



BONNIE, PATTY, KID GLOVE, MA

by Gabrielle Hovendon

I. Orchard

WE discuss role models.

“The Comtesse de la Motte,” Thea says.

She’s weighing an apple in each hand. Ahead of us, about twenty feet away, is an old carpentry shed where we’ve chalked up outlines of the cops, those bastards. A sweet vinegary smell of rot drifts up every time one of the apples hits and bursts.

“Ann and Mary Drowning,” I say, sending a real mushy one against the biggest cop.

A breeze shivers down through the tops of the trees. Thea rapid-fire throws her two apples, whack-splat.

“Marm Mandelbaum,” she says. “Bless her crooked New York heart.”

“And Boston Nancy,” I say. “Blue Liz. Little Kate Cooley.”

“Your mother, may she rest in peace.”

A respectful moment of silence. These are the thieves we’ve chosen to worship. These are the heroes of our day.

“Fuck me,” Thea sighs, shaking her head. “Those dames were fucking *glorious*.”

I grin and dig my thumbnail into another apple, torturing the flesh. The wasps are swarming lazily in the afternoon light.

“We’ll be glorious too,” I say. “Don’t you forget it.”

It’s about 3 p.m., mid-October. We’ve been out in the orchard for hours already, waiting for the sun to go down so everything can start. Overhead, a forlorn honking from the migrating geese.

As far as waiting goes, this isn’t so bad. In the past half year, Thea and I have sat through rain and cold and hunger and the flu. We’ve heard things that lack description and seen ugliness I won’t go into. Yesterday we watched a rooster get its eye pecked out by another rooster. Sitting in an empty orchard, half a mile from a bootlegger’s cabin, drunk on the smell of fermenting fruit—there are worse places to be.

A hard little green one. Upper right jaw.

“Worst case scenario,” Thea says. She’s finished with the apples and starts fiddling with our pick set. She jiggles a half diamond back and forth in an imaginary lock. “Go.”

“Dogs,” I say. “We’ll get some hamburger and come back. Easy.”

“Security system,” she says. “All the windows alarmed.”

“We’ll go fast,” I say. “We’ll take the door off its hinges. Whatever.”

“Locked vault?”

“Come on,” I say, tossing another apple. It hits the chalk cop square in the solar plexus and skids down the wall trailing brown juice. “You know I hate this shit. Let’s just see how it goes.”

Thea gives me a look: half-exasperated, half-affectionate. The thing is, we have a sixth sense about these things. We’re already pretty sure we won’t get caught tonight. A good thief can feel it in her bones, can tell if there’s danger in the air. Tonight—the fall festival starting up in town, plenty of drunk, distracted people—is going to be a lucky night.

“What do you think?” I ask now, pulling a baggie out of my pocket. “A little something?” We inventory what’s left. We have little green ones in the shape of skulls and toxic-looking white ones in prickly blue powder. We’ve got some yellow tablets that go giggling down your throat and a dark pink number that swirls when you look at it.

Thea holds out her hand.

“Surprise me,” she says, and I do.

We both close our eyes and swallow something random.

When we run out of apples, I tell Thea more stories about our favorite heroes. The Russian jewel thief Sonka Golden Hand. The treacherous Sumerian princess Inanna. The Forty Elephants gang, 300 years old and counting.

How did you rule your crooked empire, Alice Diamond? What were you thinking, 27-year-old Roberta Wesson, when you wrapped your skirt around your hand and smashed the window of the crooked sheriff’s house? Did it feel good, standing over his sleeping body, pistol cocked?

A weightless feeling slides over me. The whole world is sunshine. I close my eyes and dream of glory.

II. Juvenile Offenders

We met last year under the ticket counter at the bus station, teenagers on the run. We were crouched close, breathing hard, each hiding from different authorities. It was nearly an hour before we could crawl out,

plenty of time to discover our mutual interests. By the time we snuck away on a northern Greyhound, we'd made a blood oath, cut our fingertips with a dirty razor, crossed our hearts, and hoped to die.

At that point I'd run away from the children's home more times than I could count and Thea had stopped speaking to her foster family. We'd both been on our own for a while, collecting nickels from beneath vending machines and swiping bread from convenience stores. We'd seen people arguing with thin air, people carrying all their belongings in a trash bag, people shaking through the blue-horrored jellies on the Tuesday express. In those days, we were both already stealing, sure, but it was only for survival.

Our first big job together, we stole a canoe. We walked straight out of the sporting goods store with it on our shoulders, no receipts, no questions asked. We sold it to a college kid later that day and ate our first full meal in weeks. If you looked confident enough, we learned, you could get away with almost anything.

