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## *The Girls*

FROM IDAHO REVIEW

THE GIRLS WERE SEARCHING ARLEEN'S ROOM and had just come upon her journal. The girls were thirty-one and thirty-three. Arleen was of a dowdy unspecific age, their parents' houseguest. She had arrived with the family's city pastor, an Episcopal priest, who had been in a depression for a number of months because his lover had died. The priest spent most of his time in the garden wearing only a bright red banana sling, his flabby body turning a magnificent somber brown. The girls were certain their parents regretted inviting him for he was not at all amusing, the way he could be frequently, in the pulpit.

Arleen was presently occupied with washing her long hair in the shower down the hall. It had taken the girls many clandestine visits to her room to find anything of interest. The journal was in the zippered pocket of her open suitcase.

"I know I looked here before."

"She must move it around."

"Should we start at the beginning or should we start with the last entry, that would be last night I suppose."

"That was the Owl Walk. She went on the Owl Walk with Mommy and came back and said so seriously, 'No Owls.'"

The girls found that hysterical.

The sound of water on the curtain ceased and the girls hurried downstairs. They made tea and curled up on the sofa with their cats. There were two cats living and two cats dead. The dead cats were Roland and Georgia O'Keeffe, their cremains in elaborate colorful urns on the mantelpiece. The ceramic feet on Roland's

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urn were rabbits. The ones on Georgia O'Keeffe, mice. The urns had been conceived and created by the girls.

"Good morning, Arleen," they said together when Arleen appeared, her hair wadded wetly on her back. She peered at them and smiled shyly. The back of her blouse was soaked because of the sack of hair. She wore khaki shorts. They were the weird kind to which leggings could be buttoned to create a pair of trousers.

"I was hoping," Arleen said, "that the kitty litter box could be taken out of the bathroom?"

The girls and the cats stared at her.

"It smells," Arleen said.

"It *smells*?" the girls said.

There was silence. "I took a lovely long walk early this morning," Arleen said. "I bicycled out to the moors and then I walked. It began to rain, quite hard, and then it suddenly stopped and was beautiful."

The girls mimed extreme wonder at this remarkable experience.

"It reminded me of something I read once about the English moors and the month of April," Arleen said. "*April, who laughs her girlish laughter and a moment after weeps her girlish tears is apt to be a mature hysteric on the moors.*" She looked at them, smiling quickly, then dipped her head. She had a big ragged part in her hair that made the girls almost dizzy.

"April is far behind us, Arleen," the girls said. "It is June. You've been here almost two weeks."

Arleen nodded. "It's been very good for Father Snow."

"What is *your* home like?" the girls inquired. They'd found one couldn't be too obvious with Arleen.

"It has stairs," Arleen mused. "Very steep stairs. Sometimes I don't go out, because coming back there would be the stairs, and often when I am out, I don't return because of the stairs. Otherwise it's quite adequate."

"Are you fearful of crime?" the girls said. They widened their eyes.

"No," Arleen said. She had very much the manner of someone waiting to be dismissed. The girls loved it. They spooned honey into their tea.

"Did you have a nice birthday, Arleen?" they asked. It had been announced several evenings before by Father Snow that it was Arleen's birthday. The girls had remarked that The Birthday was

more or less an idiotic American institution regarded with some wonder by the rest of the world. Arleen had blushed. The girls had said that they did not sanction birthdays but that they adored Christmas. Last year they had given Mommy and Daddy adagio dance lessons and a needlepoint book, the pages depicting scenes from their life together — Mommy and Daddy and the girls.

No one had given Arleen anything on her birthday, but she and Father Snow had taken the opportunity to present their house present — a silver-plated cocktail shaker with Mommy and Daddy's initials engraved upon it.

"We were looking for something suitable but not insufferably dull," Father Snow said.

"No, no, you shouldn't have," Mommy said.

"We have ten of those!" the girls said, and rushed to show, hauling them out of the pantry, even the dented and tarnished ones. The cocktail shaker had proved to be a most popular house present over the years.

"I had a lovely birthday," Arleen said. She looked at her wrist and scratched it. "Is Father Snow outside?"

