

1. good night, ladies

Evelyn was an insomniac so when they say she died in her sleep, you have to question that. Probably she was sitting propped up in bed reading and heard the brush of wings and smelled the cold clean air and the angel appeared like a deer in the bedroom and Evelyn said, “Not yet. I have to finish this book.” And the angel shook his golden locks, which made a skittery sound like dry seed pods, and he laughed a long silent laugh and took her pale hand in his. He’d heard that line, “Not yet,” before. He was always interrupting people who were engrossed in their work or getting ready for a night at the opera or about to set off on a trip. Evelyn’s brother died after his wife sprayed the house with a rose-scented room freshener that made Frank sneeze so hard he had a coronary, but he made it to the phone and called the office and told them he’d be late, and then lay down and died. The angel took Evelyn’s hand gently in his cool hand and off she went with him, leaving behind the book, her bed and the blue knit coverlet, her stucco bungalow in Lake Wobegon redolent of coffee and fresh-picked strawberries, her bedside radio, her subscription to the *New Yorker* paid through the end of the year. It had been a good wet summer, plenty of rain, and as she drifted out her back door she noted how green the grass was. A cat announced itself from the shadows. The smell of burning charcoal hung in the air. A red ball lay by the walk. She wanted to pick it up and throw it but the angel rose and she with him and, hand in hand, they flew up into the sequined sky, the little town arranged below, all shushed and dozy, the double row of streetlights on Main Street, the red light blinking on the water tower, the dark fastness of the lake, the pinpricks of lights from houses where they all slept, the cranks, the stoics, the meek, the ragtag dreamers, the drunks, the martyred wives, and she saw a woman’s pale face at a window looking for evildoers and the single pair of headlights threading the serpentine county road, and after that she did not look down. She flew up through a meringue cloud into the mind of God and the embrace of her sainted ancestors all gathered at her grandfather Crandall’s farmhouse on a summer morn, the patient horses standing in the shade of a red oak tree, white chickens pecking for bugs under the lilacs, Grandma whistling in the milk house, holding a pan of cream. The windbreak of pine and red oak, the weathered sheds and barn, the hayfields of heaven.

It was a green summer day like what a child would draw, a crayon day with a few white cumulus children’s clouds, and the sun with yellow radiance lines sticking out. It was a day when after breakfast Dad did not go out to do chores but sat down at the upright piano and played by heart *O dusky maiden of the moors, my heart you do beguile—O do not hasten to your chores but stay with me awhile*. There was one day when he did that and this is that day again. The day after she was begotten.

Evelyn was a whistler, she learned it from him. The rest of the family was disposed to gloom, dark Lutherans who pitch down the rocky slope of melancholy and lie there for days, sighing, moaning, waiting for someone, usually Evelyn, to rope them in and haul them back up and comfort them with dessert. A people waiting for the other shoe to drop. Phlegmatists. Stoics. Good eaters who went for recipes that start out *Brown a pound of ground beef and six strips of bacon and in a separate pan melt a pound of butter.*

She was a finicky eater, a forager in the vegetable crisper. She'd whomp up a big feast and wait on table and have a smidgen of goose, a single stalk of asparagus, a crumb of cornbread, and that was enough for her. She was the only insomniac in a family of very good sleepers, folks who climbed into bed gladly and lay in their cottony caves and slept like stones unless awakened by heartburn. At night, she lay awake and listened to *The Bob Roberts Show* on WLT and when Bob's callers got cranking on the evils of taxation and the treachery of the media and the shiftlessness of the young, she drifted off to sleep, and if not, she switched on the bedside lamp and reached for a book and read about the Saracens and the Crusaders, about the tortured lives of great artists, Van Gogh and his prostitutes, Chopin coughing at the piano, Keats expiring in Rome, Shelley sailing in the storm, Melville languishing at the customs house, Twain and his bankruptcy and Dickens's unhappy marriage and his romances with actresses. She adored Dickens. Especially *Little Dorrit*. The weary worker trudging home from the blacking factory, the yellow glow of London street lamps, the night fog, the newshawk on the corner, the flower girl, the streetwalker in the doorway, the cabbie dozing on his hack parked by the curb, the horse's head drooping—she dozed off too. Or she got up and fixed herself a toddy and put on a recording of the Stuttgart Male Chorus singing romantic songs about moonlight and longing and the maiden who opened my heart to love and in the morning she was gone and now I can never love again, alas—that one was guaranteed to put her right out. And if not, she put on her robe and fixed breakfast.

