

Trick of the Light

Ray tells me that my cheeks are rosy. Our supervisors at the factory said the paint would give us a glow. My nickname was Plum when I was a girl, after my rosy cheeks, I think, or maybe I always looked like I had something stuffed in my mouth. I was a chubby little thing, and now people say I'm a 'big girl' but that doesn't matter to me as much anymore. I'd love to tell Ray about the name Plum. Lots of couples have nicknames for each other, and I could call him Sunshine, or just Sun, for sun rays. I like that. Sun and Plum go together beautifully.

This morning I walked to the factory, knowing I would see Ray tonight. Every day I paint hundreds of clocks, using brushes made of camel hair, which is soft and the strands lose their shape. The numbers on each clock are so tiny it's impossible to be accurate without a pointed brush. I pass the tip into my mouth, wet it, and shape it with my lips. Nettie insists she can taste the radium on her tongue, but no one else can. Nettie is dramatic, that much is for sure.

No one in New Jersey pays as well as US Radium. We earn seventeen dollars a week, which is three times what my friend Barb makes at the lamp factory. We paint the

dials with the substance they call Undark, and it's magical really. All those poor soldiers in the war who couldn't tell the time at night down in the trenches, we helped them see. One of the supervisors told Nettie a story about a soldier over in France who was a hero because he charged the enemy at the right time. His commanding officer said 0230 and it was pitch black and the sky was clear and the air was cold but the soldier's radium watch face told him it was 0230. In the silence he leapt over the ridge and charged and made ground. During the day, the enemy would never have noticed it, but at night, the paint we apply with our camel-hair brushes glows, secret, like stars.

At work I think about Ray and my family, and sometimes I think about those soldiers and how we helped them. Now that the war is over, all sorts of people are buying our compasses and clocks, our Undark watches. So I remind myself of that when my shoulders hurt a little from hunching over my bench, or when Mother asks me why I'm holding my forehead at dinner and I say it's because of my headaches, from looking at numbers so tiny. From being so precise, painting two hundred dials per day. It's magic. A person has to know the time.

'Grandma still has the newspaper clippings from the shark attacks,' I tell Ray. 'She loves showing them off.'

'Last time it was pictures of the *Titanic*,' he says. When he takes my hand, shivers move up my arm and along my shoulders.

A few years ago, in the summer of 1916, shark attacks made big news along the Jersey Shore. It was during the

heat wave while families were on vacation in July. The polio made it worse, Father read in the paper, because everyone wanted to go into the sunshine and too many people were in the water. There was absolute panic over whatever was down there – some said they weren't even sharks, just fish or sea turtles. Barb and I heard about the attacks and spent a day laid out on our towels in her back garden. Barb's blouse was dotted with blue fish and her thighs were elastic brown in the sun. I borrowed her sunglasses and we talked about Robert Wade from the football team, and about James Barclay, who is handsome but whose mother ran away with a man from the brewery. Barb's mother brought us sandwiches on a tray. I said I wasn't hungry so Barb ate them all, and then she lay back on her elbows with her neck arched in the sun.

Ray and I step off the tram and he kisses me on the corner, six houses up from Grandma Rose's front windows. I want all the world to see Ray pressing his mouth to mine. I'm thrilled to think he could imagine nothing else during the tram ride but how I would taste for him on this corner. I am wearing my green dress with the cream sash and I'm glad the tram pulls away slowly and the passengers in the back can see.

I try it out for the first time. 'I think I'll call you Sun.'

'What? Why?' He kisses me again.

'It's a pet name I thought of for you. Like the rays of the sun. Something between us.'

'It's not very masculine. What's wrong with Ray?'

'Nothing. Nothing's wrong with Ray. I love your name.'

He slips his arm around my waist. While we walk the six houses I tell him about Nettie thinking the radium has a taste. But it's nothing more than touching your lips with water. Like when I was a girl sucking on the ends of my hair, the dark brown wisps changing shape like they were alive outside of me, smooth against my lips, no matter how many times Mother told me I'd end up with a ball of hair rounding out my middle like a cantaloupe.

Ray touches my face. 'Your cheeks are rosy,' he tells me again.

I hear Grandma inside the house, fumbling in the hallway, and I call to her. 'Grandma, I've told you to leave those in the lock. What if there's a fire?'

