

PARROTS IN PALM TREES

1946

It all began, in Rose's view of things, that Sunday when she and Lydia were reorganizing the kitchen, and she couldn't, for some odd reason, bring to mind the word "orange." After casting about in her head for the correct term, her lips working fruitlessly, she said instead, "Those orange-colored fruits."

Lydia, drying her hands on a dishrag, looked at Rose with a wholly befuddled expression. "Huh?" she said.

"*Those*," Rose said, jabbing her finger good-humoredly at the bin of red-ball oranges Lydia had slid under the table so they could clean behind the ice box.

Lydia looked at the bin and then back at Rose. "You mean the *oranges*."

"Goodness," Rose said. She pressed a flustered hand against her breast bone and chuckled self-consciously. "Of course—the *oranges*."

Orange-colored fruit? Rose tried to gloss over this glitch in her thinking as if nothing had happened. She showed Lydia exactly where on the counter the orange bin should henceforth be positioned, but she sensed that Lydia had flagged her mistake as something more than a simple failure of word retrieval. The girl's ears looked pricked up, like that cocker spaniel they'd briefly owned—What was his name?—when he heard the postman mount the porch steps. Trying not to look at Lydia, Rose scrubbed down the kitchen counter until she was glazed with perspiration. The rest of that afternoon she felt something tiny and hard, like a swallowed pip, churning away in her stomach. *Oranges*, of course. *Oranges*. *Oranges*. *Oranges*. *Oranges*.

But had Rose been more honest with herself, or perhaps just a little more aware, she would have admitted that this was just another in a lengthening list of mildly disquieting mix-ups. Twice in the last month, she had turned down the wrong spoke of the plaza circle on her way home and found herself over by the railroad depot, with no idea how she'd arrived there. At the Woolworth cash register, she'd dipped into her coin purse for her carefully folded five-dollar bill and found only a jingle of nickels and dimes. She ransacked her mind but found not a shred of recollection where she'd spent the rest. And only yesterday she'd come *this close* to

crimping the top crust on an empty pie, while the sliced apples simmered on the stovetop at her elbow in plain view. She had a lot on her mind, she told herself. There was just too much for one woman to juggle. Was it any wonder she got all muddled?

But then, a few mornings after the orange bin episode, Rose—running late as usual—scurried out to her Chevrolet on her way to work. Lydia followed her out on the porch and called to her as she was inserting the key in the driver side door of her Chevy.

“Shoes,” Lydia said from the front steps, pointing down at her own feet.

Rose looked down to find herself not only shoeless but without stockings. Her flustered cheeks burned. The sight of her bare toes made her light-headed. She braced herself with one hand on the car’s roof. How had she trod across all that prickly brown grass without noticing?

Lydia came to her, took her by the elbow, and led her back inside. Lydia sat her down on a chair in the parlor and then knelt at her feet looking up at her, searching her eyes for something. The girl’s pretty young face was etched with concern.

“My mind’s just somewhere else,” Rose assured her, making herself beam serenely down at the girl. “I was in a rush. It’s nothing to fuss about.”

But Lydia, ever headstrong, kept Rose pinned to the chair. The girl insisted on calling the packinghouse to say that Rose wouldn’t be coming in today, and then she phoned the doctor’s office. Rose sat in the parlor, hands twisting in her lap, feeling the cold floorboards under her bare soles and trying not to let herself get worked up. All the while she could hear Lydia talking quickly, and in a hushed voice, into the hallway telephone.

And then Lydia was back in the parlor holding a pair of Rose’s shoes, which—though Rose felt it would be ungracious to point out at such a moment—didn’t come close to matching the smart periwinkle dress she was wearing. “Honestly, I’m fine,” Rose insisted, but Lydia was already slipping the shoes on Rose’s bare feet, like that pushy salesgirl at the Florsheim shop.

On their way downtown in Lydia’s car, Rose chewed on her lower lip and rehearsed in her head what she would tell Dr. Wilkins the moment she got him alone: She had simply come out to the car to get something she’d left there—the case for her reading glasses. Of course, she hadn’t planned to drive away without her shoes! Lydia, who would someday soon be her daughter in law, could be a bit forceful at times. Jumped to

conclusions. Wouldn't always listen to reason. She was a headstrong girl, that one—but a fine match for Alvie, didn't he think?