"It's the radio and the dang books and the crazy CD player that are keeping you awake," said her sister Florence. "Turn off the radio and take a pill. You look like death on a biscuit."

Actually she looked great right up to the day she died, a Friday night in July. She had a long neck and a prominent nose and high cheekbones; after she kicked Uncle Jack out she looked even better, happier, looser, jangler, jaunty. She was tall and wiry and stayed limber by hiking everywhere and doing her Daily Dozen. She was the outspoken aunt in a family of murmurers. Other people said No. 1 or No. 2 and she said *pee* and *take a crap*. She also said *hell* and *damn* and *son of a bitch*. She had soft green eyes and gray hair like a winter sky in the morning. She cut it short. "You look like a man," said Florence. "What's got into you?" "Piss and vinegar," she said.

She was found dead on a Saturday morning, having gone out to supper Friday night with her buddies Gladys and Margaret at the Moonlite Bay supper club where she enjoyed the deep-fried walleye and a slab of banana cream pie, along with a mai tai and a Pinot Grigio. Three old Lutheran ladies, stalwarts of the Altar Guild and the quilting circle, who had put in

their thirty years teaching Sunday school, and now in their dotage were having a little fun. Every second Wednesday they drove off to the Big Moccasin casino in Widjiwagan to play blackjack and take advantage of the \$6.95 Blue Light buffet and catch the 6 p.m. show of Richie Dee and the Radiators and once, they entered the Twist contest (*wotthell*) and won a night at the Romeo Motel (*hot damn*) and went and stayed, the three of them, turned out the lights, lay in the hot tub, looked up at the ceiling mirror, and drank champagne from their shoes.

Tonight the three chums sat at a table by the window and laughed themselves silly over Gary and LeRoy the town constables—LeRoy is Margaret’s nephew—who got a federal grant to purchase a bulletproof windshield for the squad car and a dozen tear gas grenades and grenade launcher, six antiterrorist concrete barriers, and a bullhorn to be used to negotiate with terrorists holding hostages. They recalled the chicken salad LeRoy brought to the Labor Day potluck picnic, which had been sitting in the rear window of his car for a few hours, and the waves of propulsive vomiting it caused. Men, mostly. Big men so sick they couldn’t go hide, they had to stand and empty their stomachs right there in plain view of their children. They chortled over that and then they took up Gladys’s husband Leon who had discovered Viagra and now, after a ten-year layoff, was up for sex. Viagra gave him a hard-on like a ball-peen hammer. “Or in his case, like a Phillips screwdriver,” said Gladys and they all cackled. Scheduling was an issue. He preferred mornings. Gladys wasn’t interested in getting unharnessed at 10 a.m. and climbing into bed, but she tried to be a good sport. And then it took him forever. He’d go at it for a while and run out of breath and lie down and wheeze and then try again, and in broad daylight, the sight of the two of them in the dresser mirror struck her as hilarious. “Four hundred pounds of menopausal flesh bumping around and breathing hard. He told me the least I could do was pretend to be excited, and I said, ‘For that, you have to pay me real money’”—Leon was not amused.

“So he can’t pull the trigger then?” said Margaret.

“He gets all excited and then he has to stop and rest.”

“And meanwhile you’re checking the clock.”

“The other day I had bread in the oven and I told him I had to go check it—I was baking for the Bible school bake sale—he said, ‘Don’t go! Don’t go! I’m coming!’ Then he kept at it for another five minutes—I said, ‘Jesus, if you can’t come just say so.’ He got all mad then, said it was hard being married to someone who didn’t care for sex and who kept poking holes in his confidence.”

“Who’s poking holes?” cried Margaret and they all three gasped and wheezed—*O God—O God I am going to die—don’t make me laugh like that, I swear I’m going to wet my pants*. The busboy heard all this and was quite surprised. A good boy from a nice home. And then Evelyn said, “Tell him if he needs to hump something, you’ll thaw out a chicken.” And Margaret laughed so hard a whole noseful of something shot out. The busboy retreated to the

scullery. The ladies wiped their eyes. *Oh I swear I am never having dinner with you two again, you are a bad influence. A bad influence.*

Gladys said she was thinking of replacing those little blue pills with sleeping tablets—they chortled over that and about Margaret’s brother the aging sportscaster in Minneapolis with his hair transplant and jowlectomy. And they drove back to town in Margaret’s car and Evelyn got out at her little stucco house on McKinley Street and leaned on the car and said, “It was great. See you Wednesday.” There was a full moon and she stood and admired it and headed for the house. She stopped and pointed to her moon shadow on the walk and danced a couple steps as if to elude it and that was the last anyone saw of her. She was 82 and in good shape, wearing a denim wraparound skirt and a white blouse embroidered with roses and a silky red vest and sandals, and she danced in the moonlight and went indoors to lie down and die. She was a realist. At 82 you have to be. To the roof shingler who told her that the roof would be a big headache in a few years, she said, “Not my problem.” The porch sagged—“Let it sag,” she said. “That makes two of us.” For two years, she’d been packing up her unecessities and shipping them off to rummage sales.

