

—| HELEN MOURRE | What's Come Over Her

ENID STANDS AT THE KITCHEN COUNTER and ruffles through the mail, looking for the June bank statement. She has to find it before Dutch gets home. Sask-Tel, Sask-Power, bills from the chemical dealer, flyers from Pro-Hardware, the Co-op, Pharmasave. Finally, at the bottom of the pile, she comes across the envelope from the Royal Bank. She grabs the paring knife from the cutlery drawer and slits it open. Flips through the cheques until she comes to the one made out to Lorraine's Ladies' Wear. She starts sweating when she sees the amount. One hundred and ten dollars. She nearly faints. She's never in twenty-seven years on the farm spent that much on a piece of clothing. She hesitates for one moment, rips it in half. Then quarters. Puts it in the garbage under the sink. Pushes it deep into the refuse. A slimy mixture of coffee grounds, potato peelings, burnt toast and soggy paper towels. She'll have to remember to take it out to the burning barrel before Dutch gets home.

Enid fills her lungs with air. Breathe in. Breathe out. She gives her shoulders a defiant little hitch and then heads out to the deck, flops down on the canvas lawn chair and stares straight into the sun. She can't believe what's come over her this last year. Her obsession with how she looks, what she wears. The dress was an impulse purchase three weeks ago. Enid had gone to town to pick up repairs for Dutch. Then she'd stopped at the Co-op Service Station out on the highway to get gas. She'd forgotten to fill up at the bulk tank on the farm.

Dice Evans filled her car, washed down her windows and stopped to chat. Dice was compact and coiled, his skin-tight jeans showing off his leg muscles. Enid couldn't stop staring. Until she noticed the hand with the missing thumb, and then she looked away too quickly. She hoped Dice hadn't noticed. She remembered he'd come back to town this spring from working on the oil rigs in northern Alberta. That was where he'd lost his thumb, she'd heard. Occasionally, he drove the bulk-fuel truck out to the farm when the deliveryman was on holidays or was sick or had an appointment. Dice had moved back in with his mother after the accident, although Enid thought she'd heard about some woman he'd left back in Alberta.

"Is Dutch all finished seeding out there?" Dice asked after he filled her car. His voice was smooth as cow's cream. He pulled the squeegee across the windshield in three easy swipes. Enid watched, fascinated by his graceful movements. But

the hand with the missing thumb gave her the creeps, the way it was so completely and neatly sheared off.

"We finished on Sunday," said Enid. "Now, we're praying for rain. As usual." She scanned the sky for clouds, but it was a blank slate.

"Supposed to rain tomorrow. But I wouldn't bet on it," said Dice. He wore sunglasses, the metallic kind that reflected everything back in miniature. They made her uneasy. Gave him some kind of advantage, she thought. He moved to the driver's side of the car and cleaned both windows as well as the mirror. Enid noticed he paid attention to small things. She liked that.

When he was finished, he plopped the squeegee in the water bucket and looked at her steadily for maybe a second longer than necessary. Enid blushed and looked away.

"Do either of the boys farm with you now?" he asked. "I've forgotten."

"Nobody stays anymore," said Enid flatly. "No, I'm afraid it's just Dutch and me."

"That's a shame," said Dice. "They ought to be there. To help you out."

"That's just the way it is," said Enid. "They have to make a living too. Not enough money in this game any more for us to live. Let alone the boys and their wives."

Dice pulled the hose out of the car and turned to Enid. "You want to pay for this or just put it on the tab? I'll be delivering some to the farm one of these days. Dutch phoned about a fill."

Enid wondered why he was trying to help her out by not making her ask for credit. If it had been one of the younger guys pumping gas, they'd have made her pay cash on the spot.

"Sure," she said. "Just put it on the bill." It was easy to say if you said it fast like that.

Dice's eyes dropped for a second before he said too brightly, "See you out at the farm one of these days soon. Tell Dutch not to get his shirt in a knot. We'll have his fuel out there pretty quick. Oh, just a minute. Don't move." He reached across and plucked a white ball of poplar pollen from her hair. He flicked it into the air. "You take care now. You hear?"

"Thanks," Enid said. She snatched at her hair in a nervous kind of way. She felt a strange mixture of relief and shame and something else that she couldn't put a name to. When she got back in the car, her hands on the steering wheel were sweaty. She wiped them on her faded navy shorts. Pressed her palms to her hot face.