A series of clicks. She opens the door and rocks from foot to foot. 'What did you say about a fire?' Milky with cataracts, her eyes flicker between us.

'Nothing, Mrs Bell,' Ray says. 'It's so lovely to see you.'

Grandma pulls him in, down, closer than he'd like, I can tell, but he lets her kiss his cheek. She grips his hands as best she can, and then mine.

'How's your arthritis?' I ask.

'You know I don't like to talk about that, Vivien,' she says. 'I'm fine.'

Ray removes his hat and steps ahead of me into the hall. Set out on the table in the dining room are eight crustless rectangles of sandwiches lined up like railway sleepers. Grandma's teapot steams beneath its woollen cosy.

'Mr Doherty, you sit here. Or wherever you'd like, but perhaps here. Vivien, you take up that place next to your beau.'

‘Nobody says beau anymore, Grandma.’

‘A sandwich, Mr Doherty?’

I glance at Ray to reassure him. I’ve already told Grandma that we’re going out for dinner. That her house is just a quick stop. Ray is taking me dancing.

‘Thank you, Mrs Bell. Did Vivien tell you we’re going dancing?’ He halves the sandwich in one bite and talks through it. ‘I’m going to need my strength.’

All around us, the scent of mothballs spices the air. Grandma has filled a vase on her window ledge with pansies.

She turns to me. ‘How is your mother?’

‘She’s fine, thank you.’ Thinking of Mother reminds me of my single bed under my own window ledge in the room I’ve slept in all my life. Ray shares an apartment on the other side of the Watsessing River with his high school pal Tom. I’ve never seen him, even though I’ve offered to stay at Ray’s later, or go over earlier, so Tom and I can meet. Ray doesn’t think it’s important. When I first saw their poky bathroom, I imagined leaving my toothbrush there one day, next to Ray’s and Tom’s, a different colour, the three of them lined up. Ray has a single bed, pushed against the wall, and the bed clothes don’t match and the door can be locked so there’s privacy too.

Grandma fusses because she’s forgotten something, and she returns from the kitchen balancing a small white plate. Slices of an orange have fallen about on their backs like beetles. She points out the forks and knives beside our plates, dainty things, rarely used, carefully set out for Ray’s benefit. My knife skips across the flesh and a squirt of juice

makes them both chuckle. I finish it as quickly as I can, and wait for Grandma to offer me the other platter.

‘No, thank you, no,’ I say. ‘We’ll be having dinner soon.’ I pat my belly and push back my shoulders. The skin around Grandma’s neck is grey and it reminds me of wet cement that hasn’t been smoothed. In her wedding photos, Grandma is beautiful.

She flutters her palms up in surrender. ‘Now, I know you young people are looking to leave, but I promised Mr Doherty last time – didn’t I – that I would show you the hat pictures?’

Grandma’s father set up one of the first hat factories in New Jersey. Ray sits beside her at the table. I watch him point at newspaper clippings in the pages of her scrapbook and smile as he hears the stories that I used to love as a girl.

She looks up. ‘How is the factory for you, Vivien? I hope you’re not working too hard.’

‘I’m fine, thank you. We’re very busy. I should bring one of the clocks to show you.’

She waves my suggestion away. ‘No, that would be a trouble.’

I tell her that it’s time we were going and she nods. Her fork is shaky as she prods at the plate of fruit, begging Ray to eat the last couple of slices. I fold the napkins and Ray helps Grandma collect the dishes. I hear her thrill, the gratitude at his kindness, over the sound of running water in the sink.

At the front door, I stand still as Grandma puts her lips to my cheek. ‘You’re looking healthy, Vivien. I think you’ve lost a little weight.’

Ray waits in the hall, passing his hands around the brim of his hat. He acts like he hasn't heard. Grandma grips my arm too hard and soapy water from the sink drips onto my dress.

'Thank you for the tea,' I say.

As I step out onto the front garden path, I leave without kissing Grandma back, but Ray leans in for his. 'Here,' Grandma says. 'I want you to have this.'

Ray unfolds, once, twice, a newspaper clipping that she's pressed into his right palm. 'It's the one you liked,' she says softly. 'The velvet bonnet with the ostrich feathers. I think you should have it.' He tilts his head and tries to protest.

'I won't take no for answer. Me and my silly hats.' She shakes her head at her own foolishness. 'I want you to have it.'