Jack had died nineteen years before, leaving behind a basement and garage full of his accumulations, which had taken her months to disperse, and she didn’t want to burden Barbara with the same grim chore. Barbara lived three blocks away, up the street from Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility, alone since Lloyd drifted away to the Cities and Kyle went to college. “When I die,” Evelyn told her, “I want you to be able to sweep out the place, take the sheets off the bed and the clothes out of the closet, clean out the medicine chest, and hang out a For Sale sign. Two hours and you’ll be rid of me. I’m a pilgrim. I travel light.”

Her name was all wrong. Evelyns should be plump ladies in spiffy outfits who collect salt and pepper sets and play canasta and fuss at their husbands. Evelyn was named after a battle-axe aunt, the pharmacist’s wife who took too many pills and they made her think everybody in Lake Wobegon was out to get her. The little girl should have been a Therese or a Catherine but she got evelyned. She was a divestor, not a collector, and after the children flew the nest and after Jack left, she drew a sigh of relief and shook off her long habits of vigilance and moral correction, and she became *gleeful*. Even at 82 she could pick up a ping-pong paddle and drive you nuts. She had her ears pierced and wore feathery earrings like trout flies. She bought a computer and mastered the Internet and chatted with strangers under her screen name, HotShot82. In Lake Wobegon, most people felt you should grow more dignified with age, even sour, but she became lighthearted, even girlish. If she ate lunch with the seniors on Wednesdays at the Lutheran church where a retired pastor showed slides of last summer’s cruise through the Norwegian fjords and everyone sang “Children of the Heavenly Father” and “Look For The Silver Lining” and “God Bless America,” she was somewhat more Evelyn-like, but when she and her pals hoofed it up to the Moonlite Bay supper club or if she and Barbara dined at Fisher’s in Avon, she smoked a few cigarettes and enjoyed a libation and told some off-color jokes and if you asked her how she felt, she cried “Never

better!” and slapped her chest, and if you invited her to go for a walk she said “Delighted!” and reached for her old suede jacket. She could be exalted by a good ballgame, or by the dawn—a cup of fresh coffee, the open door, the pink and silver and pale blue sky, the inhalation of lake and grass—and she wept to hear the contralto sing, *For He shall feed His flock like a shepherd*. She could marvel at the ingenuity of screws or apply herself to polishing up her Spanish. She liked to get in her red Honda and drive away for a week or two—“to visit cousin Grace in St. Louis” or “to check up on Phyl and Earl in Sacramento,” distant relations who nobody else was in touch with—and when she got home, she was vague about the details. “Oh, it was all very quiet and sedate. I was in bed by ten every night,” she told Barbara, who could smell a lie as well as the next person.

She was a welcoming person in a family of wary observers. Let a strange car pull up in the driveway, she walked toward it smiling. If someone died, she went straight to the house with a casserole for the survivors. But she could speak her mind. She went to the Town Council meeting when they took up a resolution to ban nudity, and she stood up, the lone dissenter, and said, “Why are you wasting time on this ridiculous law? So now Gary and LeRoy are supposed to get out their binoculars and watch for naked people? What does it matter to you if I go over to the Hidden Beach and go skinny-dipping? We all used to go over there—should I name names? Well, so what? If you’re offended by the sight of bare-naked people, then don’t go over there. And if you have a nice body and you want to show it off, more power to you.” They had never heard anyone speak in defense of nudity before.

When the school board took up a resolution that every child be required to say the Pledge of Allegiance she stood up and cried, “If you require me to go to church, then it’s no longer faith, and when you make somebody pledge allegiance to a flag that stands for freedom—you are just being stupid.” She sat down with a thud. The school board was stunned. Finally Mr. Halvorson moved that the resolution be referred to the executive committee for further study and everyone said “Aye” and it was gone and forgotten.

So she was memorable. And when people heard about her death, they stopped what they were doing and stood, hands at their sides, and felt her absence. A tall tree had crashed to the ground.