The girls pointed toward the garden. They had long pale shapely arms.

Arleen nodded vaguely and turned to leave, stumbling a bit on the sill.

Between themselves, the girls referred to Father Snow as Father Ice, an irony that gave them satisfaction for his fat sorrow elicited considerable indignation in them. Where was his faith? He didn't have the faith to fill a banana sling. Where was his calm demeanor? It had fled from him. He was the furthest thing from ice they could imagine, the furthest from their admiration of ice, the lacy sheaths, the glare, the brilliance and hardness of ice. There had never been enough of it in their lives. A little, but not much.

Cuddling and kissing the living cats, the girls walked to the kitchen window and looked out into the garden. Arleen was on the ground at Father Ice's feet, her head flung back, drying her hair. Father Ice was talking with his eyes shut, tears streaming down his cheeks.

What a pair! the girls thought. They kissed the cats' stomachs. Father Ice's mouth was flapping away. His lover, a gaunt young man named Donny, had cooked for Father Ice and pressed his vestments. Father Ice had broken down at dinner the previous night

over a plate of barbecued butterflied lamb, recalling, it could only be assumed, the manner in which Donny had once prepared this dish. He had just recovered from having broken down an hour earlier at cocktails.

The girls, through the glass, watched Arleen closely.

"She's in love with him, can you believe it. That is not just friendship."

"That kind of love is so safe."

The girls had never been in love. They did not plan on marrying. They would go to the dance clubs and perch on stools, in their little red dresses, their little black ones and white ones, darling provocative tight little dresses, and they would toss their hair and laugh as they gazed into each other's eyes. There were always men around. Men were drawn to them, but one would not be courted without the other, even for amusement — they would not be separated. They were like Siamese twins. They were not Siamese twins, of course, they weren't twins at all, nor were they even born on the same day a year apart, which was why they didn't care for birthdays. Men did not mind the fact that they would not be separated. It excited them agreeably in fact. They didn't believe they didn't stand a chance in the long run.

The girls dropped the cats and moved away from the window, retiring to the large glassed-in porch on the south side of the house to work on their constructions. These were attractive assemblages, neither morbid nor violent nor sexually repressed as was so common with these objects, but tasteful, cold, and peculiar. One of the several young men who were fascinated with the girls made the beautiful partitioned boxes in which selections were placed. One of them contained a snip of lace from Mommy's wedding dress. They hadn't asked her for it, but she hadn't recognized it when she saw it either. There were many things of that nature in the boxes.

They heard Mommy's voice. She was saying, "Now how would you describe the sound it made? An asthmatic squeal is what the bird book said though I wouldn't describe it that way. It certainly did not sound like an asthmatic squeal to me."

Arleen muttered something in reply. She had apparently come back into the house. It was a three-storied nineteenth-century house with fish-scale shingles and wide golden floorboards. It was a wonderful house. Mommy and Daddy almost always had houseguests in the summer. The girls didn't like it; it was as though

Mommy and Daddy didn't want to be alone with them in the loveliest of months. The houseguests didn't stay long, usually no more than a week, but no sooner did they depart than others would arrive. The girls found few of them remarkable. There had been one young woman who held their interest for a weekend by drawing in pencil dozens of semi-Gothic, semi-Saracenic buildings, clearly intended to be visions of the starved or the drugged. They watched her closely, thinking her tremendously chic and fraudulent, and were disappointed when she left abruptly, taking, for it was never seen again, one of Mommy's Hermès beach towels, the one with the Lorraine cross. Most of the guests never returned, but Father Snow had been invited several times. Priests were freeloaders in the girls' opinion, party-crashers, and although Father Snow could give a good performance in the right surroundings — they had observed this at high holidays — he was no exception. They had not encountered Arleen before. At first, certainly, she had not appeared to be a problem. She was shy, deferential, and plain. Her skin ran to bumps around the mouth and she wore red sneakers, the left one slit, she admitted, to accommodate a bunion. She did have lovely auburn hair. The one story she told concerned her hair. She had lovely hair as a child as well and had worn it in a long braid. She had cut it off one morning and given it to a man she had a crush on, a married man, a post office employee or some such thing. It had not been returned and the man had moved away. The girls loved that story. It was so droll, so retarded practically.

