

LOCUST GLEANINGS

Bubbers was standing on tiptoes, his wily face pressed against the bars of the entrance gate that led to a fine old Kentucky estate known as *Locust*. In her fifties—according to family legend—her—her—her—

Mattie and Bubbers talked of “low-cost” this and “low-cost” that—according to family legend—until Edith, tracing medieval castle patterns in the dust with her cane (turrets, walls, moat, outer walls, then funeral cortege of limousines, headlights on, in long line on Roman road), said, “Mattie, let’s buy it and call it *Low Cost!*”

Bubbers—

The front façade was timbered in gently silvered pine. On the front door, an itinerant “two hands” painter had sketched three profiles (hands relaxed languorously against ear and cheek): Mattie and Edith and Bubbers. Every spring, an apprentice came around to touch up the colors, and, for several weeks, they looked heavily made up in a louche way, but, by mid-summer, the cheeks were ashen with small cracks proliferating here and there, and the lips were no longer Fire Engine Red, but Albino Eye Pink.

Eyes themselves? Dull and expressionless, like someone pretending to be blind who can actually see.

The downstairs consisted of a sun porch filled with rubber plants, wicker furniture, and ferns hanging in Indian baskets from the Amazon, attached to gilt chains. Next: the entrance hall, a circular room with three niches in one wall in which three teakwood busts were set—Mattie and Edith and Bubbers. The living room opened onto the sequestered rose garden with the gap in the hedge through which the ocean sparkled, the ocean actually being a huge mural series painted on white marble slabs replete with fishing smacks, liners, gulls, dolphins, a whale spout, and several peopled life rafts. The dining room led to the breakfast nook, pantry, kitchen, servants' kitchen, servants' pantry, sleeping area, area for pets, out to the intercom chamber and outside phone wall, down into the tunnels through smelly dirt.

“Feel the cold pipes.”

In her forties, Bubbers had—her—her—

Edith's nickname was Lady Knickers. That's what she wore, for outings, according to family legend—afternoon lie-downs, morning socials, the regattas, the golf matches, the bridge competitions, the ghost story marathons on the bluffs above the little city (zombie hands tighten on neck, blobs of spectral wetness balloon out of mouth-and-nos-trils)—and lazy rowboat expeditions down the forgotten and disused canal system, where weeping willows drooped, trailing small sere droppings that yellowed and hardened into minute prickly balls every autumn . . .

Bubbers, in her thirties—her—her—

It had been autumn that time Mattie and she were looking for a place to settle, and land around Hiramville

was dirt-cheap. An invasion of Acacians had displaced the Scotch-Irish “Black-Spanish” mountaineers, rigorous Huguenots who headed westward across the Wall of Lakes, as they called it, fanning out into settlements on islands in the N. P. Region, as they called it (New Paris? Netherlands Papua?)—from where they wrote intensely codified letter-poems of deaths and births to Mattie and Edith and Bubbers:

*Matthew dear, Bet and Graciosa have finished their rabbit hutch.
Thanks to python miasma, they began to feel so out-of-touch
they undertook to build a covered bridge across the swamp.
Edith, they plan to take the mango harvest to P'touville where
romp*

*mulatto brats in gutters, Bubbers, full of excrement and mushy
fruit.*

*P'touville, sixty miles away, was built, Matthew, by some
galoot*

*out of cartons, tins, driftwood, discarded ballast. Bug bites
turn one's skin into a fierce inferno. On summer nights*

*under protective nettings, we gather in front of Calvin's
Shrine.*

*Surrounded by orchid bushes, his marble ruffle shimmers in
the moonshine.*

*Baby Doda is dead, Edith. Terry breathed his last (ninety
years old)*

on Xmas Eve. Wet spring. The mangos are pre-sold,

and the Co-op, Bubbers, will gross eight million yen.

*Angel statues now number (they intrigue the spider monkeys)
ten.*

*Number Six is half-concealed by a bougainvillea bush,
a mere seedling last year. Matthew, its blossoms push
and sway against the orchid bushes around #6's wings.
The contours of its face resemble yours, Edith. It sings,
Bubbers, somedays of Hiramville, canals, weeping willows in
the snow,
or so it seems to those of us who miss you all. Love, Joe.*

Edith whisked through European spas, till her penchant for fronds came to a head. To The Islands! Batting at leaves, drugged with heavy jungle odors, Edith, Mattie, and Bubbers sat in their respective litters. Dressed formally, "black-tie," they sat through excruciating meals.