But when the nurse leaned into the waiting room with her clipboard and called Rose's name, Lydia stood along with her and led her by the elbow to the door the nurse held open. What was the girl thinking? That Rose couldn't walk on her own? Was she expecting to waltz with Rose into the private inner sanctum of her doctor's office?

In the examining room, Lydia sank into the corner chair, looking anxious and expectant, while the nurse took Rose's blood pressure, a second and third time, and then left the two of them alone. Rose perched uncomplaining on the edge of the padded examination table—since there was now nowhere else to sit except Dr. Wilkins' own rolling stool. It was ill mannered and presumptuous of Lydia to have pushed her way in like this, but Dr. Wilkins, that wonderfully understanding man, was sure to ask the girl to leave.

But Lydia's trespass was quickly wiped away by the next. When the knock came on the examining room door, in walked young Dr. Evans, his hair thinning on top now and peppered with gray. He wore one of those absurd flowered ties that were the newest fad. Rose stood up when she recognized him. Were those bags under his eyes? Most women found Dr. Evans dashing—even Rose would admit that he was handsome in a vulgar sort of way. But today he looked sallow and run-down, his face inflated with middle age. Someone should take a look at *him*, Rose thought. She suppressed a small wicked smile. Dr. Evans greeted her with a bowing sort of nod, but Rose just shook her head at him.

"I'm sorry," Rose told him, gathering the collar of her dress together at her throat. "But I'd like to be seen by Doctor Wilkins. *He's* my regular physician."

Lydia gave a little gasp and clamped her fist to her mouth. She looked at the doctor, who patted Rose's shoulder as if she were a crying child brought to him with a scraped knee. "Doctor Wilkins is no longer with us," Dr. Evans said—a little too loudly and consolingly, Rose thought.

"Not *with* us?" Rose repeated, bewildered.

"Doctor Wilkins *died*," Lydia told her, setting her hand on Rose's other shoulder. "Remember?"

Rose felt the air go out of her. She sat down suddenly on the examination table. She peered at the doctor's pale blue eyes and thickening features, and flattened her palm over her staggering heart. "When did this hap-

pen?" was all she could think of to say. The news struck a surprising chord of melancholy and regret in Rose, though she wasn't quite sure why.

Dr. Evans nodded at her with a look of contrived, professional consolation. "A little over a year ago," he said soothingly.

"Why did no one inform me?" Rose demanded, but, instead of answering, Dr. Evans rudely shone a tiny flashlight into one of her eyes and then the other. Rose wanted to look away, but he held her chin firmly in his rubbery-clean hand, twisting her head this way and that as he stared, his face a little upturned, into her eyes.

Clearly, someone should have brought Rose this news. Dr. Wilkins had been their family physician for years—he'd delivered the boys, took out their tonsils, nursed them through the mumps and measles and scarlet fever, admitted Alvie to the hospital the awful night of the accident. Why, he was so much more than just a physician to Rose!

"Why wasn't I told?" she asked again.

Dr. Evans finally surrendered her chin, and Rose looked over at Lydia. The girl sat slumped on the chair, leaning with one elbow on the tiny sink. Her other hand covered her mouth. She seemed about to cry. Rose brushed aside the doctor and stood. She went to Lydia and, standing over her, stooped and held the poor girl in an awkward embrace.

Lydia seemed to float up into her arms. "Oh, Ma," the girl sobbed. "It's going to be all right."

Rose stroked the girl's hair. "Of course," she cooed into Lydia's ear. "Don't be silly. Of course everything's going to be all right."



Rose lay in her roomy four-poster bed wondering what time it was. The sun had barely gone down as far as she could tell, and here she was, tucked into bed by her son and his soon-to-be fiancée, like she was their toddler. Had they even eaten dinner tonight? Rose couldn't remember. She ran her tongue across her teeth but that revealed nothing. Had the rest of them sat down at the table together and forgotten her?

This whole situation just wouldn't do. She couldn't have her own children fawning over her the way they had done since she'd got home from the hospital. *Observation*, Dr. Evans had called it, but for three days those flighty nurses had rarely bothered to observe anything about her,

and then there was that other awful doctor with his icy hands and his countless queries about the President and the months of the year! Who wouldn't be confused by such a tedious and trivial catechism! Had that boy got his medical training on some radio quiz show?

