Three

FORGET HIM," said Lou, huffing hard with each step. "Plenty more fellers where he came from."

"You don't understand," Frieda pleaded. "He was so . . ." Somewhere in the distance from her mind to her mouth the explanation got utterly succotashed.

They were trudging up four flights to Lou's room. It was Wednesday — dance night — and ritual demanded that Frieda go home after work with Lou; that way they could eat and primp together. The routine: hike from Jordan's through downtown to the South End, straight to Schick's Delicatessen Store, where boiled dinner went for twenty cents a pint. (With corned beef and cabbage and carrots and potatoes, it was meal enough for two, plus leftovers.) Then a final block to Lou's rooming house on Shawmut and up the dark stairwell to her door: a hundred treads all faintly sloping leftward.

The climb wrung the breath from Frieda, too. Today the spring lines had come in, and on top of her normal duties she'd been called upon to stock and shelve displays. It was her first

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decent chance to impress Mr. Crowley and notch a spot on his advancement list. Jogging between her counter and the brimful garment racks, she'd memorized the merits of the brand-new corset covers, of cambric nightgowns sewn with convent edges. She'd been raised believing that colors were simply colors — nature's own finite set of hues — but now she was instructed otherwise: she learned of a newfangled green known as Neptune; Romance, this season's lip-pale pink; and a white-on-white weave, labeled Virtue.

By midafternoon she'd been absolutely tuckered — so spent that she forgot Saturday's soldier. But then, on a washroom break, she passed the collection box to purchase "smokes" for "Boston's Own," the 301st. (Was that her grinning doughboy's division? If she gave, would it buy the luck to find him?) She hated thinking about him, because thinking would get her exactly nowhere. Forty thousand soldiers at Camp Devens, and all she knew of him was — what? The way he'd gazed at her: accomplices in an all-or-nothing heist. She also hated (hated it more) *not* thinking about him, for the memory might then chafe away like sunburn. The whole thing would have been just what Lou said: a kid's crush.

"And this boy of yours," added Lou, slumping hard onto her mattress so the iron bedstead clanged against the wall. "Think he didn't make eyes at every girl?"

"He was different," said Frieda, even as she doubted it.

"You want to go and *look* for hurt? Fine. Me, I got plenty as it is." Lou unlaced her shoe to massage a swollen ankle. "Holy mother of God, are my dogs barking!"

"Mine, too," said Frieda, and joined her on the bed. "Maybe we should take a pass on dancing? We could go see *The Open Track* again." They'd seen this latest *Hazards of Helen* episode twice already: a villain accosts Helen as she drives her touring car, but she pushes him out the door and speeds on . . . in time to save the railroad from marauders! Frieda loved it — loved anything with girls in fast cars.

"Kidding?" said Lou. "Skip *dancing*? It's the only proven cure."

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As always, there was more than a bit of snarl in Lou's voice — a sound, Frieda thought, that could scare a charging moose. (Lou was from way up in Maine, a farm in Aroostook County, and the name made Frieda picture moose and bears and other beasts.) As the middle child of nine, Lou had told her when they met, she learned early to hold her own "in English, French, or elsewise."

Frieda found her pretty in a blunt, intrusive way: her face had the sturdy elegance of a plow blade. She was twenty-one, with bought-blond hair and a cocky, priceless smile. Men couldn't keep away from her.

Nor could Frieda. Lou was a cliff to the edge of which she was drawn, fearful not of any possibility of being pushed, but of her own dark inclination to jump. Lou was unlike any girl that Frieda knew (so brassy, so lavishly alive), except perhaps — perhaps — the girl who hid within herself.

Lou's furnishings, in addition to the creaky bedstead: a gas plate, a chest of drawers, a cracked full-length mirror; but she'd tried her best to ornament the place. ("If you live in a dump, what does that make you? Trash.") She'd papered the walls with *Vanity Fair* tear sheets: Theda Bara in a vampish publicity shot as *The Vixen,* leggy beauties modeling mink stoles. On the windowsill, a single, half-wilted geranium languished in a rusted coffee can.

