

SIDE 'J' ELMA, CHERIE

'cause she was sweet and kinda refined. I was allus scared I'd say or do somethin' wrong.

BO. I know how ya mean.

VIRGIL. It was cowardly of me, I s'pose, but ev'ry time I'd get back from courtin' her, and come back to the bunkhouse where my buddies was sittin' around talkin', or playin' cards, or listenin' to music, I'd jest relax and feel m'self so much at home, I din wanta give it up.

BO. Yah! Gals can scare a fella.

VIRGIL. Now I'm kinda ashamed.

BO. Y'are?
VIRGIL. Yes I am, Bo. A fella can't live his whole life dependin' on buddies. (Bo takes another reflective pause, then asks directly.)

BO. Why don't she like me, Virge?

VIRGIL. (Hesitant.) Well . . .

BO. Tell me the truth.

VIRGIL. Mebbe ya don't go about it right.

BO. What do I do wrong?

VIRGIL. Sometimes ya sound a bit bullheaded and mean.

BO. I do?

VIRGIL. Yah.

BO. How's a fella s'posed to act?

VIRGIL. I'm no authority, Bo, but it seems t'me you should be a little more gallant.

BO. Gallant? I'm as gallant as I know how to be. You hear the way Hank and Orville talk at the ranch, when they get back from sojournin' in town, 'bout their women.

VIRGIL. They like to brag, Bo. Ya cain't b'leve ev'rythin' Hank and Orville say.

BO. Is there any reason a gal wouldn't go fer me, soon as she would fer Hank or Orville?

VIRGIL. They're a bit older'n you. They learned a bit more. They can be gallant with gals . . . when they wanta be.

BO. I ain't gonna pretend.

VIRGIL. I cain't blame ya.

BO. But a gal oughta like me. I kin read and write, I'm kinda tidy and I got good manners, don't I?

VIRGIL. I'm no judge, Bo. I'm used to ya.

BO. And I'm tall and strong. Ain't that what girls like? And if do say so, m'self, I'm purty good lookin'!

VIRGIL. Yah.

BO. When I get spruced up, I'm just as good lookin' a fella as a gal might hope to see.

VIRGIL. I know ya are, Bo.

BO. (Suddenly seized with anger at the injustice of it all. Jumps up, crosses u. s.) Then hellfire and damnation! Why don't she go back to the ranch with me? (His hands in his hip pockets, he begins pacing, returning to his corner like a panther, where he stands with his back to the others, watching the snow fly outside the window.)

ELMA. (Having observed Bo's disquiet.) Gee, if you only loved him!

CHERIE. That'd solve ev'rythin', wouldn't it? But I don't. So I jest can't see m'self goin' to some God-forsaken ranch in Montana where I'd never see no one but him and a lotta cows.

ELMA. No. If you don't love him, it'd be awfully lonely.

CHERIE. I dunno why I keep expectin' m'self to fall in love with someone, but I do.

ELMA. (Sits on stool by Cherie.) I know I expect to, some day.

CHERIE. I'm beginnin' to seriously wonder if there is the kinda love I have in mind.

ELMA. What's that?

CHERIE. Well . . . I dunno. I'm oney nineteen, but I been goin' with guys since I was fourteen.

ELMA. (Astounded.) Honest?

CHERIE. Honey, I almost married a cousin a nyne when I was fourteen, but Pappy wouldn't have it.

ELMA. I never heard of anyone marryin' so young.

CHERIE. Down in the Ozarks, we don't waste much time. Any-way, I'm awful glad I never married my cousin Malcolm, 'cause he turned out real bad, like Pappy predicted. But I sure was crazy 'bout him at the time. And I been losin' my head 'bout some guy ever since. But Bo's the first one wanted to marry me, since Cousin Malcolm. And natur'ly, I'd like to get married and raise a family and all them things but . . .

ELMA. But you've never been in love?

CHERIE. Mebbe I have and din know it. Thass what I mean. Mebbe I don't know what love is. Mebbe I'm expectin' it t'be somethin' it ain't. I jest feel that, regardless how crazy ya are 'bout some guy, ya gotta feel . . . and it's hard to put into words,

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but . . . ya gotta feel he respects ya. Yah, thass what I mean.

