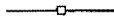


ONE



The murder is seldom discussed without someone recalling that warm autumn night years before when Martha Horgan was only seventeen and Bob Hobart, a classmate, offered her a ride home from the library. Pretending she hadn't heard him, she brought her book closer to her face. The girls at the end of the long table giggled. Everyone knew what Hobart was up to. The library was

so packed with students that many sat cross-legged against the walls, and yet the chairs flanking Martha Horgan were empty. It was always that way; she walked alone, sat alone, but it was hard to feel too bad about it, because she could be such an unpleasant girl. Bob Hobart slid into one of the empty chairs and asked again if he could give her a ride. Muttering angrily, Martha jumped up and stalked out of the reading room. The girls collapsed in laughter over their books. Martha's temper was legendary.

She was a tall skinny girl whose wide crooked mouth seemed perpetually askew, a ragged boundary between laughter and tears. Behind her thick, smudged glasses her eyes, with their slow-moving myopia, cast a watchful intensity that was unnerving. Her aunt constantly scolded her for this, but she couldn't help it. She watched people hoping to discover what it was that made her so different from them. Sometimes it seemed she might be just a step off, a moment behind, and so, if she ran faster, laughed harder, smiled brighter, she would catch up. She would get there.

"It's Donny," Bob Hobart whispered, at her heels when they were past the checkout desk. "He wants to see you. He told me."

"Really?" she asked, grinning. She was madly in love with Donny LaRue. Every day she wrote him anonymous notes which she wedged through the grille on his locker door when no one was around. She always called his house after his mother left for work. She never said anything when Donny answered, but just listened to his voice. For the past few days, though, his little brother had started answering. The brat would blast the stereo and hold the phone against the speaker.

Once she was in the car, Hobart barely spoke to her. The minute he turned onto the rutted logging road, she cringed against the door. She told him she had forgotten that she was supposed to go straight home. He assured her it would only take a minute. He just had to drop something off at this party some guys were having; in fact, it was a birthday party for Donny.

They bumped along the unlit narrow road for about ten minutes until he pulled in behind three cars as old and battered as his.

"I'll wait here. I don't want to go," she said, panicking. None of this made sense. Or did it? Maybe that's what was wrong with her, always being too suspicious and afraid to take chances.

"It won't take long, honest. Besides, you don't want to sit out here all alone in the middle of nowhere." He smiled. "Come on!"

She followed him through the woods to a clearing known as the Meadow, where twelve boys sat around a small campfire, drinking beer and passing around two joints.

The boys' eager greetings made her feel better. They usually either avoided her or made fun of her, and now they actually seemed happy to see her—all, that is, but Donny, who stood at the edge of the clearing gesturing angrily while he spoke to Bob. The flames cast jagged shadows on the boys' faces as they called up to her. Tom Gately offered her his beer, which she refused, but he stuck it in her hand, then rushed back to the fire as if he were afraid of her. They kept coaxing her to drink it, even though she insisted she hated the taste.

"What DO you like the taste of?" one boy called.

"I don't know." She felt nervous and giddy now, with Donny watching. "A lot of things."

"Like what?"

"I don't know." She shrugged uneasily. She couldn't think of anything she liked other than Donny. He wore a dark-green shirt she had never seen before. She knew all of his clothes. She knew what he did every minute of the day. She knew what everyone in his family did. Lately she thought about Donny so much that there wasn't a lot of room left for other thoughts.

"Do you like candy?"

"Yes. But not caramel. I don't like caramel." She glanced at Donny. He was still standing, but his face was shadowed. Bob Hobart sat down in the circle.

"Martha doesn't like caramel."

"Jeez, I don't either."

"How 'bout ice cream?"

"Some flavors I like." She nodded, flattered by their rapt attention.

Maybe they had changed. Or maybe it was her. Maybe she had changed over the summer.

"Yah, me too. Some I like, some I don't. How 'bout you, Ed? What's your favorite flavor?"

"Cherry. Long as the cherries are big fat juicy ones," Ed said and everyone laughed so hard she tried to laugh too. She didn't know why they were cracking up over cherry-chunk ice cream. She stopped laughing, because she could tell by their expressions that it was probably something lewd.

"How about come? You like the taste of that?" Craig Lister asked, getting up from the fire.

"No." She hated Craig Lister. He had tripped her on the stairs the first day of school, and then tried to act like it was an accident when a teacher grabbed him. But he had done it on purpose. After a lifetime of bumps and shoves, she could always tell.

"You ever tried it?" His smile was cold and thin.

"No."

"Then how do you know you don't like the taste?"

