

Saturday night came too quickly, and Katherine paced as she waited for Robert Whitcomb to arrive. Saying yes to him had given her some short-lived peace, squelched his persistent presence, but the date still loomed all week like a storm cloud on the horizon.

Caroline stood in the doorway, arms crossed, watching her daughter. Katherine had never talked about having a date, only vaguely mentioned “plans” for Saturday. But Caroline knew. She had watched Whitcomb wait for her daughter each morning in the courtyard, and followed their brief exchanges from the window.

A dusty old truck pulled in the circular driveway in front of the house.

“He’s here,” said Katherine.

“You’ll have a good time,” she said.

Katherine gathered her sweater, gave her mother a quick peck on the cheek and pulled open the door. Suddenly, Whitcomb blew a long blast on the truck horn. She stopped short, frozen at this brashness.

“Oh my,” muttered Katherine. “Honked at.”

She yanked the front door shut behind her and smiled grimly. Katherine marched across the yard to the truck, where Whitcomb stayed in the cab, fiddling with the radio. She circled around to the passenger side and waited by the door for him to open it.

“Hop in!” he hooted out the open window.

“Criminy,” said Katherine, trying to steel herself. This was over the top. Normally had something like this happened, she would have turned right around and gone back inside. But she felt her mother’s eyes on her from the front window, felt the muscles in her own neck growing tense.

“Well? You comin’?”

She grabbed the handle of the truck door and turned it slowly. Katherine knew her mother wondered about her love life. Caroline never asked her directly, but tried to hint at young men in town or bachelor farmers that she thought Katherine might like. She gabbed about it incessantly on the phone with her friends, worrying about her daughter becoming a dried-up old maid, bitter and alone.

“Alrighty!” said Whitcomb, grinning wildly as she pulled the door open slowly, still hesitating. “Let’s go!”

Katherine wanted very much to simply turn around and go back inside. But she couldn’t. No way. Her mother had shown remarkable restraint in not asking about her date with Whitcomb,

even though her curiosity was about to kill her. But if Katherine were to back out now, her mother would never be able to let it go. She'd badger her about what happened until every bit of information had been extracted. Katherine would sooner have her fingernails pulled out. She clenched her teeth, slid onto the seat and pulled the door shut.

"So, you ready for this?" Whitcomb slurred a bit as he leered at her, head cocked sideways, blood-shot eyes going up and down her slender body.

"Oh, God," she thought, spotting a silver flask tucked under the dashboard. She wanted to jump out and run inside the house, back to where Caroline frowned from the front window. But this time, even if her pride would have let her, he was too quick. Whitcomb stomped on the accelerator, spinning tires and slinging gravel and dust behind him as he fish-tailed down the driveway and onto the county road.

"Hey, how are ya?" he asked as they careened along the rutted gravel road.

"Fine." She managed a weak smile.

"C'mon, why don't you move a little closer?" He patted the seat between them.

"I'm fine here," she said, sliding away from his hand on the seat.

Neither said anything more. Whitcomb fiddled for some tunes on the radio, and other than his off-key humming to the music, the trip to town passed in silence. As they drove, she felt him looking at her again, felt his eyes on her body. Katherine kept staring straight ahead through the windshield, frozen smile on her face.

Soon enough the houses grew closer together and they entered the Augusta city limits. Katherine slunk down in the seat, hoping they didn't see anyone she knew. He looked over again. "What's the matter?" There was a touch of irritation in his voice. "You embarrassed to be out with me?"

"Oh, no," said Katherine, straightening herself. She sat upright the final few minutes, praying silently that the night would turn out alright.

The square was busy on Saturday night and they had to make two circles around the courthouse before a spot came open on the street just down from Sutton's corner location. The western-themed restaurant had been around forever. It was popular by default, literally the only place to eat in town.

As they approached in the twilight, the restaurant's red neon sign buzzed loudly and cast its glow on the sidewalk as they passed beneath it. "UTTON'S," it read. The "S" had been broken out as long as Katherine could remember, but Mr. Sutton apparently saw no need to have it repaired. The big windows that fronted the street showed that every table inside was full; even the bar area had diners waiting to be seated. Busboys hustled to clear and reset tables, hefting heavy tubs of dirty dishes as they maneuvered through the crowded dining room.

Approaching the front door, Whitcomb hurried the last little bit, speeding his unsteady steps so that he could grandly throw open the door, holding it wide for her to enter. Katherine had no choice but to follow this dramatic flourish, and as she climbed the three steps that led into the restaurant, she felt all eyes on her.

“Well, hello Katherine,” smiled the lady who met them at the door. She wore a red and white checkered apron, and her white hair was pulled in a tight bun. “What a pleasure to have you join us tonight.”