ELMA. (*Not impudent*.) I should think so.

CHERIE. I want a guy I can look up to and respect, but I don't want one that'll browbeat me. And I want a guy who can be sweet to me but I don't wanta be treated like a baby. I . . . I just gotta feel that . . . whoever I marry . . . has some real regard for me, apart from all the lovin' and sex. Know what I mean?

ELMA. (*Bustly digesting all this*.) I think so. What are you going to do when you get back to Kansas City?

CHERIE. I dunno.—There's a hillbilly program on one of the radio stations there. I might git a job on it. If I don't, I'll probably git me a job in Liggett's or Walgreen's. Then after a while, I'll probably marry some guy, whether I think I love him or not. Who'm I to keep insistin' I should fall in love? You hear all about love when yor a kid and jest take it for granted that such a thing really exists. Maybe ya have to find out fer yorself it don't. Maybe everyone's afraid to tell ya.

ELMA. (*Glims*.) Maybe you're right . . . but I hope not.

CHERIE. (*After squirming a little on the stool*.) Gee, I hate to go out to that cold powder room, but I guess I better not put it off any longer. (*Cherie hurries out the rear door as Dr. Lyman sits again at the counter, having returned from the bookshelves in time to overhear the last of Cherie's conversation. The muscs for a few moments, gloomily, then speaks to Elma out of his unconscious reflections.*)

DR. LYMAN. How defandly we pursue love, like it was an inheritance due, that we had to wrangle about with angry relatives in order to get our share.

ELMA. You shouldn't complain. You've had three wives.

DR. LYMAN. Don't shame me. I loved them all . . . with passion. (*An afterthought*.) At least I thought I did . . . for a while. (*The still chuckles about it as though it were a great irony.*)

ELMA. I'm sorry if I sounded sarcastic, Dr. Lyman. I didn't mean to be.

DR. LYMAN. Don't apologize. I'm too egotistical ever to take offense at anything people say. (*Pours drink.*)

ELMA. You're not egotistical at all.

DR. LYMAN. Oh, believe me. The greatest egos are those which are too egotistical to show just how egotistical they are.

ELMA. I'm sort of idealistic about things. I like to think that people fall in love and stay that way, forever and ever.

DR. LYMAN. Maybe we have lost the ability. Maybe Man has passed the stage in his evolution wherein love is possible. Maybe life will continue to become so terrifyingly complex that man's anxiety about his mere survival will render him too miserly to give of himself in any true relation.

ELMA. You're talking over my head. Anyone can fall in love, I always thought . . . and . . .

DR. LYMAN. But two people, really in love, must give up some thing of themselves.

ELMA. (*Trying to follow*.) Yes.

DR. LYMAN. That is the gift that men are afraid to make. Sometimes they keep it in their bosoms forever, where it withers and dies. Then they never know love, only its facsimiles, which they seek over and over again in meaningless repetition.

ELMA. (*A little depressed*.) Gee! How did we get onto this subject?

DR. LYMAN. (*Laughs heartily with sudden release, grabbing Elma's hand*.) Ah, my dear. Pay no attention to me, for whether there is such a thing as love, we can always . . . (*Shifts his drink*) . . . pretend there is. Let us talk instead of our forthcoming trip to Topeka. Will you wear your prettiest dress?

ELMA. Of course. If it turns out to be a nice day, I'll wear a new dress. Mother got me for spring. It's a soft rose color with a little lace collar.

DR. LYMAN. Ah, you'll look lovely, lovely. I know you will. I hope it doesn't embarrass you for me to speak these endearments . . .

ELMA. No . . . it doesn't embarrass me.

DR. LYMAN. I'm glad. Just think of me as a fatherly old fool, will you? And not be troubled if I take such rapturous delight in your sweetness, and youth, and innocence? For these are qualities I seek to warm my heart as I seek a fire to warm my hands.

ELMA. Now I am kind of embarrassed. I don't know what to say.

DR. LYMAN. Then say nothing, or nudge me and I'll talk endlessly about the most trivial matters. (*They laugh together as Cherie comes back in, shivering*.)

CHERIE. (*Crosses to stove*.) Brrr, it's cold. Virgil, I wish you'd