After that it was prettier things—loquets, vintage furs, raspberry liqueur. Thea stole two designer handbags while I distracted a salesclerk. We once smuggled champagne and crab out of a supermarket. Sometimes we resold the stuff, but more often we ate fast food, we slept in parks, and travelled by hitchhiking. Even when we had some in our pockets, money was never the point.

Before we met, we'd been fucking around on the brink of various catastrophes. Thea had run around a school naked except for a bow tie. I'd set a construction site on fire. We'd jumped off bridges and out of speeding cars, felt gravity lift our organs into our throats. I'd run four miles through a forest with a stolen wristwatch in my fist, trying to shed myself somewhere among the burnt red pine needles. We both had rap sheets a mile long and growing.

After we joined up, we didn't have to work so hard. We each had an accomplice, someone to watch our backs, and we could turn our attention to more elaborate plans. We were building up for bigger things, scheming and rehashing and meanwhile robbing our way up and down the Eastern seaboard.

A few years ago, back when I was still doing petty ten- and twenty-dollar jobs, a cop asked me, why did I act the way I do?

Because prettiness was expensive. Because life was short and boredom was long. Because. Because. Because.

Here's the thing I've learned: It's not the why that matters, it's the what you do next.

III. B & E

The sun's been down for nearly an hour before we make our move. Under a buttery, creamy moon, we get to our feet and pick our way across the orchard, moving slow in the dark. Down the rows. Across the road. Up the hill.

The flashlight beam bobs in the dark ahead of us. We are cats padding velvet-smooth up the ridge to the cabin. We are wind-tasters, savoring the smells of wood smoke and damp grass and trees. We are half a mile away and closing in fast.

The bootlegger's cabin sits on the downslope of the hill. A little ways off is the silhouette of the still, its giant copper drum and its tubing-like antennae. We walk slowly, carefully, up to the dark windows. All quiet. No one home.

The lock on the door is loose, sloppy in its housing. It takes Thea about ten seconds to find the right pick, another ten to jimmy the lock. I hold my breath for the telltale click, and then we're in.

Inside, it's dark and musty smelling, like a hayloft or a chapel. Our flashlight catches the jars all at once, reflecting back needles of broken-off light. There are rows and rows of them, more than we can count: jars lined

up on shelves, jars labeled and unlabeled, jars full and sparkling in the artificial light.

“Whoa,” Thea says.

“Yeah,” I say.

What we’re looking at is the moonshine of legend and tragedy, the kind of drink that convinces you to burn down your house or else take off all your clothes and dance naked in the rain. Songs have been written about this stuff, as have federal warnings. They say it looks like water and goes down like bleach.

The cabin itself has hardly any furniture, just a cot and table against the far wall and a counter for bottling under the shelves. Next to the door, there’s an old photo of the famous bootlegger Bill McCoy.

“I bet my mother knew him,” I tell Thea, nodding at the picture. “This guy has good taste.”

She doesn’t bother to look up. She’s already loading jars into her backpack, stacking them in two at a time. This is the part I love best: the quick-fingered rustle inwards, the heart pounding, zap of electricity to the brain, thrills, chills, dopamine fix. The precise moment a thing stops being *theirs* and starts being *mine*. A feeling like my body’s dipped in sun, like I’m bright and shiny and somewhere in the distance a gramophone’s playing all my favorite songs.

In three minutes flat, we're done. We load our backpacks onto our shoulders, wipe the doorknob clean. It feels like the start of a great party when all your favorite friends show up, like everything good is still in front of you.

I stand on the porch and, without even knowing why, pick up a stone and throw it through the front window.

In the seconds after it crashes, we run. I feel the wind at the back of my neck, the backpack straps cutting into my shoulders. Thea is running beside me, laughing or screaming, ecstatic and wild in the night air.

At the bottom of the hill, we stop and look at each other, panting. I think of the Comtesse de la Motte giving us a powdered smile. I think of Delilah, one hand clutching Samson's hair, the other her knife.

Thea takes one of the jars and passes it to me. I uncap it, feel the fumes scorch my lungs.

"A toast," she says.

"To being glorious," I say.

We tilt our throats to the sky and drink deep.

IV. The Black-Hearted Bess Marlingspike

In my favorite story, my mother holds up a cider mill. With a silver derringer in each boot she cleans out the cash register and takes the locked safe, which is discovered days later in pieces at the bottom of a ravine. The police report notes that she also demands a gallon of cider and a dozen homemade donuts for the road. When I picture the story, I like to imagine her speeding away, the cinnamon sugar glittering at the corners of her mouth, the passenger seat awash in cash and crumbs.