And now, to add insult to injury, she was back in her own home, with her children being *too* observant, *too* attentive. One of the three of them—she was counting Lydia as one of her children now, and why shouldn't she?—was sure to follow her from the room every time she got up, like dogs expecting to be fed. (What was the name of that dog they'd had? A poodle, wasn't it? Or had that been her mother's dog?)

Her children smiled at her inanely any time she addressed them, whispered to each other as if she wouldn't notice, insisted on doing things for her that she was perfectly capable of doing on her own. It was bad enough that they kept her from going to work, but now Lydia was doing all the cooking and household chores when she got home from the newspaper. What was Rose supposed to do with her days?

And then Frankie had gone out and taken a job. He'd jumped on the first one to come along—taking in rolls of film at the camera shop and sealing them in little envelopes for Mr. Passic in the back. Until last Christmas this had been the job of Liz Jusino's boy, a lanky, spotty kid not even out of high school. Was *that* any kind of job for a war hero like Frankie? Rose could picture it perfectly, and the image made her stomach roil: her Frankie behind the counter with a pencil stub tucked behind one ear. She imagined the jingle of the bell above the door and the dank chemical smell of the place. She pictured the glass case full of old cameras and lenses, the green ILFORD sign above the cash register. She imagined Frankie licking his dull pencil point and jotting on the envelope and listening to his customers' pointless stories about twelfth birthday parties and trips to the beach and the sunburns they'd all got. Her Frankie who had nearly died for his country! It was enough to make a person ill.

Rose picked fretfully at the lint on her quilted counterpane and thought now of the sorting belts at the packinghouse running the last few days without her. The notion brought a selfless lump to her throat. During the depression years the sorters had mostly been women like herself—pressed bravely into service by families in need, women from homes dotted around the various neighborhoods of Richland, women she'd bump into at the green grocers or the butcher shop on the weekends. But in the years since the war broke out, these women had drifted away from the packinghouse, replaced by smaller, brown-skinned, Spanish-speaking women—around whom Rose was at first self-conscious. But in the last

year or two, she had truly grown to love these women and their rustic smiling ways. She advised them about the proper handling of citrus fruit, instructed them helpfully with their English, stood up for them when the line boss came around, listened to the comforting din of their fast and incomprehensible language—a constant burble, like the sound of oranges tumbling into their bins. Lying in her bed now Rose imagined all those tiny women without her to speak up for them. What would they do now? Who would be there to help them? She shouldn't be lying here like an invalid; that much was certain. She was just a little tired. Who wouldn't slow down a step or two by the age of fifty-one?

And fifty-one, now that she thought about it, wasn't any age at all—why her grandma Ellie was still sharp as a paring knife on her ninetieth birthday! A few days rest and she'd show them all she was the same old Rose—still the same woman who had been both mother and father to two strapping boys and guarded them through a depression and a world war.

She pulled back the covers and sat up on her bed, swinging her feet down to the floor. She burrowed her feet into her waiting slippers and stood—but couldn't then recollect where she was headed. When she came out to the front parlor, cinching her bathrobe around her, she found Frankie sitting in the dark, smoking a cigarette.

"Ma?" he said. "You all right?" He didn't look shocked to see her there, which told Rose it couldn't be terribly late yet. Frankie reached up and switched on the floor lamp beside the sofa, and the sudden light seemed to bulge uncomfortably inside Rose's head.

She sat down heavily on the end of the sofa and blinked there a moment getting her bearings. She wanted to ask where Alvie and Lydia were but worried that she may have already been told and that it had slipped her mind. "I thought I'd do some reading," she told Frankie.

"Sure, Ma," he said. "You want me to turn down the music?"

Only when he mentioned it did the music seem to arrive in Rose's ears. How had she missed that blaring trombone? There was, she had to admit, a weird, hitching delay in her thinking these days, like the sudden stuttering of a film running through a projector—and then the movie would gather up, catch in the sprockets again, and run at normal speed, leaving her wondering if it had ever really happened at all.

"Have you seen my book?"

Frankie shook his head. "No, Ma, what book is that?"