Ray thanks her again and I guide him down the path. He waves over his shoulder and touches his hat. When we are six houses down, waiting for the tram, I stand on tiptoes and hold his face.

'Wow,' he says. 'She's really attached to those, huh?'

'Darling,' I say. A word better than any nickname. It's dusk and there's a chill and my cheeks will be rosy. Soon we will be a young couple sharing a seat on a tram, heading out for dinner. Others, older people of Orange, schoolgirls of Orange, will have their heads down because they are going nowhere but home. Their bones will be weary, their feet sore. 'I can't wait to go dancing,' I say, my lips on his cheek.

Ray says, 'I can't believe she gave me this.'

On the tram he tucks the paper into his coat pocket. We eat pancakes at Dennisons, and then we dance. The cream

sash around my waist comes undone and two songs later Ray re-ties it. Deep in my throat, across my cheeks and along my jaw, I feel the glow of his fingers on my hips.

‘Mother expects me in an hour,’ I whisper. We stay to finish the song and then walk to the tram.

Nettie at the factory talks a lot about all her boyfriends. She wears her hair in braids and gets each boyfriend to unravel them. She says it makes them clumsy and slow because their big fingers are trying to untie the braids without knots. Nettie likes the wait, and making them wait, too.

We step through the front door of Ray and Tom’s apartment. We pass the poky bathroom and Ray doesn’t say anything. Perhaps Tom is out somewhere tonight. When Ray ushers me into his room, I stare at the bed pushed up against the wall.

‘I have to work tomorrow,’ I say. I expect to be talking, I expect to talk right through this, so he will have to cover my mouth with kisses and the whole thing can be a little game.

I touch my hair. ‘I have to be at the factory early.’

I hope I am soft skin and slim hips. I hope I am the taste of peppermint. I hope I am aglow beneath his touch, haloed with my hair on the pillow beneath the window. I hope we are young forever and together in the dark.

‘Do you want to lie down?’ Ray says, his voice catching.

I wake up in my own bedroom, imagining that I am incubating something strange. Last summer, Jean at the factory thought she was pregnant, but in the end she wasn’t.

Or she was, and then she wasn't. We never found out.

When I dress for work I am covering a body that has now been seen. Our uniform is a smock that I always change out of before my dates with Ray. When we first met at the tram stop five months ago, he was in his suit, the one with the dark blue lining, and I felt like a schoolgirl. He doesn't see me in my work clothes anymore, and I have become slender like Grandma says, and my skin is healthy. With the money I've made at the factory I've bought some nice things, like the green dress and the powder blue hat from Paton's.

Beatrice sits next to me on our row. Everyone agrees that she's the prettiest of all the girls, but her boyfriend Stan died on his way home from the war, and I no longer wish that I was her.

'Did you and Stan have nicknames for each other?' I ask.

Beatrice doesn't look up from her dial, but she pauses, her brush hovering above the three. 'I guess we never did,' she says.

'So you always called each other Beatrice and Stan?'

Beatrice's brush quivers as she dips it into the pot. She dabs the bundle of hairs against her lips, rounding them to a point. 'Yes. Just Beatrice and Stan. Always just like that.'

A lady in France discovered radium, and here we are – Beatrice, Dorsie, Nettie, May, Lillian, Jean and me at one row, and all the girls at the other rows – helping out the soldiers one year, and making lovely gifts for people the next. When the French lady found it, she said it pulsed. Dorsie showed me an advertisement from a company in East Orange that makes a liquid radium elixir to extend your youth. Doctors sell it in bottles, but we're here every

day, surrounded by our jars of paint that are white in the light and green in the dark. I think of my grandmother's hands, crooked like bird beaks, and how Mother has to run hers under warm water before she can slice the vegetables.

After lunch I tell Beatrice that I'll see Ray again tonight. Mother is making roast duck and Goldenrod cake, and perhaps Ray and Father will smoke out on the porch afterwards. While I paint my dial, I rest my left hand on Beatrice's lap. Beatrice does the steadiest manicures. When she was in high school she wanted to be an artist, and Stan was going to build her a studio for her paintings. Beatrice's camel-hair brush tickles my nails, and she's finished in less than a minute. I turn to my right and bare my teeth to Dorsie. The radium mix goes on clear, and most of our supervisors don't mind if we have a bit of a laugh with it. I'll surprise Ray tonight, outside, after dinner, with my glowing fingers, my glowing teeth.