

FROG
MUSIC

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I

DARLIN'

Sitting on the edge of the bed in the front room, Blanche stoops to rip at the laces of her gaiters. “*Dors, min p’tit quinquin—*’” Her husky voice frays to a thread on the second high note. She clears her throat, rasping away the heat.

A train hurtles north from San Jose. The light from the locomotive’s headlamp jabs through the long gap between the peeling window frame and the green blind, illuminating the room for Blanche: the shabby bureau, the bedstead, and Jenny, lolling against the scarred headboard. The Eight Mile House shakes like cardboard as the freight cars rattle by. Here at San Miguel Station, they’re right at the southern boundary—the last gasp—of San Francisco.

Two days Blanche and Jenny have been boarding with the McNamaras, *auld acquaintance* to Jenny but still virtually strangers to Blanche. How much longer will Blanche be stuck in this four-room shack, she wonders, on the parched outskirts of the outskirts of the City? And how will she decide when it’s even halfway safe to go back?

Blanche has got the left gaiter off now, and the boot below it, but the laces on the other one have snagged, and in the light of the single candle stub she can’t find the knot; her long nails pick at the laces.

*Dors, min p'tit quinquin,
Min p'tit pouchin,
Min gros rojin...*

Sleep, my little child, my little chick, my fat grape. The old tune comes more sweetly now, the notes like pinpricks. A silly Picard rhyme her grandmother used to sing to Blanche in the tiny attic in Paris.

“*Dors, min p'tit quinquin, min p'tit pouchin...*” Jenny slides the refrain back at her like a lazy leaf in a river.

It still amazes Blanche how fast this young woman can pick up a song on first hearing.

“How does the rest of it go?” Jenny asks, up on one elbow, brown cheeks sparkling with sweat. Her flesh from nose to brows is puffy, darkening. She’ll have a pair of black eyes by morning.

But Blanche doesn’t want to think about that. Jenny never harps on what’s past, does she? She wears her bruises like parade gear, and they fade fast.

Blanche sits up straighter on the edge of the bed and sings on.

*Te m'fras du chagrin
Si te n'dors point qu'à d'main.*

“Shut your trap, little baby, before I shut it for you,” Jenny translates very loosely, nodding. “Guess most lullabies boil down to that.”

And Blanche is suddenly winded by an image of P’tit, wherever he is. A stern hand coming down to shut his trap. If only she knew the baby was all right: just that much. Has Jenny ever in her life stopped to think before opening her own goddamn trap?

But her friend’s eyes are half sealed already, feline as she settles back on the limp pillows. Above the nightshirt borrowed from McNamara, Jenny’s battered face is flattening toward sleep.

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Blanche hauls up her skirt and sets her right ankle on her left knee to get a better look at the tangled lace. The gritty canvas of the gaiter clings to her calf like skin that won't be sloughed. Mud flecking the floorboards, the dingy sheets; the whole shack is probably crawling with fleas and lice. Blanche bends closer to make out the knot. Another few seconds and she'll have it undone. Her lungs fill, stretching rib cage, skin, corset, bodice, as she croons again: "*Te m'f'ras du chagrin—*"

The cracks come so hard Blanche takes them for thunder. The hot sky must have finally exploded, forking its blades into the eaves of the Eight Mile House. Oh, she shouldn't have been singing, she thinks with a superstitious shiver; she's brought on a storm.

"*Qu'est-ce—*" Is that the start of a question from Jenny, or just a gasp?

The candle's out, and it's so dark here in the hinterlands. "Wait," Blanche tells Jenny, lurching to her feet with her right boot still on. A sulfurous tang on the air—she's never known a thunderstorm to smell like that. Fireworks? But what is there to celebrate on the fourteenth of September? Outside, the dogs of San Miguel Station bark in furious chorus. What can blow out a candle? Knock it over, spatter its burning wax—is that what's running down her jaw?

"John!" That's Ellen McNamara in the back room, bawling for her husband.

A thump, something falling near Blanche. Has the little washstand toppled off the bureau?

"John!"

Blanche's right cheek is dripping as if with scalding tears, but she's not crying. She swabs it and something bites—some monstrous skeeter? No, not an insect, something sharp. "*Merde*, I've been cut," she cries through the stifling dark.

No answer from Jenny. Behind the thin bedroom wall, in the

saloon, a door bangs. McNamara, only half audible, and his wife, and the children, shrieking too high for Blanche to make out the words.

