falls or Florida or even Europe. They're probably wondering what we're doing out in the middle of nowhere instead of some place more exotic."

"Any place with you is heaven, angel. Even the middle of nowhere."

"Congratulations," father said, unceremoniously ladling a heap of clumpy potatoes onto his plate as he passed the bowl to the guests.

"Thank you," Philip said. "We're from Philadelphia. I'm an artist and there's an artists' colony of sorts nearby so we're combining our honeymoon in the countryside with some art classes. We passed a convent before our auto broke down, but we saw your farm from the hill and it was a shorter walk here than to the convent."

Father looked interested now. "I'm a painter too," he said. "A doctor mostly, but painting is my passion. I do it privately. I'm not part of any colony. I would love to paint you, Hattie. You'd make a great study."

"She does," Philip said. "I paint her often."

I frowned at my father, thinking of the corpses that had lain on this table and the sucking sound the organs made as he'd pulled them from the bodies and stuck them in jars, safely hidden away in the small cellar where it was cooler or in the barn. I changed the subject.

"Please forgive the way we're dressed," I said. "Didn't know we'd be having company and that it'd be city folk."

"What's wrong with the way you're dressed?" Hattie asked. "I think it's just fine. Why, I heard farm children were sewn into their underwear at the beginning of winter and cut out in the spring!" She winked at me and I looked down at my plate.

She put her warm hand briefly on mine. "Oh, I've embarrassed you. I'm sorry, Ivey. You're not a child, you're a young man, and the way you're dressed is just fine, really."

"Show me the clothes of a country and I can write history," I said, blushing fiercely at trying to impress her.

"Ah, Anatole France," she said. "His style, modelled on Voltaire and Fénelon, as well as his urbane skepticism and enlightened hedonism, continue the tradition of the French eighteenth century." She stuck a green bean in her mouth. When she was finished chewing and swallowing she said, "He wrote a biography of Joan

of Arc. And the period of transition from paganism to Christianity was one of his favorites. I liked his novel The Revolt of Angels. Do you read a lot, Ivey?"

"Yes."

"Do you speak French?"

"No. But my father does."

She looked surprised.

"Une honte," she said. "A shame. Le francais est une belle langue."

"French is a beautiful language," I responded.

"I thought you said you didn't speak it." A smile danced on her sensuous lips.

"I can make out some of the easier words."

"Hattie speaks her mind," Philip said. "That's one of the many things I love about her. She can spend hours talking about the Nineteenth Amendment, politics, law, history, fashion, and dancing. She wants to get a job."

"Have you heard of the Nineteenth Amendment, Ivey?" she asked.

"Of course. We have a radio in the front room. And I read newspapers."

Hattie set her fork down. "Ratified on August 18, 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution granted American women the right to vote." She cleared her throat. "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any State on account of sex."

"Well said, darling," Philip commented. "Well said."

Night was descending so father got up and lit some candles on the mantel over the hearth. Hattie's short, blonde hair glowed in the soft light. Father took one of the candles and placed it in the center of the table. I could see Hattie more clearly in the swimming light; her eyes were long-lashed and a deep, vivid green. Her

lipstick was bright red. She sat next to me, and wore a short skirt, so I could discreetly study her stockinged legs.

"Women are not the equal of men mentally," father said, as he returned to eating. "Being able to vote will take them out of their natural and proper sphere of life."

Hattie retrieved a cigarette from her small purse and Philip lit it. Leisurely, she blew a puff of smoke out the side of her mouth and smiled. "What is that sphere, Owen?"

"Bearing children, cooking meals, keeping the house neat and tidy. And most women around here, my female patients, they tell me they don't want the right to vote."

I was surprised Hattie didn't seem angered by his words. "It's true. There are women who don't want that right. But I for one am glad to have it, and about time too. And women are joining the workforce in droves these days."

"Much to the detriment of their families," my father mumbled.