The girls heard Mommy's voice again and cocked their heads. She was planning the marketing. If Arleen would like to go into town, they could get flowers as well, and Arleen could give her opinion about a sweater Mommy was considering buying. Daddy said that when you look death in the eye, you want to do it as calmly as a stroller looks into a shop window. But Mommy never looked into a shop window that way. She looked into shop windows with excitement and distress. Sometimes what Daddy said didn't take Mommy into account.

"Girls!" Mommy called.

The girls put aside their constructions and glided into the kitchen where Mommy was putting away the tea things.

"Arleen said she saw the cats playing with a mockingbird earlier. She said they had snapped its legs clean off."

"Clean off?" the girls repeated, marveling at the infelicitous phrasing.

Mommy nodded. She was wearing a lovely floral dressing gown and silk slippers, just like the girls.

"Those weren't our cats," the girls said, "our cats are sweet cats, old stay-at-home cats, they play with store-bought toys only," knowing full well that even this early in the summer the cats had slaughtered no less than a dozen songbirds by visible count, that they were efficient and ruthless and that the way in which they so naturally expressed their essential nature was something the girls admired very much.

"Are you aware," Arleen said, "that domestic cats kill 4.4 million birds every year in this country alone?"

"Awful," Mommy said faintly.

"Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, don't you listen to such dreadful things. Such dreadful things don't happen in our garden," the girls said, hugging her, pretending to hang off her, touching her soft waist with their narrow hands, prattling on until Mommy made a smile.

"On a lighter note," the girls then announced, glaring at Arleen, "we are going to the beach."

There they spent the remainder of the day, nude and much admired, glistening with frequently applied oil. They talked about Mommy and Daddy. This they did not usually do, preferring to keep them inside themselves in quite a definite and distinct way, not touching them with words not even inside words, but just holding them inside, trapped as it were, aware of them quite clearly but not thinking about them, fooling around with them that way.

But Mommy and Daddy were changing. They seemed to be actually crumbling in the girls' eyes. This was of concern. Daddy was smoking and drinking more and surrendering himself to bleak pronouncements. He was sometimes gruff with them as though they were not everything to him! And Mommy's enchantment with life seemed to be waning. They were behaving uncertainly; it was harder for them to be discriminating. Daddy had wanted to burn like a hot fire, and he had not. Clearly, he had not. Something was hastening toward him, and Mommy too, hastening but slowly at once, cloaked in the minutes and months.

The girls returned home, subdued, coming through the garden, passing beneath the rose arbor where the birds' nest was concealed

prettily among the climbing canes. The girls grimaced at it, knowing it contained two rotting eggs, having investigated it some days before. They had not informed Mommy of the nest's pulpy contents and they never would, of course.

In the kitchen there was a message for them, written on Mommy's heavy stationery, in Mommy's rounded hand.

*Father Snow and Arleen have gone downtown for ice cream cones. Daddy and I are taking our naps.*

The girls skipped upstairs and into Father Snow's room. There was nothing there but two black round stones on the table by the single bed.

"He doesn't think that's him and Donny, does he?"

"How ghastly."

In Arleen's room, they immediately went to the suitcase but couldn't find the journal. The journal was missing again, it was nowhere. Then they found it. Triumphant, they scarcely acknowledged Arleen standing in the doorway. She was a smudgy thing, round-shouldered, carrying a whale-shaped purse, a wretched souvenir of this perfect island.

Then she was gone.

"Well, that was considerate of her."

"It is our house."

But just as they opened the book, which was covered with a disgusting pink and rawly fibrous cover, Arleen appeared again and spoke the words as they appeared on the first page.

"Headaches . . . Palpitations . . . Isolated . . . Guilt . . ." And that's a sketch of a photograph your mother showed me. It's you and your parents when you were little girls."

The girls peered at it, at a loss. The woman had no talent whatsoever. On impulse, they bent forward and sniffed it.