The title was on the tip of her tongue—some drivel she'd been reading about a farm and two sides of a family feuding over the acreage—but she couldn't bring the name to mind, so, rather than look foolish, she said brightly, "Oh, that's right: I lent it to one of the nurses at the hospital! I suppose I'll have to start a new one." She waved blithely at the small case of books behind the floor lamp on Frankie's side of the sofa. "Pick one for me, Frankie," she said.

Frankie looked jadedly at the bookcase and then back at her. He rubbed at the stubble on his chin. "Anything?" he said.

"Yes. Just pick one out." She gave his knee a pat, as if this would be a grand lark for both of them. "One that looks nice."

Frankie shrugged and, without shifting his position on the sofa, slipped a squat green book from the shelf. The book had no dust jacket. Frankie turned it over, tilted his head to see the title on the spine and then handed it to her.

"Why, thank you, Frankie," she said, accepting the book with a smile of gratitude that was ceremonial in its grandeur. She set the book on her lap and opened it. *The Grapes of Wrath*: hadn't she read this one before? Or was she thinking of that song they used to sing at school? Or was it at church? Rose stared at the first page while Frankie yawned, got up and went to turn his record over. While her son cued up his music, Rose chipped away at the book's first impenetrable paragraph—something about the earth and the rain and the sky—but its meaning seemed to stiff-arm her away. Her mind kept being deflected off the page to other things.

Frankie sat back down next to her and arranged himself for a long haul of music listening, so Rose made herself content with being beside him, turning the page every once in a while when she thought it might be time to do so. Writers today, she had noticed, couldn't tell an engaging story to save their lives—how could anyone be expected to concentrate on these meandering sentences that swam on the page like a school of minnow in the shallows?

While she stared at the open book, and Frankie smoked beside her with his eyes closed, Rose's mind flitted about and lighted on the blue dragonflies in the Newport Beach estuary. As a child, she used to chase them from bush to bush until she caught them by the tail, between her finger and thumb. She felt the small frantic tugs and scrambles of the insect trying to free itself. She felt her own small fingers creaky with a seawater glaze.

For someone who couldn't these days call to mind which knob operated which burner on the stove she'd cooked on for more than twenty years, Rose now found her thoughts often intruded upon by impossibly vibrant memories she hadn't entertained in years. She thought now, abruptly and without antecedent, of Miss Figman, the typing teacher at Freemont Academy, the all-girl school Rose had attended in her early teens. Rose pictured exactly the way the tiny woman paced the rows, hands linked behind her back, peering at the text that accumulated above each clacking typewriter's black roller. Rose remembered the flock of escaped and breeding parrots that some mornings roosted noisily outside the second-floor window in the campus palm trees, squawking loud enough to drown out even the assiduous, collective tating of all those typewriters.

Rose took a quick breath and looked up from her book. She glanced at Frankie, who sat beside her serenely, engrossed in his music. A ribbon of smoke dangled down to the glowing tip of his cigarette. Rose pressed a hand over her thumping heart. Where had those images come from? Why had they lain in wait all these years only to pounce upon her now? There was a flustering *presentness* to the memories that ambushed her these days. They were so lucid, so *authentic*—much more vivid than the parlor she blinked around at now. The objects in her memories were somehow more solid than the real book now in her lap, their people somehow more plausible than the man smoking beside her. Departing them was like stepping from a moving car and tumbling into the ditch of the real world.



But memories weren't the only things that leapt to Rose's mind and set it skittering in unpredictable directions. One Saturday evening, a few weeks later, geometry began to press upon her from every side. She was sitting at the dinner table with the others, when suddenly the right angularity of the window casements and the cupboard doors and the corners of the ceiling leapt out at her in a way that took her breath away. She had the presence of mind to cover her look of sudden shock by pressing her napkin to her lips and coughing delicately, as if a shred of Lydia's chicken casserole had gone down the wrong way.