Philip covered her small hand with his. "I'd have to respectfully disagree with you, Owen. Women are just as capable as men and doing amazing things. Hattie is interested in working to help to reform child labor laws and prisons, for example. She went to college."

"At home, we have an electric washing machine and a vacuum cleaner and a pop-up toaster," Hattie said. "Electricity is a marvelous thing. I'm not going to spend all my time washing clothes and sucking up dirt and crumbs and cooking over a hot stove. Philip knows how to use the appliances too. It might surprise you, Owen, but some women find cooking and cleaning completely boring and tiresome after a while. Some women want to—and are meant to—do more with their lives."

"Well," father said, "what about children though?"

"I'm not ready to have them. I don't know that I ever will be. And I'm not alone. Not all women are ready right off the bat for the home-and-baby show. Do you know a woman opened a clinic in New York City in 1914 and in ten days she and her sister fitted almost five hundred women with Dutch caps before the police came and shut it down? Dutch caps are popular in Europe and I don't think it will be long before they're just as popular here."

"What's a Dutch Cap?" I asked.

"It's a kind of rubber cap. It covers the upper vagina and cervix, preventing pregnancy. Women in Victorian England have been controlling their fertility with Dutch Caps for decades."

I stared at my potatoes.

"It's the fault of the damn war and the Nineteenth Amendment," Owen said.

"Women are confused about their role in society. Do they belong in the workplace or at home? Giving women the right to vote put ideas in their heads. As a doctor, I can tell you, education would be too stressful for women, having to endure long hours of intense study. You could contract tuberculosis, taxing your body with too much textbook knowledge."

"You know, Owen, it's funny how men think women are weaker mentally and yet we're expected to be the guardians of morality. Don't you find that just a little contradicting?" She took a bite of potato and became thoughtful. There was sadness in her green eyes. "Life will never be like it was before the war. I lost not one but two brothers in the war. They almost made it out alive. They died shortly

before Germany surrendered. In November 1918, I remember the sirens began to wail before dawn. Church bells rang. From railroad yards and factory buildings, steam whistles blasted the air. Women pulled up their wool stockings, buttoned their boots, pinned up their long hair and danced in the streets. People honked their horns and drug tin cans behind their autos. Some grabbed pots and pans, cowbells, anything to bang or clang. Confetti flew through the air like snow. I was happy but I was sad at the same time. My brothers weren't there to celebrate with me.

"I don't have any sisters. But it all gave me a new perspective. I'm never going back to wearing woolen stockings. I don't blush when a man hugs me. I won't be ashamed of dancing all night or drinking gin or pursuing work that will make a difference in the world. I will never be the same person I was before the war."

"Maybe we should give them a little time to get used to your personality before we tackle all these subjects," Philip said, smiling and caressing her arm.

"I don't mind," father said. "I'm a doctor. I've seen a lot of things you can't imagine."

"Still, being an artist myself, I'd like to know, what do you like to paint, Owen?"

Philip asked.

Father gave me a look. "Mostly simple things. Goats and cows. Landscapes. Fruit.

Jugs and bowls. I guess I would say...still life."

I coughed and tried not to choke on my food.

"Have a sip of lemonade, Hanssem."

I quickly disguised the shock on my face. Father had called me by the name I was never supposed to reveal to anyone. His face grew red. "That's his middle name, see," he said quickly, "but I don't like to use it regular because it sounds too much like 'handsome'."

"But I think you're a fine, strapping, handsome lad," Hattie said.

I stared at the bloody beef on my plate.

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"Do you paint too, Ivey?" Hattie pressed.

I nodded, unable to find my tongue at the moment with such a beautiful and foreign creature sitting next to me.

"Do you paint the same things as your father?"

I worked up my courage to speak. "I sketch a lot. I paint too, but I'm not as good as father. Yet. What about you, Philip?"

"Portraits and landscapes. A lot of prominent people in Philadelphia want their portraits painted. I have to admit, I have no desire to paint a mug or a bowl or a piece of lumpy fruit."