After she'd bought groceries at the ShopRite, she drove up Main Street and saw the dresses on display in the window of Lorraine's Ladies' Wear and the sign, New for Spring. She had no idea why she suddenly angle-parked on the half-deserted street and went in. She hadn't been in the store for years. Wasn't even sure who it was that owned it anymore. Some divorced woman, she thought. The dresses hanging in the window were beautiful, all pastels. Creamy yellow, pale watercolour blue and celery green. She thought back to the time she'd worked at the dry-cleaner in town that summer before she'd married Dutch. How she'd drooled over Miss Arsenault's couturier dresses. Enid stood for a long time just looking until a voice from the back startled her. "May I be of help?" A cultured, carefully restrained voice. Soothing.

Enid looked up. The woman who belonged to the voice was perched on a high stool behind the counter. Her dyed blonde hair was sprayed into position and she had a thick layer of makeup, so heavy Enid suspected her wrinkles had all been filled in.

"No, no thank you," said Enid. She looked down at her faded navy shorts, her plain white T-shirt, her worn-out Tender Tootsies. Then she looked again at the dresses in the window. She made a decision. "I'd like to try that one. The yellow one."

"What size do you take?" asked the saleswoman. "About a twelve?"

Enid looked down at her widening hips. "I used to take a ten."

The saleswoman assessed her. "This line of dresses fits on the small side." She hung the dress in the changing room with a clang.

Enid stripped down to her bra and panties and tried to avoid her reflection in the full-length mirror. Since turning fifty-one, Enid has noticed some drastic changes. She'd always prided herself on being in good shape, but now she is alarmed to see stretches of cellulite on her upper legs, a bulging stomach and just enough pockets of fat here and there to give her whole body a lumpy, uncertain contour. She quickly pulled the dress over her head and twisted her arm behind her back and did up the zipper.

She looked straight into the mirror. Met her image face-to-face. The dress flattered her. A graceful A-line with enough excess material to camouflage the mysterious swellings. She fingered the fabric, a wonderful soft rayon with just the hint of a sheen as if sunlight had been trapped there. She twirled around, stood on tiptoes to get the proper effect. She pushed her short, grey-streaked hair behind her ears, fluffed up her too-long bangs. She decided she must have it. Quickly,

before she could change her mind, she pulled her shorts and T-shirt back on and took the dress out to the counter to pay for it.

"How did you make out, dear?" the saleswoman asked. "You didn't come out and show me."

Enid was anxious now to make the purchase and get out of the store. She had no idea what had come over her. Her hands shook so badly she could barely make out the cheque. She had to write it twice. The saleswoman wrapped the dress carefully in white tissue paper and fastened a shiny gold sticker where the two pieces overlapped. Enid wished she would hurry. She felt sick.

"There you go, dear. I hope you enjoy your dress." The saleswoman handed her a brilliant pink bag with Lorraine's Ladies' Wear embossed in gold letters.

Enid fled the store, pointed the '84 Pontiac towards home and drove without seeing, past the new green fields of wheat, past Ferguson's Seed Cleaning plant, past the Hutterite colony, past the McClean place with the red and white barn, past the dugout where little Tommy Kennedy drowned.

When she got home, she hung the dress at the very back of her closet. Behind the dress she had worn to the boys' weddings and their graduations and her parents' anniversary. Then she made herself a cup of tea. Very strong.

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ENID WEEDS THE GARDEN, PICKS THE PORTULACA and cockle and redroot pigweed between the rows of radish and lettuce and beets. She didn't even want to plant a garden this spring but Dutch had insisted. A farm without a garden? What kind of farm wife was she, anyway? Most of her neighbours don't plant gardens anymore. It's less bother to buy fresh vegetables at the Hutterite colony up the road. It's easy for them, Enid thinks. They're not married to Dutch.

She stoops and picks. Straightens. Massages her aching back as best she can. This kind of work never bothered Enid until this year. She is surprised, really, by the violent onslaught of middle age. She had expected the deterioration to be more gradual. She envies Dutch, the way he appears to sail through everything with just as much energy as a thirty-year-old.

The sun rides high, so strong it almost bleaches out the blue of the sky. A flock of magpies circles above, biding their time to come and plunder the lettuce and the beets. Bully birds. They'll be fooled this morning, though. Enid has pounded stakes into the ground on either side of the tender plants and then wound strong black string from one stake to another. When the birds fly into the string, their wings get caught, they panic and escape.