Mattie died, of what nobody quite knew. Effluvia . . . insects in it . . . blackens . . . found in portable tub . . . all red . . . the water . . . return to settle estate: molasses holdings, dabblings in "futures," railroad stocks, mines, chrome wipers, crocks, iridescent hooks, Friendship Clubs, barber shops, bull boxes, schools for training domestics, unguents, Orphan Associations, congestion research.

According to local legend, Bubbers met a young drifter: Phil. They formed an immediate attachment, and soon, a new profile was ensconced on the front door, replacing Mattie's, and a plastic bust was set in Mattie's niche in the entrance hall.

Scene: Deserted Fishing Camp.

Bubbers and Edith stare down through knot-hole gap in floor-board. Phil is naked on cot, reading *Popular Mechanics* he purchased in drugstore, along with comb, pack of *Shadows*, pocketknife.

Three weeks later, Edith was found asphyxiated in a motel bathroom, a bath mat soaked with chloroform over her head, and, in one hand, a blue and pink mottled "Locust" orchid, grown in the hot-house of Locust Mansion from a cutting sent by Joe. The hot-house was left to Bubbers, everything else to Phil. In her twenties—her—her—

Even in her teens, Edith enjoyed demise parodies, according to family legend.

"Orchids take on the form of little birds, lizards, insects, man, woman, of sinister fighters in a death embrace, of lazy tortoises basking upside down in the sun, of agile and ever chattering monkeys screened by fronds. If they don't make us laugh, they surely excite—"

So saying, Edith likely as not'd rush from the room, slam her door from behind which would issue forth the most desperate noises (chokes, gasps, "HELP! MURDERER! FIRE, FIRE!") and likely as not, a blood-colored liquid (concocted via her chemistry set) would ooze out from under the door as she'd go into her demise parody ("Send for Father Pierre—it's my *coeur*"—"My life is whirling past: hello, Mama Stephanie, hello Baby Doda, hello Genevieve's baroque inner climate, someone smells of sourgrass, aha, that old rancher Dade Morris, that's who, going backwards now, people moving funnily, jumping up on diving-boards, climbing off of trains backwards, hurrying up through the sunset onto the cliff, climbing off of trains backwards, they wave goodbye, then kiss their beloveds, and walk backwards with their beloveds into a motor-car which backs up into the distance, ha-ha, babies, goo-goo, babies, climbing back into the black place, ha-ha, happy, ha-pp-ee!!)—followed by a thump. Everyone'd rush inside, having battered down the door only to see she'd fled out the win-

dow, having kicked chairs and tables in everyone's way, all along the verandah. Locked in the guest bathroom downstairs, she'd begin her Silent Treatment, except for a long succession of suspicious plop-plop sounds (stale bread carried in a bag tied around her neck, along with pebbles gathered on summer walks)—then, finally, a long sigh, “Ha-pp-ee!!!”—then the worst, a black foamy liquid dribbling out the door (referred to privately as “vampire excrement”) and silence, irrevocable silence.

At this point, there was nothing left to do but creep away, and try to salvage the day; when she came down to dinner, no mention was made of Edith's demise parody penchant.

Bubbers handed me the “death” orchid, Edith's orchid, already brown.

“Throw it far, far away.”

I went into the garden and walked to the cliff. I stared glumly at a peopled life raft. A tiny creature in a be-spangled outfit was clinging to a chihuahua disconsolately. Girls in cage, mouths agape. Spray wet my kneecaps: lawn sprinkler. I put the orchid in my underwear, next to my sex.

Bubbers lay beside me, and cranked up his portable victrola to listen to *GILDA GREY*, his favorite movie-star operetta. The story of a silent screen star who falls on evil days, his favorite aria, *Alien Moon*, was sung by Gilda to a bellboy in her hotel room, in Alabama, overlooking the Gulf of Mexico.