She's staggering now. The boards crunch under her bare sole. Glass: that must be what's cut her cheek. The lightning's shattered the window and made a hole in the blind, so a murky moonlight is leaking in. Blanche pants in outrage. Will those dogs ever shut up so she can hear herself think? She squints across the bedroom. "Jenny?" Kicking shards off her foot, Blanche clammers onto the bed, but Jenny's no longer there. She couldn't have got past Blanche without opening the door, could she?

The sheets are sodden to the touch. What can have wet them?

Blanche's eyes adjust to the faint radiance. Something on the floor between bed and wall, puddled in the corner, moving, but not the way a person moves. Arms bent wrong, nightshirt rucked obscenely, skinny legs daubed with blood, and wearing a carnival version of a familiar face.

Jenny!

Blanche recoils.

A second.

Another.

She forces her hand down toward—to feel, to know for sure, at least—but the geyser spurt against her fingers sends her howling back to the other side of the bed. She clings to the foul sheets.

Light smashes in the doorway from the saloon: McNamara with a lamp. "Miss Blanche, are you shot or what?"

She blinks down at herself, scarlet all over.



Not quite a month ago, at the House of Mirrors in San Francisco's Chinatown.

From the piano, the soft opening chords of a waltz. In the very

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center of the little stage, rising like the stigma of a flower: Blanche. All in white tonight, true to her stage name. She begins very slow and stately, as chaste as any ingenue in her first role; that's the trick of the skirt dance. With delicacy, with wonder, as if she's only just discovering the sleek waterfall of white satin spilling from her waist to her toes, Blanche circles the platform. She enfolds herself in the glossy material (forty-four feet around), lingers in its caress.

She makes sure to act as if she hasn't noticed the men in the tight rows of crimson velvet chairs, as if they aren't even there. The Grand Saloon is already packed early on this Saturday evening in the middle of August. Lamplight ricochets from the floor-to-ceiling looking glasses, and the red walls and matching tufted carpet seem to pulse with heat. Inside her frilled bodice, sweat is trickling down Blanche's sides. But she holds herself as serene as any swan spreading its milky wings. She makes a screen of the vast silk skirt to silhouette her curves. The *micbetons* must be leaning forward by now, eager to peer through the fabric, but she doesn't so much as cast them a glance.

Delibes's sweet melody gives way to the bolder theme, and Blanche starts to hop, glide, spin. She pushes every pose to its precise extreme. Face dipped to one knee, she raises the other leg behind her, pointing her toes at the gilt-coffered ceiling. The skirt slithers down her thigh, catching a little on the gauzy tights, threatening to turn inside out, and a few gasps erupt from the audience, even though they can see nothing yet—what thrills them most, Blanche knows, is what they can only imagine—but she rights herself and starts waltzing again as the music returns to the calm opening tune. Her face still cool and virginal.

Micbetons who pay this much to watch a dance have complicated cravings. They need to be roused and refused at almost the same moment. Blanche is an expert tease, an *allumeuse* who lights the flame and snuffs it, lights and snuffs it.

She knows this routine so well, and the famous “Swanhilde Waltz” it’s set to, that she can let her mind wander. What was that slip of an Italian called, the first Swanhilde, at the premiere of *Coppélia* they attended, back in Paris? Five, no, six years ago; Blanche remembers being dazzled by every pirouette. Arthur came home one day during the siege with the news that she’d died, the little Italian. Even top ballerinas had had their wages frozen while the Prussians were at the gates of the city, and this one half starved, it was said, and succumbed to smallpox on her seventeenth birthday.

Goddamn it. Blanche has been trying to keep it outside the walls of her mind, the pestilence that began infiltrating San Francisco back in May. Smallpox: the very word makes her itch.

She almost stumbles. Then strikes a pose, very classical: a fleeing nymph metamorphosed into marble. As the music darkens in the final section of the waltz, Blanche bends back, all the way back, till her fingers are almost stroking the boards, and she starts to spin, her whole body the trumpet of a white lily revolving helplessly on its stem.

The accompaniment spirals upward, frantic, and Blanche whips upright, her swirling skirt engulfing the stage. Thunderous, triumphant chords. At the crescendo she touches the secret tape at the small of her back and the whole thing flies free, creamy satin swooping toward the audience and landing, albatross-like, on a pair of old millionaires.

The men’s whoops break the tension, but that’s all right. It wouldn’t be burlesque without a few laughs.