In Thea's favorite story, my mother befriends an auto tycoon and steals ten bottles of Hennessy from his personal cellar. It's not improbable, given how charming she was. How charming the stories say she was. Even though I wasn't old enough to remember, I swear I can sometimes hear her voice, low and hypnotic, lulling me to sleep.

Growing up, I found clippings of all the newspaper reports at the local library: the convertible and the case of champagne, the ambassador's family china, the suitcase full of gold Rolexes. Weekends at the children's home, I'd beg a staff member to take me so I could go and read them over and over. Three-inch headlines. Sensational heists. Blaze of glory, RIP.

Later, out of a sense of obligation, I'd steal the clippings.

When I got older, people started recognizing me as Bess Marlingspike's daughter. A few of them, old friends of hers, took it upon themselves to contact me, teach me some skills, give me a leg up in the

trade. But those newspaper stories about my mother were the beginning of everything I know:

Style matters.

Charm goes a long way.

Don't steal the thing you want. Steal the thing everyone else wants.

V. Sleight of Hand

On the way home, we practice our pickpocketing.

“The trick’s in the wrist,” Thea says. “You have to hold it—no, more like this.”

“And be smooth,” I say.

“And distract them,” she says. “God, this really is harder than it looks.”

We’re pretending we’re strangers in a crowded train station, slipping things in and out of each other’s back pockets.

“Did you feel that?” I ask, her bracelet between my first and second fingers. “Did you feel *that*?”

The stars are out, fat and pulsing. Our backpacks thud against our spines. We're giddy and drunk and achey and it's cold out, cold enough to see our breath. The moonshine has distorted the ground, made it wobbly and silver, given a children's book quality to everything. The orchard is as calm and unkempt as we left it, but in this mood even the trees look hilarious.

We're nearly back at the carpentry shed when we hear the noise. It's unmistakable, a branch snapping at close range. We freeze and hear another branch snap, then another. Something big is crashing toward us, something moving fast, and we're too laden down with moonshine to hide.

"Fuck," Thea hisses. The noise is only few rows over and getting nearer, nearer—

The thing breaks into our row and freezes, its eyes sending back tiny mirrors at our flashlight beam.

A deer. A doe.

"Oh my god," I whisper. My knees are wobbly from shock. In the intervening seconds, a fawn pushes clumsily through the trees and comes to stand next to its mother, the two of them regarding us silent and unblinking. Moments later, they're bounding away.

“Jesus,” Thea says. She’s grabbed my arm and hasn’t let go. “I thought that was it. The game was up. Like that time in the antiques store. God, I was about to piss myself.”

I nod, feeling the blood drain back into my arms and legs. Now that it’s over, I feel a tiny bit disappointed, like we’ve been cheated out of something. The golden feeling is gone, replaced by a slight sickness, too much moonshine and not enough dinner.

“Come on,” I say. “Let’s get inside. It’s freezing out.”

Inside the carpenter’s shed, we’ve made a little tent out of two sawhorses, draping a plastic tarp over them and spreading a blanket on the filthy floor below. We crawl underneath the tarp and slide into our sleeping bags without bothering to take off our coats. It smells like sawdust, but the shed is dry and we’ve both slept in worse.

We scrunch inwards till we’re curled against each other. Our breaths steam the tarp. One of the opened bottles manages to make its way under here and we pass it back and forth with the baggie, getting giggly, spilling moonshine on the sleeping bags.

“Tell me a story,” Thea says, and so I tell her about Ulrike and the Terrible Twenty, about Cockney pickpockets and wicked rumrunners. I tell her about my mother, things I’ve read and things I’ve invented. I talk until I’m not sure whether what I’m saying is truth or lies or somewhere in-between.

Eventually, I feel her breath slow and stretch toward sleep. I'm drowsy, too, playing with a Zippo we stole from a kid two towns back, making a glowing orange world, a little sunset habitat under our tarp. In my mind, I'm replaying the final theft of Bess Marlingspike in all its Technicolor gorgeosity: shock of headlights, gunmetal and flames, the racket deafening and the cops falling one by one, guts and gore, until all but the very last one are dead.

Thea shifts beside me in her sleeping bag.

“What are you thinking about?” she asks dreamily.

I drift the lighter back and forth, scattering shadows across the blanket.

“Possibilities,” I say.

And the dome of the world is sherbet and fire.

VI. Interlude

With the pills, I dreamed we could fly and live in the trees like animals. We ate acorns and berries, and birds taught us to sing. There was rain some nights, but we were happy, mostly.