"Your mother thinks of her heart as a speeding car," Arleen said. "Too big, too fast, out of control, no one at the wheel. And in her head too, a speeding . . . Further on, there are accounts of some of her dreams."

"She didn't tell you her dreams!" The girls didn't believe it for a moment, that Mommy would tell this *troll* her dreams.

Arleen gently tugged her journal from their hands and smiling thinly at them, left.

The girls sat for several moments in a perturbed silence. Later, in their own room, which comprised the entire third floor and was ex-

otic and theatrical, they bathed and dressed and put up their hair. It was now dusk; the downstairs parlor where they were all to gather for cocktails was filled with a soft and moteless light.

The girls tiptoed down the stairs. Daddy was telling Father Snow about a former houseguest who claimed he could get out of his body anytime he wanted to and turn around and look at it. The girls remembered *that* weekend. They rolled their eyes.

"I never believed him," Mommy said. "But then it's a very subjective matter, I would think."

"Must have gotten a taste for it," Father Snow said.

"I would never, I don't think," Mommy said.

This was regarded as amusing by all. The girls were scandalized by the friendship between Mommy and Daddy and this weird duo. They couldn't bear it for another night.

"Oh, girls, you look lovely!" Mommy exclaimed.

Father Snow was stirring martinis. He wore a jacket and tie. Arleen was wearing . . . something dreadful. The drinks in their crystal glasses were passed around. Father Snow liked to offer a small prayer before the cocktail hour began. To the girls it was merely one of his excruciatingly annoying habits. Prayer is a means of getting rid of some of our own ignorance about ourselves, Father Snow had always said. Mommy and Daddy and Arleen bowed their heads. The girls, as they always did, looked around the room. The mirrors, the embroidered footstool, the good Chinese rug, the little brass clocks, the wallpaper of madder rose. They adored it, this was theirs.

"A toast," Father Snow said, "a toast to those not with us tonight." He looked at them unhappily. "We all have to do this at once," he said. They all took a sip of their drinks.

"Was Donny your first best boy?" the girls asked brightly.

"I wish I could snap out of this," Father Snow said. "I do apologize."

"Maybe you're in the wrong line of work," the girls said with concern.

"I am thinking of resigning my parish," Father Snow said, chewing on an olive, "and dealing with people on a one-to-one basis. Seeing them through. One by one."

Daddy remarked that he and Mommy were with him 100 percent on that.

"Poor Donny," Father Snow said. "He led a fairly incoherent existence and then he died."

"But that's because he was so typical," the girls said. "And there is nothing, absolutely nothing, wrong with that. But what was the matter with his teeth? He had that high-water mark like on his teeth." The girls found the ensuing awkward moment quite satisfying.

Father Snow blinked. "I loved him very much."

The girls sighed. He seemed to them like a mollusk at that moment. He was hardly worth the effort.

"Mommy," they said, "tell the story about the night Daddy proposed."

"Oh," Mommy said, "yes. He knelt before me and said, 'Let's merely see each other every day for the rest of our lives.'" She passed Arleen a cracker with a bit of foul and expensive cheese daubed upon it. This was declined. "Almost thirty-five years ago now."

"Tell the whole story," the girls squealed. "We love the story. Tell how Daddy ran over that man that winter night, the man who was standing beside his disabled car on the highway, but Daddy didn't stop even though he knew he'd very likely killed him because you were going to a concert, it was the night Daddy was going to propose to you, and Daddy didn't want your life together compromised or delayed. You had your life before you!"

Father Snow visibly paled.

"It was Janáček's 'Fairy Tale' that evening," Mommy said. "Debussy and Beethoven were also on the program."

Father Snow looked very ill at ease. Mommy reached out and squeezed his hand. "If this happened," Mommy said, "you'd be able to accept it, wouldn't you? If it had happened, you'd understand."

Father Snow squeezed back. "Only if it had," he said.

"That story has not been previously aired in public," Daddy said.

The girls closed their eyes and hummed a little. They loved the story — the night, the waves of snow descending, the elegant evening clothes, the nonexistent girls, some stranger sacrificed.