Blanche, now wearing only her bodice and a pair of shirred white pantaloons over her translucent tights, sucks one fingertip. As if she’s an innocent, discomfited by the greedy stares. The Professor, at the piano, knows to wait. She sings the first verse a cappella, like some creamy-skinned beggar girl on a street corner:

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*Darlin', better love just one—
Darlin', better love just one.
You can't love more than one,
And have all the fun—
Darlin', better love just one.*

Now the piano takes up the tune, adding some sauce. “‘You can't love two,’” Blanche warns the crowd, wagging that wet-tipped finger, “‘and keep me true to you—’”

The minute she first heard this song, crooned off-key at the back of a streetcar, she knew she could make an act of it. She does a different little dance after each verse. Blanche is gaining in knowledge, ripening before their eyes. By the fourth verse her strut behind the footlights grows impudent. “‘You can't love four, and come knocking on my door—’” *Can't*, she insists, but her dance is saying *Can, can, can, can*. Her hips respond to imaginary handling. Blanche moves as dancing girls have moved for as long as there've been dancing girls, through the whole sweaty history of the human race.

*You can't love five,
And eat honey from my hive—
Darlin', you can't love five.*

A surge of heat goes through Blanche. She's counting: fifty dollars from this performance, plus whatever she'll make from a private rendezvous afterward. Every dip, sway, pout, wiggle, grind, she converts into greenbacks in her head and that gives extra vim to her movements, burnishes the shine of her eyes. “‘You can't love six, and teach me any tricks—’” she scolds the crowd, flicking a couple of hats off their front-row wearers with rapid-fire toe kicks. One red-faced visitor squeals with such delight, she fears he might drop down in an apoplectic fit.

At the back of the Grand Saloon stands a nunnish figure in

gray, the proprietor: Madame Johanna Werner. She gives Blanche a sober nod of approval.

Jump splits now, panting just enough to make it interesting:

*You can't love eight,
And get through my pearly gate—
Darlin', you can't love eight.*

Did Blanche forget the seventh verse? Who cares. Down on her hands and knees, shaking her hips as she taunts the *michetons* over one round shoulder. “‘You can’t love nine, or you’ll run out of time!’” She jerks as if rammed by an invisible lover. “‘You can’t love ten, and do that to me again—’”

At the twelfth verse, Blanche shuts her eyes and belts it out as urgently as she can.

*Darlin', you can't love twelve—
Darlin', you can't love twelve.
You can't love twelve,
Or I'll have to manage by myself—*

She lets her voice crack with desperation. One hand slips inside the waistband of her pantaloons; now the other. Men are groaning, writhing in their velvet chairs. Every *cigare* in the house is smoking now. And Blanche is excited too. Her genius for this job is that she doesn’t have to pretend, because every throb of her salty little crack is real.

Flat on her back now. Legs thrashing in the air. Assailed by an unseen crowd of thrusting incubi. Blanche gasps: “‘You can’t love thirteen, or it’s gonna start hurting...’”

Later that evening, as she steps out of the International Hotel, her sleeves instantly glue themselves to her arms. The ink-black porter

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holds the door, and the quarter she drops into his pink palm is sticky from hers.

The organ-grinder at the corner is cranking out the Triumphal March from *Aida*, the same barrel he was playing more than an hour ago when a cab brought Blanche to the hotel. The man has stamina, she'll grant him that. His organ must weigh a hundred pounds, and despite the spindly hinged leg it leans on, its strap is pulling his shoulders down like a millstone. His wife gives her tambourine a listless smack on every fourth beat, and their spaniel capers in a joyless, practiced way.

Twilight now, and the light is dimming but the warmth has only thickened. *L'heure bleue*, they used to call it at home, "the blue hour," when the sky turns that serious azure and the jagged horizon blackens. Not that this cockeyed metropolis is a patch on Paris, to Blanche's mind, even if some call it the Paris of the West. The Capital of the West, maybe, but San Francisco is a tenth the size of the City of Light, and it hasn't a smooth boulevard, a promenade, even an avenue worth the name. The City, the locals call it, as if it's the only one. All hills, like some feather bed that a giant's shaken and left a crumpled mess. Blanche has been marching up and down these slopes with all the other human ants for a year and a half, since she arrived from France, but she'll never get used to the dizzying gradients.