But, later that same night, when they all retired to the parlor to listen to *The Burns and Allen Show*, the same thing happened again. The round knobs and dials of Frankie's radio seemed to glow at her in their perfect crystalline circularity. The next instant, the grid of glass panes in the front windows achieved a blinding and beautiful symmetry. One by one the things around her in the parlor seemed to disassemble before her eyes

into independent shapes, floating and marvelous—platonic ideals freed fleetingly from their instantiation in everyday objects. Rose had the urge to elbow Alvie, who had nodded asleep, chin on his chest—but, upon reflection, decided she had better not. This geometric epiphany was meant for her alone. It would only worry the others if she were to point it out to them—and the sensation never visited her again after that evening.

But then there was the afternoon when smells got inexplicably cross-wired. A bottle of uncapped Coca Cola hissed forth the scent of baking bread. The roses Lydia set out in a vase on the entry table, upon inspection, smelled pungently of shoe polish. A peeled banana reeked of wet dog. This muddle of scents robbed Rose of her appetite for days when a buttered cob of corn suddenly filled her mouth with the flavor of tar-nished pennies.

Rose's days became increasingly punctuated with visions of the past that swooped her up to dizzying hallucinatory heights and then, just as abruptly, plunged her back into the mundane present. She again saw every age-slackened muscle on the old man she'd seen bathing naked in a river when she'd wandered away from a family picnic at the age of nine. Again, she doused the backyard fire nine-year-old Frankie set with Alvie's magnifying glass. Again she saw Baby Doris in her basinet between her brothers, grasping at the air with her small red fists—saw even the slits of her eyes, with their tiny arcs of damp black lashes, that uncanny apple birthmark on her shoulder. Rose saw all these things again—lived them, breathed them—and then quit them just as she was getting her bearings.

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Rose was sitting on the front porch swing one afternoon, waiting for someone to come home and drive her to the Woolworth for some yarn, when the memory of Grady Weems, partner in her father's law firm, stole upon her. Weems, a man her father's age, wore a preened walrus mustache that was, despite his head of dense coppery hair, flamboyantly white. That particular drowsy afternoon Mr. Weems and her father lounged out on the sun porch of the summer home in Newport Beach. The men sat in their shirtsleeves, across from one another at the white table, a scattered pinochle deck abandoned between them. Both men had taken off their straw boaters, and the two hats lay brim up on the porch rail, as if the men might be using them as ashtrays for the cigars they were smoking.

Rose, the spinster daughter in her late twenties, had been sent out by the men's wives with two tall glasses of lemonade. These she primly set on the table between them. When Rose glanced up, she saw that Mr. Weems' red hair, slick with summer perspiration, had retained the shape of the hat he'd doffed. The sight of him—he looked as if the top of his head could be lifted off like a cookie jar—took Rose by surprise and made her smile. At that precise moment a breeze drew back the veil of cigar smoke between them and strummed a wind chime somewhere overhead. Mr. Weems straightened suddenly and smiled back at her, and then glanced guiltily beyond her at her father who was leaning on the railing, looking out over the water. Then, eyes still on her father, Mr. Weems had reached out and brushed his fingertips across the back of Rose's hand, which still rested on the table top.

Rose retreated, without a word, to the house's dark entryway, and paused there a moment, her heart racing. His touch had been deliberate, that much she understood—but what could it possibly mean? Her face stinging, she trotted up the stairs to her bedroom unseen. She pulled the door closed, sat on the edge of her single bed and looked numbly at the bright curtains that billowed out from her windows. Down below she heard her father cough and mumble, and then she heard the chairs pushed back and the sound of the two men scuffling down the porch steps and away towards the beach. She lay back on her bed and closed her eyes, still feeling Mr. Weems' touch tingling on her skin.

And then Rose looked down to find another manly hand on her own. "Were you asleep?" Alvie asked, crouching before her.

"Asleep?" she said. She blinked and looked around. She was sitting on the porch swing now, and there was Lydia's car parked out in front of the house, and there was Lydia looking over Alvie's shoulder, eyeing her curiously.

"Your hands were moving," Alvie informed her. He smiled up at her. "It was like you were washing them under a faucet, but you looked like you were sleeping."

"Sleeping," Rose said. "Yes, sleeping." She yawned and stretched her arms daintily over her head, feigning a drowsiness she didn't feel at all.

Alvie straightened up and stood over her. Had the two of them just arrived home, or were they about to leave? "Nothing like a nap in the afternoon," he said jovially. And then he passed her, humming to himself,

and went into the house. Lydia paused a moment and regarded Rose with an expression of distant concern before she followed him inside.