Looking at Hattie, I could see why. My father rose stiffly from the table. "I'll put some coffee on. You're in luck. We have dessert tonight because one of my patients gave me something called an Upside Down Cake this morning."

Hattie rubbed her shapely feet together, absently bumping my foot. I nearly jumped at the contact.

"Sorry," she said. "Hope you don't mind I'm making myself comfortable. I wasn't prepared to walk so far in heels and my dogs are barking."

"We don't mind, do we father?" I called to him. "We don't get many visitors from the city."

"Like I said, we're not fancy folk and we don't stand on ceremony here," he called back.

Soon he returned with the coffee and the dessert and we gorged ourselves on the cake. Father went outside and a few moments later returned holding a rooster.

"Oh my Lord!" Hattie exclaimed, resting her small palm on her chest.

My father gave a rare smile. "This here is Henry, my rooster. Henry likes to have coffee for dessert once in a while." He set Henry down on the floor and poured some coffee into a small tin and sure enough, Henry had some. "Crazy rooster," father said.

Hattie laughed herself silly, wiping a tear from her eye with her knuckle. I was so ridiculously happy in that moment.

"Everything was delicious," Hattie said. "Especially the cake. Thank you for the meal." She kept a wary eye on the rooster, who wandered away into the kitchen.

Father grunted. "Mrs. Carlsburg is always raving about canned pineapple. She's one of my patients. A widow. Always bringing me things with pineapples in them. I think she fancies me but one marriage was enough. The only good thing my wife did was give me a son before she left us."

We sat in silence for a while and Hattie smoked another cigarette. The world outside the window was a sea of dark now.

"I don't know why the auto broke down," Philip said. "I don't know why I can't start it. I'm always so careful. I clean the spark plugs, check the wires, change the oil, and inspect the brakes and tires, even the spare."

"Autos are funny things," father said. "I don't see too many in these parts. But I'm good with machines, with figuring out how things work, so maybe I can figure out what's wrong with yours. What kind of auto is it?"

"Chevrolet."

"Well, no sense in looking at it tonight." He scratched his head. "Guess you didn't figure on spending part of your honeymoon in a simple country place like ours. But you can stay the night or however long you need to and I can look at it tomorrow. You can sleep in my room."

"Let them have my room, father. My bed is larger. I don't mind sleeping by the stove."

"Won't you be cold, darling?" she asked.

"No," I lied. In winter, the stones of our farm house became icy cold and kept the rooms chilly even when a big fire roared in the stove.

Hattie protested but it was settled that the beautiful exotic creature and her groom would stay the night at our farm.

"Since we're going to be staying tonight, do you have any booze?" Hattie asked.

"Booze is illegal," father said.

Hattie just laughed. "I have such a craving for a Gin Rickey." She winked at my father. "I won't tell the police if you won't."

Soon we were sitting in the parlor in front of a roaring fire. Philip had his arm around Hattie's shoulders as she sipped her drink. Father didn't like his illegal gin fancy. He liked it strong.

"I see you have two ukuleles sitting there," Hattie said. "Play us a song! Do you know something fun?"

Father and I picked up our instruments from the floor near his chair and played It Ain't Gonna Rain No More. We all sang. Hattie slapped her knees. For a while, I felt like we all forgot who we were and who we were supposed to be.

After that father didn't want to play anything else. Soon he was snoring in his rocking chair. Philip stared at the fire, with Hattie snuggled close to his side, his fingers caressing her arm.

I went to my room to ready it for them. Later, laying on my pallet on the floor by the kitchen stove, I couldn't sleep. I was thankful that our unexpected guests hadn't arrived in the middle of a clandestine dissection and that none of father's odd jars with their sloshing contents were in the dining room.

Mostly what kept me up long into the night was the thought of Hattie undressing in my bedroom, the thought of her silky skin touching my sheets. An ugly boy like me would never have a girl like that. An ugly boy like me would never kiss such soft lips or feel her smile, outlined in lipstick, just for me, or stroke such silky thighs.