"Listen," Lou said. She had hoisted herself from the bed and was spooning boiled dinner into two tin bowls. "Do you think you're gonna find true love on the street? Course you're not! Besides, love ain't what you need just now. Have some fun — play the field a bit."

Easy for her to say! Lou went through men like pairs of cheap stockings. Frieda hadn't learned to do the same; she wasn't positive she wanted to.

"What you *need,*" said Lou through an overambitious bite of beef, "is to get fussed up and out on that dance floor. Quit sulking and find someone new."

Frieda swallowed her own modest mouthful of dinner, her

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first genuine food of the day. "Just like that? Snap my fingers and I find him?"

Lou scoffed. "Haven't I taught you nothing? If you want to get any notion took of you, you gotta have some style."

After dinner, then, she made Frieda stand in front of her and she gave her a thorough studying, like an orchardist preparing to prune a tree. And prune she did: Frieda's eyebrows first, tweeze by ruthless tweeze ("Men like wildness, sure," she said, "but not between your eyes!"), then stray wisps of hair at Frieda's ears. She roped Frieda in a necklace boasting a single keen-edged rhinestone, as blatant as a swollen tooth. "Stop twitching!" Lou said, but Frieda couldn't help it. With a pencil smeared in residue from the blackened gas-plate burner, she painted a mole above Frieda's lip. ("Draw their eyes to a fake flaw, and they're more liable to miss the real ones.")

Frieda tracked her transformation in the mirror, uncertain if this catchpenny version of herself was closer to, or further from, the real thing. Mama had always made her feel that dolling herself up would be a sin — and worse, not worth the bother. (How Frieda might be both too plain and too alluring was a contradiction she'd only lately come to question.) Where the girls in Lou's magazines were pale and wasp-waisted — the fastidious end products of refining — Frieda was the raw, unmilled grain: brown hair that ripened in the sun with red highlights, cheeks that went to freckles after June. But she'd learned that some men — many men — had a taste for rawness.

At Jordan's men watched her. At the Liberty Loan parade. And most stunningly — the thought of it restored moxie to her muscles — at the grand halls where she and Lou danced.

Before she left home, the only dancing Frieda had done — the only dancing Mama had condoned — was at the Russian Emigrant Relief Fund Ball. To the wheeze of travel-battered, button-stuck accordions, pimply boys waltzed their rheumy-eyed aunts; Frieda'd had better times plucking chickens. But Lou showed her worlds as different from those flops as chickens are from swoop-necked swans. Dances at the Bowdoin Square

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Ballroom, the Scollay Palace. Wednesdays and weekends at the least.

She fell in love with an orchestra's biting, full-tilt blare, with the flattering light of chandeliers. They danced the bunny hug, the grizzly bear, the Chaplin wiggle: twirly tough dances that loosened up her limbs as they loosened in her private late-night notions. Some folks, she knew, called such dancing scandalous, but if this was shameful — her lungs pumping, her skin rife with blood — then so, Frieda thought, was life itself. In shoes with lifted heels, on a wax-slick parquet floor, she could slide scot-free into her own future.

At the dances, Frieda met other wage-earning girls — shoe vampers and laundry feeders, stenographers — all of them making their way, making *themselves.* But the men! Fellows who strutted the tango, catlike, haunches taut; clunkers with two left boots but charm to burn. And every single one willing to treat. Sometimes she and Lou scraped together the entrance fee and met some fellows inside the hall. Other times they went first to the Keith's Amusement Centre or to a café beside the Bijou Dream; without fail, a pair of men would come and ask politely if the ladies wouldn't care to find a dance. Lou never blanched; she called it "picking up."

"We *all* play the game," she'd explained the first night, as she helped Frieda pin her hair into place. "We all play — ain't nothing to be ashamed of. Let the feller treat for your coat check, your drinks. Later, if you're hungry, maybe food." Lou transferred coins from her change purse to a clutch; she always brought the streetcar fare, in case. "How much you give back is up to you. Sometimes just your company, or a snuggle in the balcony, or . . ."