Then Thea was gone and my mother was up in the tree. She was dressed like a stagecoach robber and she had flowers in her hair. She told me someone had put out poisoned oats to kill the rats, and then I saw we were the rats. Towards the end, the dream warped and I was standing before a parole officer who was holding cuffs and chains in her hands.

“You are so very young,” she told me, grinning. Her mouth looked like it could devour a city.

The deer from the orchard was looking at me coolly.

“But what are you doing at the hour of triumph?” it asked. “Who gets to stay for long on the burning ridge?”

VII. Festival

I wake with a rolling nausea. The moonshine’s worn off, left everything watery and washed out at the edges. There’s a roaring in my head like an entire ocean trying to squeeze in through my ears.

I turn over. Thea’s awake next to me.

“I think I’m dying,” she groans.

I roll back over, bury my head in the sleeping bag.

“No kidding,” I say.

For breakfast, we split some stale bagels and an orange pill. We pack up, grim and hungover, while we wait for it to kick in. Sleeping bags rolled. Jars recapped. Nothing left behind. Today we’ll head to the next town, the next job.

And who knows? It’s chillier today than yesterday, and soon we’ll need to find somewhere warm to spend the winter. Maybe we’ll meet some real friends. Maybe we’ll find a thief boyfriend to carry around our moneybags for us. I’ve pictured it often enough, mostly when I was lonely and sleeping on some dismal floor, wondering where my next meal was coming from, thinking, sure, it could be like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, a race to the bottom, who’s the most lethal motherfucker in this relationship?

When I say this out loud, Thea rolls her eyes.

“Come on,” she says. “We ought to get going.”

We walk into town, our bags heavy and clunking. It’s not a big place, only a few streets and some faded storefronts, but there’s the big festival going on and every road is lined with parked cars. Crossing the bridge, they honk at us, pointing and taking pictures of the glittering river. In the aggressive morning light, men in waders stand in the shallows and cast their fishing poles in elaborate patterns, whippy against the white reflection of the water.

“Hey,” I say as we approach the festival. “Before we look for a ride, let’s pick up some things here. Grab some cash, you know.”

“Yeah?” Thea says. The whole walk into town she’s been quiet, scuffing her shoes.

“Well,” I say, confused by her silence. “There’s no reason we shouldn’t load up before we hit the road. All these people, it just kind of makes sense.”

She shrugs. The pill we took for breakfast is turning cartwheels in my brain.

“Fine,” she says. “Let’s go.”

Inside the gate, things are just getting started for the day, the vendors laying out pumpkins and Indian corn, the cotton candy machine warming up. Thea and I weave in and out of the crowd in an invisible pattern, flickering, menacing. Soon it doesn’t matter that she’s not talking, we’re back in our old rhythms and signaling with our eyes, how about that guy, he looks like a good one, get a load of this joker, wallet already halfway out of his pocket.

It’s so easy it’s almost not fun. Everyone’s distracted: by rides and caramel apples and games, by sloppy dates or by their own miserable families, grim and silent, lips pressed together. There are children running all over the place, bumping into people left and right, and what’s one more

jostle, excuse me, sorry, didn't see you, oops, looks like you dropped your wallet, let me help you with that, no problem, you have a good day.

After about half an hour, we stop behind a souvenir tent, out of sight of the midway. My pockets are bulging and I'm feeling marked: missing shadow, dark stain of guilt, whatever.

“Okay, here's what I'm thinking. We get out of town, go somewhere a good ways away. Then our next job should be *big*. I mean, *really* big. I'm talking speedboat, sports car, Bess-level shit.”

Thea is counting out our haul, dividing the cash into two equal piles. She doesn't say anything.

“And I think we should go west,” I continue. The pill is mashing up my thoughts, making me talk too fast. “All the great thefts happened out there. Maybe Vegas, you know? Or else Europe, but we'd have to get passports.”

Silence.

“And we should come up with a signature,” I say. “Some sort of calling card. All the big players had them.”

Thea throws down the money.

“Jesus Christ, Cleo! Just because you want something doesn't mean you automatically get it.” She stamps her foot like a little kid. “You can't

just *be* a famous thief, you know? You can't just *say* you're going to be great like that'll keep us from getting in trouble."

I take a step forward. There are dollar bills all over the ground between us.

"You were the one who stole the steaks, Thea. You were the one who just stole half those fucking wallets. What do you *mean* we can't be thieves?"

She says nothing. I ball up my fists.

"Really, tell me what you're talking about. Bonnie was a waitress before she met Clyde, you know that? And Anne Bonny was a servant's daughter. We can be whatever we want, that's the whole fucking point."

"You have a death wish," she says. She's looking at me like she's just figured out something important. "That's it, isn't it? Big bad Cleo with her big bad criminal ways."