“Hi,” smiled Katherine, blinking and smiling blankly. Just when it seemed things couldn’t get any worse, along came another surprise. It was Stella Wade, her neighbor, who sometimes pitched in on busy weekends, especially if they were short staffed. Having Mrs. Wade see her out with a man was as good as putting it in the paper. Spreading gossip was first-rate entertainment in a little town like Augusta, and Katherine had just provided enough material for the next six months.

“And who’s your friend?” asked Mrs. Wade, pursing her lips and leaning toward Whitcomb. She sized him up through her thick glasses, ready to grab this chance for some juicy information. “I don’t believe I’ve seen him before.”

“Name’s Whitcomb, ma’am. Robert Whitcomb,” he jumped in. He stuck out his hand and pumped hers up and down in a fierce shake. “I’m one of the soldiers staying with the prisoners out at the Lorberg’s farm.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Wade. “I’ve seen those men out there. Germans, aren’t they? It must be exciting work guarding those men.”

“Yes, ma’am, it is,” said Whitcomb. “Very dangerous. We soldiers have to be extremely vigilant at all times.”

Katherine looked at him sharply. Whitcomb and the other two guards spent most of their time either playing cards in the barracks or sleeping under a shade tree while the prisoners worked in an adjacent field. Vigilant was not exactly the word that came to mind.

“Well, thank you for the service you are giving our country,” said Mrs. Wade. “It’s boys like you who really make us proud.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you. It’s an honor to serve wherever Uncle Sam puts me.”

Katherine rolled her eyes.

“It’ll be just a couple of minutes more. Care to be seated at the bar?” asked Mrs. Wade. “Perhaps you’d like a cocktail until your table is ready.”

“No thanks.” Katherine said. “We’ll just . . .”

“Great!” he said, grabbing Katherine by the elbow, pulling her toward the two empty stools. She jerked her arm away from him as they sat.

“I’ll be right back,” said Mrs. Wade, smiling at Robert and Katherine. She returned to her post at the front door where other diners waited.

“Don’t touch me like that again!” she hissed at him as the woman left. He was leaned forward, elbows on the bar, scoping out the bottles lined against the back mirror.

A bartender came. “What can I get you?”

Katherine shook her head, “Nothing.”

“Two beers and a shot of bourbon,” said Whitcomb. He twirled on the barstool to face her. He smiled. “She’s a nice old gal.”

“Didn’t you hear me?” Katherine demanded, but was interrupted again. Mrs. Wade came back and stood behind them, putting her hand on Robert Whitcomb’s shoulder.

“Mr. Whitcomb, any time you want to come by for dinner, you are welcome at our house.” She patted his cheek gently. “God bless you boys!”

“Thank you, ma’am, and thank you for your kind offer. That would be nice.”

The bartender set two glasses of beer in front of Robert and Katherine and poured the whiskey into a heavy tumbler in front of him.

“I didn’t order this,” said Katherine.

“It’s not for you. Cheers.” Whitcomb lifted the shot glass, toasted Katherine and downed the whiskey. Grimacing, he clanked down the heavy glass down then picked up one of the beers and gulped about half for a chaser.

“Yep, seems like a nice old gal. You know her?” Whitcomb asked. “She must live out by us, huh?”

“She lives out by me,” said Katherine.

Whitcomb finished the remaining half glass of beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He switched the empty glass with the full one in front of Katherine. When the bartender came back to retrieve the empty glasses, he held up the tumbler.

“Another?”

Whitcomb gave what he thought was a subtle nod, a sideways tilt of the head and a wink, and the bartender soon returned with a second glass of the brown liquid.

“You’ve been drinking already,” said Katherine. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to have any more.”

“Nonsense,” said Whitcomb. “I’m pacing myself. Besides, what’s an evening out at a fine restaurant without a drink or a bottle of wine?”

Katherine looked at herself in the mirror behind the bar and tried to figure out what to do. She couldn’t just walk out and leave. That would only provide more fodder for the local rumor mill. She would have to play along, eat dinner and endure the evening. Make it as brief as possible, then try to get the keys when it was time to drive home.

“Your table is ready.” Mrs. Wade was again at their shoulders.

“Thank you, ma’am.” Whitcomb smiled warmly at her.

“Please,” she chirped at him. “Call me Stella.”

“Thank you,” he lingered on the syllables, caressing them like he was whispering his lover’s name, “Stella.”

Katherine thought the woman was going to swoon.

“Christ,” she muttered. “I can’t believe this.”

They followed Mrs. Wade to a booth in the back corner of the main dining room. Katherine moved fast and kept her head down, hoping she didn’t see anyone else that she knew. She slid into the booth as Whitcomb did the same on the opposite side. Soon the waitress was there and they both looked up as she stood over them holding menus. She was blond, with a tight blouse and a tight face. Her ample cleavage strained against the buttons in the front of her Sutton’s uniform.

“Hi y’all. I’m Loretta,” she said, note pad in hand. “Can I get you something to drink?”