"I just know, that's all," she said, her chin out. Thought he was so smart. She hated boys like him, rude, strutting, cocky boys, hated them.

"I don't know, Martha, I hear it's pretty good. You want to try some?"

The fire crackled and spit.

"No." She turned quickly and stared at Bob. "You said a minute. A minute's up and I have to go home now."

"Come on, Martha, try it. You'll like it," Kevin Moss called.

"Yah, Martha, come on!"

She saw Donny laugh now, so she smiled.

"See, she already did! She did Hobart. On the way here," someone called.

"Hey, Hobart!" Craig Lister said, shaking his finger down at Bob. "Not nice, Hobie, sampling Donny's surprise."

Hobart's head sagged with helpless laughter onto his drawn-up knees.

"Okay," Craig Lister said. "Let's see what you got here, Martha. See

if it's anything we can use." He had just undone the top two buttons of her shirt.

Shocked, she stepped back and slapped his hand. He reached toward her again, and this time she hit his hand hard. Laughing, he kept coming at her as she backed away. Suddenly he leaped with a whoop and yanked open her shirt. Instead of a bra, she wore one of her father's old undershirts that was so flimsy, Lister ripped it in two with just a pull; the way you'd tear up old rags, she thought, such a strange thought, with everyone staring up at her; threadbare, useless old cloth for the rags her father buffed her aunt's car with.

"Holy shit," Lister said, seeing her long full breasts. "Take a look. . . ."

She held her shirt closed and ran toward the woods. But suddenly he was behind her, his arms pinning hers as he butted her back to the campfire with his body.

"Now, let me see," he said, looking over her shoulder down at the hysterical faces ringing the fire. "We got a lot of your favorites here tonight. Okay, Justin, Jim, Tom. You go first. Show Donny how."

One by one they stood before her and stared at her chest. Eyes closed, she hung her head so that her hair obscured her face.

"Come on! Come on!" Lister said, disgusted that no one would touch her. "Martha loves this," he grunted, jiggling her body against his. "She loves you guys. She's been after you guys ever since first grade. You know that. Come on! You're gonna make Martha feel bad."

"Oh no," she gasped, as the first cold hand clamped over her breast, squeezing one, then both. "Please don't," she begged. She was choking.

"Good tits."

"Excellent."

She was gagging.

"Come on, Hobie!"

"Pass."

"Come on, you creep, they don't bite, you know."

"I said no."

"You're holding up the line, pit face," Lister growled.

"Please don't," she gasped.

"Are you nuts?" called a voice she recognized as Donny's. "This shits."

"Fuck off, dickhead. She likes it! That's what she came for. Ask Hobart. She told him."

"Let her go, you fuckin' creep. You're making me sick."

Someone was unzipping her pants, and now they yanked them down to her ankles. A stick was being dragged across her chest, poking her breasts, jiggling them, now flipping them up and down. Behind her Lister laughed into her hair and rubbed his pelvis against her. A can whooshed open and a spray of ice-cold beer hit her chest and ran down her belly. She screamed, struggling to get away. Her arms were being pulled from their sockets. Another can whooshed open and sprayed her face. The beer smeared her glasses and stung her eyes.

"Let her go!"

"You creep, you fuckin' sadist, Lister, let her the fuck go!"

She tripped and fell forward as someone yanked Craig Lister away from her. Sobbing, she scrambled to her feet and pulled up her pants. Her slick beery fingers fumbled at her shirt buttons. The boys were running into the woods. She heard their cars start, then peel off into the darkness. She ran most of the way back down the road. It was close to midnight by the time she got home.

"I knew this was going to happen," her aunt Frances screamed as she staggered through the door.

"They oughta be arrested," her father said, averting his embarrassed gaze.

"What did she expect, going into the woods with them," her aunt said when she had heard the story. "I told her! I've warned her! Always staring at people, haunting them. I knew this would happen!"

"It's not her fault," her father said, and she did not know if he meant what the boys had done or the strangeness that was her life.

Over Frances's objections, Floyd Horgan called his friend Sheriff Sonny Stoner, who rounded up the boys and their parents in the aldermen's dark conference room at Town Hall. There was no denying

the incident had taken place. Some of the boys wept, recalling the details. Poor Martha Horgan . . . Oh, they were so ashamed.

A few parents vowed that, come hell or high water, they would stand by their sons' sworn accounts of how sexed up Martha Horgan got after she drank that first beer. She had started it, and the boys had only done what any normal boys would have.

"Now, let's not go off the deep end here," the sheriff cautioned. "Let's not see any more harm done."