Father Snow drained his drink. "I'm going to make another batch of these if I may," he said. He extricated his hand from Mommy's and dumped more gin in the shaker, swirled it once and poured, without ceremony. There simply were some situations that did not allow for the sacralization of the ordinary, which he otherwise made every effort to observe.

He swallowed and groped for Mommy's hand again, recoiling slightly when he found it.

"Do you think we could do something about it?" Mommy said tentatively. "Is it possible after all these years?"

"Repent?" he said, his voice cracking. "Repent," he said.

Mommy looked at him with some annoyance. "I've always thought that was a rather commonly easy thing to do." She wanted to offer more cheese to all, but her hand was trapped. "I do feel sorry," she said. "We do."

"But the word is misunderstood!" Father Snow said. "The word translated throughout the New Testament as *repentance* is, in the Greek, *meta-noia*, which means change of mind. *Meta* means transference, as in *metaphor* — transference of meaning. Transformation."

"Repent," Mommy said. "So unhelpful. So common, really."

"The English word *repentance* is derived from the Latin *poenitare*, which merely means to feel sorry, suggesting a change in the heart rather than in the mind. *Poenitare* is a most inadequate word, which doesn't reflect the challenge involved," Father Snow said excitedly.

"We've had a good life," Daddy said, smoking. "Full. Can't take that away from us."

Father Snow looked at his drink. The moment of exhilaration had passed. He was now merely drunk and missing Donny in the same sad keen way. "Very difficult. Another way of thinking, a different approach to everything in life . . ." he said uncertainly.

The cats came into the room and leapt up onto Arleen's lap. The cats would do this to people they sensed hated them, and this amused the girls. But Arleen stroked them, first the one, then the other. From one's side she plucked a bloodsucker the size of a swollen dime. She held it between her fingers, a fat full thing with tiny waving legs, and dropped it in the dish Daddy was using as an ash-tray. From behind the ear of the other cat, Arleen snapped off another. Its removal occasioned a slight clicking sound. She dropped it beside the other one. The things stumbled around in the ashes in the little china dish. The attractive floral pattern that was so Mommy, that Mommy admired on all her china, was totally obscured. In this pretty room, this formal room with the silk shades, the portraits of ancestors, and the lark beneath the bell jar.

"That's disgusting, Arleen," the girls said. They had no doubt that she had produced them fraudulently. Their pets, their dar-

lings, could not possibly be harboring such things. "Are you a magician? Isn't that unchristian?"

"No, no," Arleen said, ducking her head shyly. "I'm hardly a magician. I'm an adviser, a companion."

"Arleen's no amateur," Father Snow said.

"A companion?" the girls said.

"The woman can listen to anything and come to a swift decision," Father Snow said. "I rely more on the ritual stuff. Words. Blah blah blah."

Arleen turned to Mommy. "You should get rid of them."

"The cats?" Mommy said. "Oh, I know, sometimes they *spray* . . ."

"The girls," Arleen said. "High time for them to be gone."

The girls gaped at her.

"Your mother's not well, you're killing her," Arleen said simply.

Mommy looked at them. She looked as though she didn't know what to think. Daddy lay his burning cigarette in the dish, then ground it out and lit another. The ashes moved with continuing, even renewed, effort.

Mommy spread more cheese on the crackers, quickly, quickly. Wads of it, a bit more than was nice actually. She stood up to pass the plate, tottering a bit.

"Oh, do sit down," the girls said, exasperated.

She did, abruptly, looking stunned as though she had seen something quite unusual, though more puzzling than extraordinary.

Father Snow said, "Clarissa, are you all right?" for Clarissa was Mommy's name.

"Dear?" Daddy said.

She smiled slyly and gave a little grunt. It was all so not like Mommy. She swayed and slid to the floor not at all gracefully, entangling herself in the cord of a lamp and striking her head on the lintel of the fireplace.

The girls clutched each other and cried out.

Arleen moved to cradle Clarissa's head, and Father Snow, with surprising sureness, crouched beside them both. He had quite regained his composure, as though for the moment he had put the old dead behind him and was moving on to the requirements of the quickening new.