She's tired now. It's not the leg show at the House of Mirrors, or the quick glass of champagne at the International with the *micheton* she's just left winded on the hotel's fine sheets. (He wasn't a regular of hers but a silver millionaire passing through town for the night who begged Madame Johanna to bump him to the top of Blanche's line. Actually, Blanche rather prefers the fly-by-nights, since it's easier to make a spectacular impression if it's one time only.) No, it's this strange heat that's wearing her out. The summer began civilly enough, with warm breezes whisking away the morning fogs, but now, heading into the second half of

August, the City can't breathe. The air's a stinking miasma of all the steams and soots San Franciscans can produce. One newspaper's dug up an odd little fellow who's been noting down what his thermometer tells him every day since he arrived in '49. This summer of 1876 is the hottest season in his records, with the mercury hitting ninety every afternoon.

Half a block down Jackson, that same opera seems to be dragging on at the Chinese Royal Theater, all screeching strings, drum and gong. Blanche shakes her head to clear it. She gathers speed as she marches down Kearny, fuchsia skirt swaying lankly, heels knocking puffs of dust out of the wooden sidewalk. She'll be back at her apartment in ten minutes. Then she can get out of these sticky clothes, and maybe have a drink with Arthur, if he's home.

The Pony Express Saloon is already advertising September's grand-prize-gala dogfight. Spotting a yellow smallpox flag nailed over the door of a dress shop, Blanche holds her breath and veers away. Red dots on face, hands, or feet, that's what you look out for, according to the so-called experts. Not that they can agree on how you catch it, whether by poisonous vapors leaking from the ground or invisible bugs jumping from the sick to the well. And really, who can bear to stay shut up indoors holding their breath all summer?

Past the Bella Union Theater, where what sounds like a full house is chanting for the variety show to begin. The Ice Cream Boudoir is stuffed to the gills, but City Hall's deserted—except for a prisoner in the lockup who clangs on the bars of the basement window as Blanche walks by, making her jump. Portsmouth Square is fenced with iron spears dipped in gold. Confetti of limp flower beds. Snoozers stacked like war dead under every canopied tree. In the fountain, two drunks wrestle for a chance to lie full length under the spout. Children hover out of range, gathering their nerve to dash in for a faceful of water. The sight makes

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Blanche thirsty, but she doesn't fancy pushing her way through the bums and *gamins* to take a drink.

The streets are filling up now the sun's gone down. Folks burst out of their stifling rooms. When Blanche stares west, past Nob Hill, she catches the last of the light sinking into the Pacific. On the corner of Clay, she spots that old one-eyed woman dragging her stained valise. To avoid her, Blanche pivots to cross Kearny but has to wait for a horsecar to rattle by. The fist-shaped cobbles release all the stored heat of the day into her shoes' thin soles. She steps out in the streetcar's wake, watching for fresh dung in the uncertain dusk—which means she doesn't see the thing till it's on top of her.

Black antlerish handlebars, that's all she has time to glimpse before the gigantic spokes are swallowing her skirts. Her scream seems to break the bicycle in two. Machine explodes one way and rider another, smashing Blanche to the ground.

She tries to spring up but her right leg won't bear her. Mouth too dry to spit.

The lanky daredevil jumps up, rubbing one elbow, as lively as a clown. "*Ça va, mademoiselle?*"

The fellow's observant enough to read Blanche's nationality from her style of dress. And the accent is as French as Blanche's own. But the voice—

Not a man's, Blanche realizes. Not a boy's, even. This is a girl, for all the gray jacket, vest, pants, the jet hair hacked above the sunburned jawline. One of these eccentrics on whom the City prides itself—which only aggravates Blanche's irritation, as if the whole collision were nothing but a gag, and never mind who's left with *merde* on her hem.

A cart swerves around Blanche, hooves close enough to make her flinch. She gets up onto her knees, but she's hobbled by her skirt.

The young woman in pants holds out a hand, teeth flashing in a grin.

Blanche slaps it away. For this female to run her down and then smirk about it—

A long screech of brakes: another horsecar at the crossing, bearing down on them. The stranger offers her hand again, with a theatrical flourish. Blanche grabs hold of the cool fingers and wrenches herself to her feet, hearing a seam rip under one arm. She staggers to the sidewalk, her skewed bustle bulging over one hip.

As she shakes out her aching right leg, she realizes she's alone. The daredevil's run half a block up Kearny and is roaring in English at some *gamins* who've seized their chance to make off with her fancy machine. Serves her right if it's gone!