Yes, most agreed, the sheriff was right. Enough harm had already been done to one of the more fragile members of the community.

"One of the more disturbed!" Mrs. LaRue piped up, dumping onto the table a bag of the notes Martha Horgan had written to her son just since the start of school. "Over two hundred," she announced, crumpling the bag and throwing it onto the pile of tightly folded notes. "Letting a girl like that roam all over the place—seems to me that aunt of hers is just asking for trouble, or else maybe she just don't give a damn. Well, I know one thing'll shake up Mrs. Horace Beecham, and that's the lawsuit I'm gonna file against her if one single thing happens to my son—if she dares file any kind of charges against him. Sonny, you're so damn worried about protecting Martha Horgan, have you given any thought to protecting my son from her? All our sons. Think about it!"

There was dark grumbling. It was a shame about Martha Horgan. On that they could all agree. Oh, she was bright enough and certainly pretty enough to pass for normal, but everyone knew she was about as odd as they come, poor thing, muttering to herself and chasing little kids if they so much as looked at her, which they were bound to do, of course, kids being kids.

Nutty as a fruitcake, always had been, always would be, and so, really, wouldn't it be better just to drop the whole thing and not ruin the lives of a fine bunch of young men who would be graduating high school in a few months—not to mention the shame the poor thing would be subjected to in testimony of that sort? Sonny explained all this to Steve Bell, who was Aunt Frances's longtime attorney and lover, and he spelled

it all out to Martha's father, who, while he said it didn't seem right to drop it, agreed it also didn't seem right to pursue it.

And so the matter was dropped. The only problem was everyone's sense that, in some inexplicable way that defied all reason and logic, Martha had somehow asked for it, that she had brought it on herself with her attractive figure and her peculiar ways. The young men went off to school and the service, then careers and families of their own. And there grew with time the rancorous certainty that she had probably instigated the whole pitiful thing, not only that, but (and some said they knew this for certifiable fact) that she had actually had relations of one sort or another that night with every single one of those fine boys. The joke in town was how no man dared be alone on the same side of the street with her for fear she'd chase after him. Even now, some fifteen years later, a teenager was sure to get a rise out of his buddies by suddenly darting across the street with Martha Horgan's approach.

She never returned to high school after that night. And if there were people who felt she should have, they never said so, relieved as everyone was that things had worked out so well. Dressed in baggy shapeless clothes, usually her father's old work shirts and pants, Martha kept to herself. The most that ever happened was the loneliness that grew in her heart. She had no friends, no life beyond the upkeep of the garage apartment she shared with her father. Even the parties across the way, in her aunt's elegant home, had little to do with her. Frances's friends were uneasy around her. She made people nervous because they made her nervous, and on the rare occasion when she met someone she liked, her attention was so rapt as to be frightening. There were some days when she felt as if there were a net around her, a spell that had been cast on her at birth, a spell that only love could undo.

When she was thirty-one, her father died. During the wake, she couldn't cry or speak to people. It was on the morning of the funeral service, just as the casket was about to be closed, that she finally broke down, sobbing and retching, causing a nasty scene in front of the dry-eyed chatty mourners, who were all Frances's friends. Everyone looked away with the same thought: Poor, poor Frances. Wesley Mount, the

funeral director, rushed to comfort Martha, but unaccountably, after a lifetime in the business, not a word of solace came to him. Nothing. And so he put his arms around her and held her until she was calm enough to breathe normally.

Later that same day, Frances cornered Martha in the kitchen. Frances was distraught and panicky; without her brother, it was all on her shoulders now, the house, the grounds, everything, even Martha. She started off by saying that the scene in the funeral home had been humiliating.

“What are you talking about?” Martha demanded.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about, leaping into Wesley Mount’s arms like that and then standing there . . .” Frances shuddered. “Just standing there with your eyes closed, making that weird sound, that moaning.”

“I wasn’t moaning!”

“Didn’t you know what everyone was thinking? Didn’t you care?” Martha glared at her.

“I mean, you just confirmed every rumor they’ve ever heard about that night in the woods.”

“Don’t talk about that,” Martha warned, starting to get up.

“I will talk about it and you will listen!” her aunt insisted, blocking her way. “From now on, you will consider every single consequence of your actions before you say or do anything! Do you understand? Do you? Do you?” she was screaming as Martha pushed past her in a rage.

That very day, Martha moved into town. She got a job at Kolditis Cleaners and a room in Claire Mayo’s boardinghouse. And for eight wonderful months she was on her own. She had her first real friend, and everything seemed possible.