The heady smell of lilacs wafts over the garden patch. Enid decides to pick a bouquet for the table. She can hear Missy barking a welcome and Dutch's service truck roaring up the road. She jumps at the sound of it. She snaps off two more blossoms and hurries to the house. Dutch is in the bathroom off the kitchen, washing up. She can hear him splashing and snorting like an old elephant. The bathroom usually looks like a herd of them had a water fight when Dutch is through. Enid wonders if she's the only farmwife who has to wash the soap before using it.

"Dinner ready?" yells Dutch.

Thank God for leftovers. Enid dumps a Tupperware container of vegetable stew into a dish and pops it into the microwave. She's failed badly at house-training Dutch. If she wasn't around, he'd starve to death.

Dutch roughly pulls a chair out and seats himself at the kitchen table. He flips through the morning mail, which Enid has left lying there. Scatters it in all directions. She stands at the counter breaking lettuce into a bowl for salad. Holds her breath.

"Here's the goddamn bank statement," says Dutch. "How bad is it?"

"Well," she hesitates. "It's not as bad as I thought."

"Christ," he says. "Where does all the money go?" He quickly flips through the cancelled cheques. His fingers, thick like sausages, travel down the list of numbers until he comes to the bottom line.

Enid slices tomatoes and cucumber to garnish the salad. Her hands are shaking. The heavy-sweet smell of the lilacs, which she has put on the table in a jam jar, makes her nauseous. Suddenly, the knife veers off to the side, shearing a small piece of flesh off her middle finger. Blood spatters over the cutting board.

"Damn," says Enid. She runs cold water over her finger and quickly grabs a bandage from the kitchen cupboard.

"What happened, Enid? You hurt yourself?" He doesn't look up when he says this, continues reading the classifieds in the *Western Producer*.

She remembers that time one spring when he'd brought her a bouquet of crocuses from the south pasture, how shy he'd been when he'd given them to her, how her pleased reaction had somehow made him feel foolish. There was just that one time she can remember.

Enid sets the bowl of salad on the table and then fetches the fly swatter from the nail that holds the calendar. Buzz. Buzz. The sound puts her on edge. The fly circles her head erratically, swooping past her ear and then landing on the table a few inches from Dutch's plate. Enid brings the swatter back to her shoulder and

tries to anticipate where the fly is going to go. Whack. She brings the swatter down hard on the table, making Dutch's cutlery go spinning.

"Christ, Enid, do ya have to swat flies over my food?"

Enid hangs the swatter back up on the nail. Sits down to the table and dishes up a plate of stew and salad. The fly is crazy now. Making swooping flypasts over the table and then bombarding the window, trying to escape. She hears the buzz inside her head as if the fly is trapped in there and is trying to get out.

"What's wrong?" Dutch says. "You haven't said a word hardly since I got home. You get the weather forecast?"

Enid pushes the stew and salad together on her plate. "No, no," she says. "I've been out in the garden all morning. Weeding."

"Well, I've got work to do. Gotta finish that summer fallowing. Won't be back till late. Don't wait on supper for me." He throws his cutlery on his plate.

She hears the screen door slam and the hook latch fly up and ping against the door jamb and she knows he is gone and the buzzing in her head stops.

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IT IS HOT. ENID SITS LANGUIDLY on the couch and watches the afternoon soaps. Then *Oprah*. If only she knew as much as Oprah. Oprah would know how to cope with middle age, with a sagging body, an atrophied mind, inertia. Enid pays attention to herself as she breathes in and out. Watches the rise and fall of her chest. After a while she hears a vehicle coming up the drive. She sits up at once, startled, because it couldn't be Dutch home so soon. She listens to the sound of gravel crunch all the way up the driveway and then fade away. Whoever it is isn't planning to come to the house. Curious now, she eases herself off the couch and goes to the kitchen, lifts the curtain and peers out. The Co-op fuel truck is backed up and a long hose, like an umbilical cord, is connected to the big silver fuel tank. Light explodes off the tank, refracting into space.

Enid can't see which deliveryman it is. She can only see his legs as he walks behind the truck. Her heart begins to pound and her fingers run through her hair, lifting it, and she whispers, "Jesus," wondering how bad she looks.

She hears the roar of the delivery truck as it pulls away from the tanks. It comes to a stop at the back door and Enid listens to the truck door slam. She goes to the screen door and peers through. Dice Evans jumps out of the truck and starts towards the house, the yellow sales bill fluttering in his hand. Enid steps out onto the porch steps and smooths her cotton blouse over her hips. Pushes her glasses up on her nose, fingers her left earlobe, as if looking for something there.