"What if it turns out I don't like him?"

"A boy's not going to spend all that money on you for nothing. Remember, you gotta be a good Injun."

So Frieda had doled out favors to a string of grateful men. One midnight, in the moonshadows of the Granary Burying Ground, a Sweepervac salesman groped beneath her dress;

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she'd let a stevedore named Jim caress her neck. But she never allowed a man to go as far as Jack Galassi — for fear of getting pregnant, was what she told her dates, but the deeper truth was even more old-fashioned: she was waiting to find the one like no one else. She drew this line firmly in the sand of her self-will, like the other distinction Lou insisted on:

"Getting treated when you pick up boys is one thing," Lou explained, "and we're lots of us charity girls. But it's never just for money, straight out. If they think you're a common you-know-what who sells herself, then that's all you're ever gonna be."

Which wasn't to say that the spoils were wholly up to the man's design. Lou was a veritable robber baroness, profiting on the principal of her charm. "How d'you think," she asked Frieda, "I got this Elgin watch? Made a second date with this feller that I met — a looker, but his breath smelled like old eggs — and then I showed up fifteen minutes late. 'Ooh, I'm *so* sorry, but my stupid watch is broke! *Now* how'll I ever mind the time?' The very next night, lo and behold, he had a gift. 'Now you can check the time,' he said. I did: it was time for a new feller!"

Lou had employed a similar technique to get her newest hat (a toque of aqua tulle with chiffon roses), which a night watchman had given her last Wednesday, and which she now snugged onto Frieda's head. "Looks to me like you need a pick-me-up."

"Lou, you've never even worn it."

Lou leaned back to admire her handiwork. Her lips shaped a broad, soft-touch smile. "Save your breath. I'm not hearing 'no.'"

Two blocks from the Independence Ballroom, they sheltered under the awning of the Seaman's Credit Union. Trying to check their faces in the bank's plate-glass window, they were stymied by the paucity of glow: the city was under "lightless night" restrictions to save coal. So they served as each other's vanities: Frieda smoothed Lou's face powder with a nimble tongue-dabbed thumb; Lou fixed a smudge on Frieda's mole.

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When they stepped out from under the awning, two men had materialized. "*La-dies,*" said the shorter one with affable impatience, as though Frieda and Lou were their chronically tardy sweethearts. With casually deft fingers he rolled a cigarette, but his poise was foiled by his tall, skinny pal, whose fidgeting evoked a doomed man awaiting his final meal.

Fellow number one lit the cigarette. Through a theatrical cloud of smoke, he said his name: "Frankie Gallivan. And this here's Tip Gilooly."

Frankie was a jack-in-the-box of a man, Frieda thought — five feet three if he tipped his chin, maybe. His nose looked to have been broken in at least a couple spots, the caricature of a lightning bolt. Tip, for his part, had a good foot on his friend, but by hunching seemed to use just half the space. His long, moon-pale face wore a slightly qualmish look, as if he was scared of heights and the view from his own eyes spooked him.

"So . . . ," Frankie said. The word trailed suggestively, like the slink of smoke from his nostrils.

Lou glanced at Frieda, then at the fellows, vettingly; you had to watch for rounders and cadets. But these weren't white slavers, Lou's wink to Frieda implied. They were just two lively Irish lads from Southie. Lou reached out, snatched the cigarette with a fly-swatting motion, and stole an indulgent inhalation. "So," she copied Frankie, her tone splitting the difference between mockery and flirtation, "we gonna camp here all night, or we gonna dance?"

"You're quite the little fizgig, ain'tcha?" said Frankie. He reached up and hooked his arm in Lou's. Off they went.

Frieda tagged after, Tip stilting along beside her, until they caught their friends and fell in step; she wasn't sure if she was the booby prize, or if he was.