The odd thing, Rose began to feel, was the way her return to the present was always something of a let down, like waking from a pleasant dream in which she was again percolating with potential, a dream in which anything might yet happen. Her life these days seemed so drained of drama, so unvarying and dull, so empty of promise—as flavorless as the store-bought bread Lydia had lately been bringing home from the knew Skaggs they'd put up on Kolar Street.

And then, as the weeks passed, a balance seemed to tip—perhaps because Rose, herself, had begun to lean in the direction of memory. Recollection overtook awareness. The past outran the present. Rose slipped into a montage of cross-faded scenes: again and again she visited certain moments, the echoes of which never seemed to fade—the phone call that her small fortune of blue-chip stock had vanished, as feared, in the Crash; the night she burst into the hospital room to find Alvie, his left leg hoisted with pulleys and wires, slap-happy with morphine and his brother nowhere to be found; the bleak December morning she reached down and found Baby Doris's cheek cold as a lichen-crusting tombstone.

Again and yet again Rose found herself back in their rambling house in Temple City, and she was lying late in bed that April Saturday, cupping one hand under her belly. She'd lied to her mother, claiming it was influenza, but Rose knew better, and she knew she wouldn't be able to hide her condition long. This, she sensed, was the morning she would tell them. There was no need for medical tests to confirm what she already understood—though she knew her father would press the tests upon her for his own selfish certitude. And there was no need for her to confess who had done this—though she knew her father would disown her for her silence. It was *her* life, after all—and so were the three lives winking awake now in her womb. She lingered lazily under the blankets, sensing, even then, that this was the last moment of something and she had better take pleasure in it before she let it go. She rose, pulled back the curtains to the morning and stood watching the birds dart from tree to tree and the clouds in their scudding journey east. Rose then turned from the window, chose carefully which clothes she would wear, and moved without hurry down the stairs to find her mother.

The face of one of her grown boys loomed before her now, but she was in no hurry to swim all the way up to the surface to hear what it was

he was telling her—she'd rather just float languidly yet a while, let the current take her where it would.

And now it is a Monday, a cold spring fog of a morning in 1924. Rose is on her way to donate her signature lemon pie to the Episcopal Ladies' Altar Guild Bake Sale. Leaving nothing to chance, she baked three pies the night before—just so she could choose the best as her offering. And the pie is indeed a marvel; the cumulus egg whites are piled up in a perfect caramelized symmetry.

But, still, that familiar flicker of disdain crosses the chairwoman's face when she recognizes Rose through the window in the church's basement door and sees the twin mounds of two bastard babies in the pram. Rose reflexively lowers her bare left hand below the level of the pram's push bar. The Guild already has more goods than it can possibly sell, Rose is curtly informed (though the notice appeared for the first time in yesterday's church bulletin). And aren't those two handsome, strapping boys in that pram of hers.

And now Rose is pushing the pram towards home again, the rebuffed pie riding atop the fleece blanket under which her boys sleep, their faces crumpled against the chill. A dense meringue of fog has settled over the valley during the night, seeping east over the hills from the Pacific. It will burn off before long, Rose knows, and Richland will once again be drenched in sunlight. But, for the moment, the telephone poles she passes dissolve at half their height, and the houses on the far side of the street are bleached to invisibility, except for an occasional bleary porch light.

Rose arrives in front of her own house—which does not yet feel like home—and, without pause or deliberation, she passes it. She walks on to where Grove Street ends, and then she turns onto Telegraph Road. Soon she is passing the newest tract of homes, finished last summer and mostly still empty. There is no traffic on the street.

Rose presses on past the last ghostly building into the hazy orange groves, which run for miles in every direction. Soon she is pushing the pram along the hardpan shoulder of a farm road. The round heads of the groves are barely visible on either side of her as she makes her way deeper among them—deeper into the unfathomable fog. She presses on, the babies sleeping snugly in front of her, the heavy mist a cool veil against her face.

Rose has no idea where she is going, but she resolves to keep walking as long as her legs will carry her. And, in an act of willful solipsism, she imagines the world of everything she has ever known—every misstep she has taken, every slight she has felt, every twinge of regret—behind her now, fading to white.