"Hi, Enid," he says. He moves fluidly as if walking is no effort at all. Not like Dutch, who seems to attack the very earth he steps on. Sometimes Enid expects little bits of the earth's crust to come flying off when he passes by.

"Dice," she says. It's not her voice she hears—a small choking sound that seems to come from some distant place.

"Here's the bill of sale, Enid." He hands her the yellow slip of paper smudged in one corner with a greasy thumbprint.

"Thanks." She looks down at the bill and then begins to stroke the corner with her thumb.

He stares across the yard. "You do all the yard work here, Enid? It looks real nice." Her hands flutter to her hair. She leans against the screen door and feels the sticky dampness of her blouse against her skin. She shivers.

"Would you like to come in for a cool drink?" she asks.

He hesitates. "I suppose I could. Don't have another delivery until tomorrow. Wouldn't want to get back to town too soon or the boss'll just give me more jobs."

"Come in," she says, holding the screen door open. "Seat yourself."

She fetches the iced tea from the fridge.

Dice takes off his metallic sunglasses and puts them in the pocket of his tan work shirt. Enid finds herself looking into the two dark pools of Dice's eyes.

"It's real homey in here, Enid. You do the decoratin' in here too?" He motions to the wallpaper, a cheery yellow checked gingham with a border of sunflowers.

"Yes," she says. "Thanks." She isn't used to men noticing her efforts. She had the kitchen wallpapered a week before Dutch even made a comment. She tries real hard to keep the place up, even though there's scant resources to do it. She hopes Dice doesn't notice the holes in the linoleum.

She turns her back to him to get the glasses from the cupboard. Then pours iced tea and ice cubes, her hands shaking so badly she overshoots the glass and spills a brown puddle on the kitchen table.

"Damn," she mutters under her breath. She grabs the dishcloth and sops it up, rinses it under the tap and wipes the Formica table again.

"Hey," Dice says. "What you so nervous about? Slow down, girl." He puts his crippled hand on her bare arm, forcing her to sit.

She shivers involuntarily. Her eyes avoid looking at his hand even though disturbing images of it caught in the rigging chain flash before her. She wonders what it would feel like running up her thighs, the inside of her legs.

Dice's laugh startles her. "Go ahead, Enid. Why don't you ask me about my hand?"

She jerks her head up, surprised. "No. I . . . I didn't mean to . . . no, I don't . . ."

He rocks back on the wooden chair, his feet coiled around the rungs, his balance perfect. "Workin' on the rigs is a dangerous business, Enid. Ya gotta know when to get in the clear. Before ya get hurt, that is. It's a fine line." He takes a swallow of iced tea and rocks back on his chair again.

"I learned my lesson the hard way." The front legs of the chair connect with the floor. Slam.

"Enid, I've got something to ask ya. I hope ya don't mind. I've been meanin' to for a long time, but I just wasn't sure."

Enid fingers the small gold chain around her throat that she never takes off. She laughs nervously. "Of course, Dice. Ask away."

Dice coughs. "Folks in town tell me that good-lookin' brunette that works at the Royal Bank is your cousin. Is that true?"

Enid hesitates. Why would Dice want to know about her? "Yes. She's my cousin. Just moved here from up north. Why did you want to know?"

"Well, I'd like to ask her out. I was wondrin' if you could introduce us some time. I'd sure appreciate it."

She sees colours and shapes spinning out of control, like a kaleidoscope. And then an emptiness as if a great vacuum has sucked out all of her oxygen.

"Sure," she says flatly. "I don't mind. Anytime."

Dice pushes the crumpled yellow bill on the table towards her and shoves his chair back. "Gotta go now, Enid. Ya take care, ya hear now?"

"Sure. Of course." She doesn't get up to see him out. Bastard, she thinks.

She sits at the table and hears the sound of the truck fade into the distance. Dice's words come back to her like the cruel snap of an elastic band. "Ya gotta know when to get in the clear. Before ya get hurt, that is. It's a fine line."

She gets up from the table. She watches herself pick up the empty glasses and put them in the dishwasher. She watches herself wipe the kitchen table. And wipe it again. Then she watches herself go to the closet, take out the yellow dress. She fingers the fabric lovingly. She thinks about taking it back and getting her money, but the anger she feels at this moment demands something more.

She carries it to the burning barrel, douses it with gas and sets it ablaze. It is surprising how quickly it burns. How quietly. A late-afternoon wind picks up the stray ashes, which are as thin as parchment, and carries them over the caragana hedge into the green fields of wheat.