I was more than envious of Philip, with his broad shoulders, his tanned and perfect handsome face, his blue eyes and sandy blonde hair, and his man's body.

I was fourteen, with brown eyes, curly copperish hair, and a disfigured face.

I heard an owl hoot in the distance, trying to find another owl to talk to. I listened to see if another one called back. There was no answer.

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"Wake up sleepy."

I opened my face to find Hattie staring down at me. In the early morning I'd wandered over to the couch and fallen asleep.

"Your father and Philip have gone to try to fix the auto. They'll be gone for hours, and I'm bored."

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. Hattie wore stockings and a lightweight shapeless dress that came only to her knees. Her buckled shoes still sat by the fireplace. Beneath the skimpy material was some sort of chemise.

"I could turn on the radio on the table," I said. "Father got it last year. It's a newer model. You don't need headphones to listen. Everyone can listen at the same time."

She clapped her hands. "Wonderful! I want to dance. Find a station that plays ragtime." She sat down in a chair next to the table and pulled a tube of lipstick from her pocket. When her smile was outlined, she set the tube on the table and forgot about it.

I went to the radio and fiddled with the knobs. "But Philip's not here to dance with you."

"I can do the Charleston alone but it's better with a partner. I could dance it in my sleep. You're going to learn it and you're going to dance it with me."

"I wouldn't make a good partner. I've...never danced with a girl before."

"Never danced with a girl! Well, that's their loss. Ivey, you're not going to turn me down and break my heart. I want to have some fun!"

"Won't Philip mind?"

She smiled. "Of course not. Don't be silly. He knows I'm not one to sit back and watch others have all the fun. And he married me anyway." She smiled, pushing a

bobbed curl behind her ear. I had rarely seen a woman's ear or neck; almost all of the women I saw had long hair. I'd never been to a city; I'd never seen "modern" women.

I found a station playing a song called After the Ball. The words floated into the room. "Many a heart is aching, if you could read them all; Many the hopes that have vanished, after the ball."

"That's an old song," Hattie said. "We can't dance to songs like that, ballads about babies and separations and death. We need happy ragtime! I guess you've never seen anyone dance the Charleston?"

"No."

"We'll have to rectify that immediately! Thank God women are tossing their corsets aside for more comfortable clothing like this, clothing you can dance in!" She smoothed her dress. "Do you know a pastor once recited a poem from his pulpit that almost made me laugh out loud in the quiet church?" She sat straight, put on a mock stern face, and began reciting:

Mary had a little skirt,

*The latest style, no doubt,
But every time she got inside,
She was more than half way out!"*

Hattie laughed and I laughed with her.

*"I think there's a station that plays the kind of music you're looking for, Hattie.
I've heard The Charleston before." I fiddled with the knobs until I found the
station.*

*"That's perfect. It doesn't have to be The Charleston hit. We can dance it to other
songs." She took my hand.*

I felt awkward. I was taller than Hattie and much less experienced. In many ways.

*She let go of my hand. "Now just watch me for a while." She began to do the
steps, her feet and arms moving slowing at first and then faster, her body
gyrating. Soon I forgot all about the music. I forgot about everything except
Hattie and me dancing.*

My first few attempts were horrible. She laughed, but she wasn't laughing at me. I knew the difference from past experience.

"Left foot tap and then step with your right foot forward. Forward and back and a tap, forward and back and a tap. Swing your arms. Turn your heels in and out, in and out. Now put that together. Now swing your arms side to side when you do it." She touched my arm and then began to demonstrate.

"Good! Now you're ready. You go forward and I'll go backward." We put our hands on each other's shoulders and we were doing The Charleston. And then we were swinging our arms and looking at each other.

"See, you're a good dancer! I knew you would be." It was the most glorious experience, dancing with Hattie alone, having her full attention on me. Time slowed down. Hours seemed like minutes.

There was a brief weather report on the radio; a blizzard was headed our way, threatening to blanket the countryside with more than four feet of snow. "Oh dear," Hattie said. "We simply must have an indoor picnic!"