In the quick hike to the Independence they exchanged their whats and whyfores. The fellows were linemen for Boston Edison. They'd been kept out of the Army — Frank for his height, he said, admitting the obvious; Tip for a reason that went unsaid — but were proudly engaged in war work: constructing

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new transmission lines ("Fifteen thousand volts of voom!") from the L Street station to the destroyer plant at Squantum.

"And you two?" said Frankie. "You got jobs?"

(Tip still hadn't peeped a single word.)

When Frieda named Jordan Marsh, Frankie's smile tightened. "Hear that, Tipper? A couple of downtown gals."

"We work in Intimates," Lou euphemized (Frankie's smile pulled even tighter), then she gave Frieda and herself quick promotions: "I'm assistant buyer. Frieda's our very best saleslady."

Lou was perpetually buttoning up her stories two or three holes above the truth. It unnerved Frieda. Wasn't it begging for exposure?

But then they reached the dance hall. The men paid their way, and as they swept all together up the ramp to the main room, Frieda's doubts burned off under the sizzle of all those bulbs. The hall loomed vast — the square footage of a whole wing at Jordan's — and was magnified to infinity by mirrors. Here was a world untouched by wartime thrift!

At the far side of the dance floor, on the streamer-draped stage, Professor Okay's Orchestra performed its alchemy. Frieda recognized the tune — "In for a Penny, in for a Pound" — she'd turkey-trotted to it once with a furrier from Brighton. The floor was packed with dancers: men with their hair slicked by sweat and petrolatum, girls with minxish, mounded pompadours. The girls' taffeta gowns had powder puffs and yards of ruffle, but Frieda, despite her own simple sateen frock (the best that Lou had managed for a loaner), didn't feel the slightest bit outdone. Her borrowed hat fit as firmly as a new conviction.

At Jordan's, Frieda always thanked her stars to be a bundler and not, despite the higher wage, a cashier girl. She watched every evening as the cashier girls rose from the dim, barren basement where they toiled, deprived of normal life but through pneumatic change tubes, by which they sent notes to upper floors: *Has it cooled off yet? Thunderstorms or clear?* Now, standing here in the ballroom's lucid glare, she realized that she was not so different. Her life until recently — until these bur-

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nished, jackpot weeks — had been spent dungeoned, ignorant of the weather; now at last, at last, she had emerged.

Their dates, who had beelined for the bar, returned with drinks (Mamie Taylors and, for themselves, Rusty Nails). In toast, four glasses met: a lucky clover.

"Gee," said Frankie, shading his eyes from the chandeliers, "you'd think we built those power lines to *here*."

Tip said, "It'd be worth every volt." He lifted his face as if to bask in sunshine.

Maybe, Frieda thought, he'd be all right.

Tip lit a cigarette and offered her a puff, which she took even though she didn't smoke. To chase the rough heat, she sipped her cool drink; her throat was dazzled, pleasantly haywire.

Professor Okay revved his orchestra to another frisky ragtime, and the floor was deluged with new dancers. "Shall we?" Frankie asked, and when Lou ardently nodded, they set down their drinks and rode the wave. Tip and Frieda followed close behind.

Dancing with Tip was an awkward affair. He pawed her hips; she struggled for his shoulders. The whirligig of his long limbs kept clipping her. "Sorry," he said. "Christ, sorry." Each apology tore him further from the rhythm.

Tip had the faltering air of a mule sold too often, who can't keep straight its new owner's orders. He stank of mothballs, but Frieda would have sworn the smell rose from his pores more than from his threadbare suit, as though his body itself had long been stored away. Her own body, despite its entanglement with Tip's, pistoned with the music's lubrication.

"Go easy?" said Tip. An offer, or a request?

She ignored it, fixing her grip around his neck. From this close she caught a difference between his eyes: the left one moistly bashful, the right blank. So *that's* what had disqualified him! Now that she guessed it, the glass eye was obvious. She stared into its marbly dispassion, and rather than evoke pity or condolence, the defect roused an urge to dance rough. She wondered why damaged goods incited further damage: Was his

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misfortune a hedge against her own? Their feet jigsawed space in an outlandish one-step. Frieda pressed her cheek against his chest.