But by the time Blanche has hauled her bustle straight and slapped the dirt from her skirts, the rider's back. Perched above the gigantic front wheel, she glides down the street to Blanche, then swings one leg over, hops down, and hits the ground running. "Jenny Bonnet," she announces as if it's good news, the accent thoroughly American now even if she says her surname in the French way, with a silent *t*. She tips her black hat to a natty angle. "And you are?"

"None of your business." Blanche blows at the strand of hair that's stuck to her damp lip and summons her crispest English, because what she lacks in height she can make up for in hauteur. "Listen, you he-she-whatever, the next time you get the notion to make the street your playground—"

"Yeah, this thing's the devil to steer," interrupts Jenny Bonnet, nodding as if they agree. She has only about six inches on Blanche, up close. "Didn't hurt you, though, did I?"

Blanche bristles. "I'm bruised from head to toe."

"No bones sticking out, though?" The young woman makes a show of looking her up and down, mugging for a laugh. "No actual bloodshed per se?"

"You might have killed us both, imbecile."

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“If it comes to that, I might have fallen off a steamer to Lima this morning, and you might have caught your death,” says Jenny, jerking her thumb at a smallpox flag on a tobacconist’s just behind them.

Blanche jerks back and takes a few steps away.

“Instead, it appears we’re both safe and sound, and so’s my high-wheeler.” Jenny lets out a cowboy whoop.

And oddly enough, Blanche’s wrath begins to lift a little. Maybe it’s the whisper of a breeze rising off the Bay, where the masts of the quarantined junks and clippers seem to be swaying a little, unless that’s a trick of the dusk. Or the soft trill from a flute player in some apartment overhead. The lights are flaring on in the cafés and shops along Kearny, and soon Chinatown’s border will be as glittering as a carousel.

“Let me buy you a drink,” suggests Jenny, nodding toward Durand’s brasserie.

Blanche always likes the sound of that. “As an apology?”

“If you like. Never found them worth the candle myself.”

Blanche hoists her eyebrows.

“If you’re sorry, folks can tell,” remarks Jenny. “No use piling on the verbiage.” She lays her bicycle flat outside the brasserie’s door and beckons a boy over to guard it.

“Do you reckon this kid won’t run off with it as fast as the others did?” asks Blanche, sardonic.

“Ah, I know where this one lives.”

That disconcerts Blanche. “I never imagine them as living anywhere in particular.”

Jenny nods up at the building’s rickety overhang: “He’s a Durand.”

As the two of them step into the garlicky fug, a couple of customers glance up, but nobody gives the young woman in pants a second glance. This Jenny must be an habitué.

Monsieur Durand greets her with a nod and clears a space at

the bar with his elbows. His fat mustache is leaking wax as he comes back and slaps down their glasses and a carafe of wine. Blanche pours the wine, takes a long drink. Ah, that's better. She wipes sweat out of her eyes. "Aren't you sweltering under all those layers?"

A shrug as Jenny fills her own glass.

"September can't come too soon for me. It has to cool down by then."

"The City's the exception to any rule," says Jenny. "I've known it to be hottest in October."

Blanche groans at the prospect.

Durand returns with two bowls of *cuisse de grenouille au beurre noir* they didn't ask for. Discovering that she's hungry, Blanche rips the firm, aromatic flesh from the frog thighs. "These aren't like back in France."

"No, they're better," Jenny counters. She lets out a grunt of pleasure as she chews. "Only ten minutes dead, that's the trick. But a touch too salty. Tell him he's still oversalting," she throws at Durand.

The owner thumbs his mustache off his unsmiling mouth. "Portal," he roars over his shoulder.

"How long have you been here?" Jenny asks Blanche.

"Since the winter before last."

"So why've you stayed?"

Blanche blinks at the question. "You have no manners, miss."

"Oh, I've got some," says Jenny, "they're just not what you might call pretty. Diamond in the rough, that's me."

Blanche rolls her eyes. "And why shouldn't I have stayed, may I ask?"

"Most move on through," observes Jenny. "As if the City's just a mouth, swallowing them whole, and the rest of America's the belly where they end up."

Blanche winces at the image and pours herself more wine. Cali-

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fornia was Arthur's choice, she recalls. Blanche couldn't have found it on a map. All the French they got into conversations with on the ship were heading, like Arthur and Blanche and Ernest, to some big city—New York or Chicago if not San Francisco—where, it was said, the hospitality and entertainment trades paid well. “We came because we heard you can cock your hat as you please here,” she says, “and stayed for the same reason, I suppose.”