"We can have leftovers from last night's dinner," I said.

She grabbed a quilt off the couch, a quilt my insane mother Helena had made years ago before they carted her off to the mental institution, and spread it on the floor. It had hearts and doves on it.

I found a box containing a tablecloth and spread the tablecloth over the quilt.

"Is it okay if I scrounge in your icebox?" Hattie said. "I'll help set up."

"No," I said. "The icebox is in the cellar and the steps are tricky. I'll bring everything up. You just relax."

"Well, can I at least get the plates and utensils?"

I nodded and showed her where they were in the kitchen.

Soon we had a marvelous feast set before us. Beef, potatoes, biscuits, and cold milk. Upside-Down Cake. I'd even brought up a Coca-Cola for us to share. Father never lets me drink it. He says it's as wicked as beer and whiskey.

We switched off the radio and ate and talked for hours that way, a roaring fire in the hearth. The first snowflakes had begun to fall when father and Philip returned, joining us in our "picnic." Fortunately, I had hid the Coca-Cola bottle after we drank it.

I didn't want to think about tomorrow. I wanted to freeze my time with Hattie and savor it. I didn't want her to leave tomorrow, as she planned, to return to their honeymooning and Philip's art class. I hoped, selfishly, they'd be snowed in with us for a week or more.

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In the morning, I was the first up, the first in the kitchen, looking out the small window above the sink and rejoicing at the piles of snow that greeted me. Or so I thought.

I turned when I heard steps on the cellar stairs, thinking it was my father gone to get cold milk. At the same time Philip emerged from the cellar with a pitcher of milk in his hands, my father appeared in the kitchen and the smile disappeared from my face.

"What were you doing down there?" father demanded.

"I went to get some milk," Philip said. "Figured that's where you keep it. You said to make ourselves at home."

My father's face was beet red. Hattie appeared at that moment clad in a silky peach bathrobe tied loosely at her waist. She didn't seem to think coming to breakfast in such an outfit was scandalous. She stretched and yawned. "I finished packing our things, Philip." Then she seemed to recognize the tension that sliced the room in half. And she looked out the window to see we were snowed in.

"Don't ever go down there again," father hissed.

"Alright, alright," Philip said, sitting down at the table. "I was only interested in the milk."

"You've seen the squirrel and rabbit skins nailed to the walls," father said. "Sears and Roebuck pays good prices for the pelts."

"I didn't look around. I was just thirsty."

Breakfast was made and eaten in a tense fashion with little conversation.

When we were done I cleared the dishes from the table. "I need to get started on some chores," father said and disappeared upstairs.

"Looks like you won't be going anywhere today," I said. "Snow's probably three feet deep already."

Hattie and Philip looked at each other.

I tried to keep my hands from trembling. I didn't know what father would do. I liked Philip and I especially liked Hattie. I didn't want them to end up on my father's dining room table. I didn't want to see what was inside of her.

I turned, drying a knife with a dish towel. I was going to warn them. Of what I don't know. I guess to get out. To get back on the road, to get away, even if they had to climb through the snow. But father was back already, with a gun in his hand. I didn't know he still had a gun. I knew he practiced with it when he was younger because he talked about it, but he hadn't fired it for years.

He pointed it at our guests. "If only you hadn't gone in the cellar," he said to Philip.

"My God," Philip said. "You don't need to kill us, chap. I didn't see anything down there. It's dark. I found the milk and came right back up."

"Please," Hattie said. "We just got married. We have our whole lives ahead of us. Just, please, let us leave. We have so much to live for. Philip won't tell anyone what he saw down there. Right Philip?"

"Honest to God I won't," he said. "I didn't see anything."

Hattie stood up, her robe dipping slightly, revealing the tops of her firm, rounded breasts and father was distracted. It was a critical moment. That's when Philip pulled a small revolver from beneath his jacket and pointed it at father. And just like that, after scrambled eggs and bacon and cornbread and sorghum molasses, we had ourselves a standoff.