When the song ended, Frankie and Lou, who'd been lost in their own wiggling, announced that they were leaving the dance floor. "It's slam-bang here," said Frankie. "How 'bout some privacy." He cocked his head unsubtly toward the staircase.

The balcony was where, in quarter light, girls sat on fellows' laps, and hands roved in shifty, shadowed motions. At least that was how Lou had described it; Frieda, though she'd indulged in her share of dance-floor petting, had yet to stray above the ballroom level.

"Let's go," said Lou. "We'll have a bash." She turned and hoofed off with restless Frankie.

Tip was staring at Frieda, and his glass eye seemed to see right through her. Something had stiffened him to his full treacherous height — maybe the same force that inspired Frieda to clutch him. Together, leaning close, they approached the balcony stairs, Tip's camphor scent tart with potential, like gasoline.

She was stepping up when the sludgy sound of Yiddish made her stumble. To her left, her cousin Sadie — Mama's sister's youngest — stood among a pack of friends, gawking; Sadie who, by some mischief of genetics, looked more like Mama than did Frieda herself: that same blade of mouth, those scoffing eyes.

Sadie turned her smug, awful gaze now on Frieda, and Frieda felt it strip away her jaunty, borrowed hat, her fake mole, her happy-squaw smile, to lay bare her old West End self.

"C'mon," Tip said. "There's folks waiting on us."

Dimly, Frieda sensed the crowd's agitation, but she was stuck staring at her cousin. Would Sadie, having spied her, rush off and snitch to Mama? Of course not, that would give *herself* away. But rather than relieving Frieda, the realization crushed her: nobody from the neighborhood would learn that

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she'd been here; nobody would think of her at all. Less and less would they remember her until she truly would be dead — like Papa, for whose loss they'd always blamed her.

"C'mon," Tip urged, his voice quietly brutal.

If Frieda budged, she thought she might be sick.

She *hadn't* killed Papa. They were wrong! He'd stayed late one Friday eve at Slotnik's Kosher Meats, trimming a roast he'd promised to their neighbor. But with sunset washing fast across the sky, Mama came and ordered him to stop. "Izzy! Izzy Mintz. It's almost *yontiff!*" At the scare of her voice he jerked, and the knife caught his knuckle — an inch-long slice that should have bled but didn't. She rushed him straight home and into his Shabbos suit; in the rush, he neglected to clean the wound. Within a week, a devil-colored line spread up his arm. Less than four days later, his heart quit.

It was Mama! Mama who knew which *b'racha* to chant when you swallowed a grain of barley — and which when it passed into the toilet — but who wouldn't know the Lord our God, King of the universe, if He swooped down and seized her by the throat. Yet Frieda was the one held culpable — as if her love of Jack were the knife that had sliced Papa. At the shivah, Mama had pointed at her. "What *she* did, that's what killed him!" And no one had said *That's crazy talk* or tried to hush her up — not the rabbi or the chazan; not Hannah, who, having long blamed Frieda for being their father's favorite, had no trouble endorsing this new indictment; and certainly not Sadie, who had sat carrying on by Mama's side as if *she* were the second daughter — weeping less from grief (Frieda, seeing her now, guessed) than from fear her own misdeeds might be exposed.

Sadie now looked poised to say something, her mouth puckering into the shape of condemnation, but with a final snubbing turn she walked away.

Frieda, woozy with a sense of being jettisoned, realized that Tip had dropped her arm.

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“You said sheeny girls was fast,” he griped to Frankie, who stood three steps above, cuddling Lou.

“What can I tell ya, Tipper? When *I’m* with one, they are.”

“If you’ve had such good luck, then let’s trade.”

Firmly, condescendingly, Frankie shook his head, like a bookie saying *Sorry, all bets closed.*

“But you promised. C’mon, trade me. Mine’s no good.”

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