“Who's *we*?”

But Blanche has had enough of this style of questioning. “And you, when did you arrive?”

“Portal!” roars Durand again.

“I was three,” says Jenny, neat teeth nibbling her last frog leg, “but even then I was choosy about my food.”

“What are you now?”

“Still choosy.”

“No,” says Blanche, “I mean—”

A chuckle. “Twenty-seven.”

Really? “Huh. That's three years older than me, and I still look pretty fresh.”

Jenny grins back at her, neither agreeing nor contradicting.

“It must be your outfit,” says Blanche with a sigh, nodding at the pants. “It's as odd as all get-out, but it does take years off you.”

They're bantering as if they've always known each other, it occurs to Blanche with a prickle of unease. She's not one for making friends with women, as a rule.

A mournful face looks through the hatch from the kitchen, and Durand snaps at him, “Ease up on the salt, Jeanne says.”

This must be Portal. The cook makes a small, obscene gesture in Jenny's direction.

“You know I'm right, *mon vieux*,” she tells Portal.

“Stick to swamp-wading.” He mops his forehead with his sleeve and disappears again.

“So come on now,” says Jenny to Blanche, greedily, “who are you and what’s your story?”

“Hold on. Swamp-wading?” Blanche repeats.

“I caught these last night, out by Lake Merced,” Jenny tells her, holding up a glistening bone.

“That’s your trade? Hunting frogs?” Well, it would go some way to explain the young woman’s getup. “Don’t they give you warts?”

“That’s pure dumb superstition.” Jenny offers her small hands for examination.

They’re brown but smooth. “Couldn’t you work at something... I don’t know, less disgusting?”

“Guess I don’t disgust easy,” says Jenny. “The City has three hundred restaurants, and all the French and Chinese ones need frogs.”

“But they’re such ugly, clumsy creatures.”

“Clumsy? You ever seen them swim?”

Now that she thinks about it, Blanche realizes she’s never seen a live frog except on sale in barrels on Dupont Street. “But the smell, the slime—”

“That’s fish you’re thinking of. Frogs don’t smell of anything,” Jenny corrects her, “and without a touch of slipperiness, you can’t have it both ways.”

“Both ways?”

“Live on land and in water as well. I call that crafty.”

Blanche purses her mouth. “That’s my glass you’re drinking from, by the way.”

Jenny blinks at it. “Sorry.” She gestures to Durand for another.

“An apology at last,” marvels Blanche under her breath, satirical.

When the proprietor slaps a clean glass down in front of her, she refills it and strips the last shred of garlicky meat from a delicate bone with her teeth. “Since you’ve drunk from my glass,”

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she tells Jenny, “you should be able to read my thoughts. Except you’d probably call that more *dumb superstition*.”

Jenny furrows her brow. “Your name is Patience Vautrien . . . and you’re a dairymaid.”

Blanche makes a small sound of outrage. Those girls are known for their reek. “I did once work with horses,” she says. A fact, if a misleading one.

“But not anymore?” Jenny presses her temples, frowning with effort. “Mrs. Hector Losange, mother of five lovely offspring, known for her charity teas?” She waits. “Arabella Delafrance, lady spy?”

“Enough!” The joke suddenly sours on Blanche. As if it’s not as clear as day from her flowered bodice, fuchsia skirt, and general gaudiness that she’s a showgirl, at least, and probably on the town.

Why should she care who knows? If Blanche didn’t want to be recognized for what she was, she wouldn’t dress this way, would she? She never exactly intended to be a soiled dove (that curious euphemism), but neither can she remember putting up any real objection. She stepped into the life like a swimmer entering a lake, a few inches at a time.

“So where did you grow up,” she asks, to change the subject, “America’s belly or mouth?”

“Some gristly part, anyway,” Jenny jokes instead of answering.

“How much?” asks a man at Blanche’s shoulder.

She decides to assume he’s addressing Durand. “Have you family?” she presses on.

“Found under a cabbage leaf, I was,” says Jenny, deadpan.

“I said, how much?” The American is breathing right in Blanche’s ear, and she can smell the chaw in his mouth.

“I’m eating,” she says without looking around.

“Only asking a civil question.” The big man squeezes up to the bar between the two women, dark wheels of sweat under his arms.