Back on the midway, people are starting to look around.

"Who said anything about being dead?" I hiss. "All I wanted to talk about was going west. What's wrong with you today?"

"You don't care if we get caught because you think it'll make you a hero," she spits. "Newsflash, Cleo, dying doesn't make you as great as your mother. It just makes you dead."

I stand stock still for a minute.

Then I flip her off and storm away.

My pulse is pounding in my ears. The festival roils and churns around me. So what, she doesn't want to steal with me? Fine, let her leave. I've had fights before; they didn't kill me. I was stealing before I met Thea, I'll be stealing after she's gone.

I stomp down the midway. Fire juggler, jack-o'-lantern stand, exotic animal handler. We swore a blood oath. We stole a *croquet set* together. How dare she? How the fuck dare she? I stop outside the animal tent. A sprinkled sawdust ring. Signs for tigers, cheetahs, kangaroos.

No one around. No one to stop me.

VIII. Shootout

This is how Bess Marlingspike dies:

She leaves me (six months old, baby stroller) at a motel.

She drives to the music shop. It's nighttime, and she works carefully. Picking the lock, touching nothing.

She steals the Strad. The workbench is cluttered. She doesn't want to use a light, so she finds it with other senses. Smell of old reeds. Click of metal buttons. Keys and valves.

She goes outside. A whirl of blue and red lights. Police, hands in the air. She drops the violin case and draws her pistol.

The gun jams. It's one of her derringers: antique, sentimental, rarely used. She hits it against the heel of her hand. It coughs up one more bullet and then jams again.

She is shot.

She is shot.

She is shot.

She dies in the parking lot. Blood, paramedics, TV crews, the works.

A question: Which do you abandon, the thing you want or the person who stands in your way?

XI. Westward, Young Woman

A week later, and I'm driving on the surface of the moon. Craters, riverbeds, dry valleys of striped and jagged rock. South Dakota soil is bumpy to begin with and I'm not exactly on a road, but I'm doing my damndest. The cops are two hundred yards back and gaining fast. I'm laughing out loud.

It's early morning. All the shadows are long and ghostly and torn where the rocks intersect with the sky. I've been driving all night and now I'm pushing eighty, listening to the van rattle on its axes, wondering how many miles it's got left.

Last week, I walked through the festival with a boa constrictor draped around my neck. I found Thea on the midway using a bottle of moonshine to set a pile of jack-o'-lanterns on fire.

"Thank god," she said when she saw me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I can't help it."

"I know, she said, lighting a match. The snake was twining up my neck, into my hair.

"What do you think?" I asked. "Jesse and Belle?"

"Bonnie and Clyde," she said, and she tossed the match and the pumpkins went up.

I take a corner fast, nearly smash us into a rock outcropping. The van teeters. We're headed due west, ready to ditch the cops at the next bend.

They've got the faster cars, but we've got the guts and the stolen vehicle. We'll drive through flames before we surrender.

The landscape flashes by, bumpy and indifferent.

"Almost there," I say aloud. Life would be so different if we did what we were supposed to, I think. It would be so goddamn easy to be nothing.

"We'll steal everything," Thea told me last week. "Church bells, jet engines, you name it. We'll take a whole damn circus. We'll steal the elephants."

I grinned.

"We'll do all that and more, baby."

And now that we've started, who'll stop us? We have pills for fainting. We have pills for disobeying gravity. Around 5 a.m. we held up a donut shop, and the sack sits greasy on the dashboard between us.

In the passenger seat, Thea turns to me.

"You know, we might be different from Bess," she says.

I hear the far-off whine of the sirens growing fainter. Our bend is coming up.

"We might get sick of each other," she adds.

I aim the van between a gap in the rocks and brace myself.

"It's possible," I say, but I doubt it. I, Cleopatra Marlingspike, will have a life that walks the fine line between danger and death, the only kind of

life there really is, or else I will fly an airplane straight into the heart of the sun. I will have absurd graffiti, more proclamations shouted blindly into the night: *I loved this person! Death will not get me yet!* I'll have wind, dirtiness, movies, drugs. I'll drive recklessly all night and catch knives in my teeth and worship inferior gods. I'll take without asking, do without permission, be Anne and Bonnie and Patty and Marm, be always and forever surprised, thievery without end, outlaws till it all goes up in flames.

“We might get caught,” Thea adds.

I floor the accelerator and tell her, shouting over the deep engine-roar beneath us, that that place is still out of sight and a long way off.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabrielle Hovendon's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Missouri Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Day One*, *Verse*, *Boulevard*, and *Ninth Letter*. She lives and teaches in Athens, Georgia.

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