Katherine frowned, her eyes narrowing. Whitcomb’s eyes grew big. His glass eye wiggled like it was going to pop out in his lap. Katherine knew this Loretta but hadn’t seen her for years. They had been in the same class in high school. She had been pregnant at eighteen. Twice married. Now she had three kids under age seven and was divorced again.

“You bet!” said Whitcomb, smiling and leering at the waitress. He gave her a big wink. Katherine couldn’t decide if she should be happy or troubled by this development. Maybe he could be husband number three, she thought. Katherine remembered a strong dislike for her back in high school.

“Two beers and a bourbon,” said Whitcomb. “On the rocks.” He stared at her chest, mesmerized by its bobbing as she wrote in her notepad.

She giggled and left to get the drinks, wiggling all the way back to the bar. Whitcomb's eyes stayed fixed on her bottom until she went around the corner.

Snapping out of it, he turned to look back at Katherine who sat with her hands clasped on the table. She smiled politely at him. She was definitely glad for this development. That floozy could keep him distracted, and all she had to do was eat and then drive them back home. Then, thank God, the evening would be finished.

"I know you," Loretta nodded to Katherine as she returned carrying a tray with their drinks, "but where are you from, sailor?"

"Well, gosh" chuckled Whitcomb, looking sheepish. "I'm not really a sailor, I'm a GI. And I'm from New Mexico."

"Oooh," she crooned, "a foreigner."

Katherine rolled her eyes. Whitcomb looked puzzled. Loretta giggled but didn't know why. "Here's menus," she announced, handing them each a vinyl bound folder, leaning across the table so Whitcomb could get a full look at her chest.

"I'll be back in a minute," she said, fluffing her hair and winking at Whitcomb.

There was silence for a couple of minutes as they scanned the menu.

"What're you gonna have?" he asked.

Something quick, thought Katherine.

"I'm think I'll order the pork chop special," she said instead.

"You said they've got good steaks?"

"Yes." It was Katherine's suggestion about the steaks that got her in this whole mess in the first place.

"Well, I'm getting the fried chicken," said Whitcomb, closing his menu.

The meal itself passed mercifully fast. The steady crowd of diners waiting in the front room to be seated wasn't entirely lost on Loretta, and she hustled out their plates, kept them moving, wanting to turn tables as fast as she could. They ate mostly in silence, the only interruption Loretta's bold flirting with Whitcomb each time she stopped by their table.

When the bill was presented, Katherine excused herself to use the ladies room while Whitcomb pored over the tab.

"Sheesh," he muttered as she walked off. "Who ordered all these drinks?!"

Inside the restroom, the wooden door held the noise of the dining room at bay. Katherine wanted a moment to herself. She had lost count of Whitcomb's drinks after a half-dozen, and she knew getting the keys from him would be a struggle.

She leaned over the sink, splashed water on her face and looked at herself in the mirror. She looked older, tired, and saw the dark circles that had formed underneath her eyes. The stress of the evening had taken its toll on her already but the worst was yet to come.

The din of the dining room washed over her again as she opened the door and picked her way back to the table. Whitcomb was standing now, talking to Loretta, who was writing something on her notepad. She tore off the sheet of paper as Katherine approached and pressed it into Whitcomb's hand.

"Um, hello, Katherine," smiled Whitcomb, trying to fold the paper with one hand and slide it in his pocket. Instead he dropped it on the floor. He tried to pick it up, and Loretta giggled again, smirking at Katherine.

Katherine smiled at Loretta. The waitress stood before her, still giggling and smirking, clutching Whitcomb's arm.

"Go to hell," Katherine said pleasantly, still smiling. Loretta's mouth fell open.

Katherine turned to Whitcomb and held out her hand. She wanted the keys to the truck. He turned white, then red, the look of a boy who'd been caught by his mother. He reached into his pocket, slowly extracted the paper from the waitress' notepad, and laid it on Katherine's palm. "Loretta" it said. "332 South Water Street." A heart surrounded the words.

"Not that, you dope," Katherine laughed out loud. "The keys."

Whitcomb turned a deeper shade now, a purple she hadn't seen before.

"Let's go," he said, snatching the paper back and jamming it into his pocket. "I'm fine."

He tried to march to the front door but Katherine put her hand on his chest. "You're not fine. You're drunk. That's why I'm driving."

Loretta tried to step between them. "You leave him be," she warned Katherine, her voice growing louder. "You should know better'n to act like that towards a man who took you out to a nice dinner."

Katherine looked around, heard the restaurant grow quiet. Conversations stopped in mid-sentence.

"He just had one beer. It's you who's drunk. You ought to be ashamed of yourself going on like this." Loretta's voice rang in the room. "No wonder you ain't got a man."

Katherine heard Stella Wade gasp clear from her station near the front door, saw the old woman's hands fly to her face. Silence hung in the air and she felt the entire room of diners staring at her. Katherine felt dizzy and her face grew hot. She turned and headed quickly for the front door, weaving through the crowd of diners and out into the cool night air.