

The Book Club

On the morning of April 18th Audrey Delacroix claimed her backpack at Inmate Property. She found a ten in a secret compartment, and also her pack of Marlboros, though only two remained. She knew the pack had been unopened twenty-one months before, but where did you lodge your complaint? With the governor?

She assumed they'd give her money at the gate. It was the right thing to do, after what they'd put her through. In all the old movies you got at least \$50, but no longer, not in Arkansas. She'd earned almost \$400 working in the kitchen, but she'd have to find a bank, and fill out God knew how many forms, before it was hers.

It wasn't fair.

And that Puerto Rican woman at the gate wasn't *human*. No "Good luck, Inmate," or "Don't wanta see *you* again." Looking skyward, the woman droned, "Transportation is available for the newly-released to the point of arrest," which was such a convoluted way of talking that for an instant Audrey didn't understand. When she did, she thought that Arkansas had gone crazy. Her point of arrest had been the police station in Berryville, but why would she return to the county jail? The Salvation Army had offered her a job in Eureka Springs, hardly five miles away. She was a free woman. She'd walk.

Happily, the day was clear and sunny, with wild plums blooming alongside the road, and dogwoods joined like white lace in the understories of the oaks. Hazy green hills stretched as far as

she could see, making Audrey feel like she was part of something big and important. She walked briskly at first, the scent of lilacs around the farmhouses filling her with joy, and nostalgia for her childhood with her grandparents.

She grew tired after a mile or so, and stopped to smoke one of her cigarettes. She discovered she had no light, and with a brave shudder, crushed both cigarettes and dropped them into the grass. Nicotine was the gateway drug to just about everything. This was her new life, and she **WOULD NOT SMOKE!**

This seemed like a victory, the first of many to come, and her resolve carried her for a while longer. But by the time the Walmart came into view—two miles, still, from the Salvation Army—she was worn out. Her feet were sore and she wanted new shoes, but at least she'd buy something to eat. An apple, perhaps. They never gave you fresh fruit in the prison.

It wasn't her fault. Oh, she couldn't claim to be innocent, but Larry was the one who manufactured meth. The state of Arkansas didn't make any allowances. No such thing as "gradations of guilt"—a phrase some lawyer used, somewhere between jail cells. And then claiming she was a bad mother!

By the front entrance, three women sat at a long table with baked goods and a few early vegetables. They all wore long, pale blue, muslin dresses, with black stockings and black shoes, and thin white hats with cute little chin straps. They seemed so pure that Audrey was ashamed to approach them. Head down, she bought a rough, beautiful loaf of bread, and inside the store, an apple and piece of cheese. She was left with only a little change, but she needed strength to reach the Salvation Army.

She sat in the sun to attack the bread and cheese, but though ravenous, she held back half her plunder. She might need it this evening. She sat with her Walmart bag and backpack beside her,

trying to look as though she were awaiting a ride. A girl of six or seven, the age Catelynn would be now, crawled up on the bench.

“Are those new blue jeans?” Audrey asked her.

“My mama bought them.”

“They look really, really nice. And you’re very pretty with all your blonde hair. What does your mother call you?”

“Faith.”

“Such a pretty name.” Audrey reached inside her Walmart bag. “Would you like a piece of cheese, Faith?”

The girl held out her hand, but from nowhere a woman rushed up, grabbed the girl, and hurried into the parking lot. Head on her mother’s shoulder, the little girl waved goodbye, closing her fingers in a soft fist like Catelynn used to. Audrey couldn’t hold it in. She began to cry.

The youngest of the women selling baked goods ran to Audrey’s side. “Are you all right, Sister?”

Audrey hyperventilated, and the young woman stroked her back tentatively. Gasping, Audrey said, “I just got out of prison.”

“I know.”

“You . . . know?”

“How lonely you seem, for one thing. And your old clothes.”

Audrey wore sweat pants with a cigarette hole at one knee, and a purple tee shirt with a Razorbacks logo. She liked the pure young woman, and tried to check her tears.

“It’s all right. A lot of us got law trouble.”

“Not you nice Amish ladies!”

“We may be plain, but we’re not Amish. We’re the Book Club.”

Audrey sat at the table with the kind ladies, and almost relaxed, though jail-time had put in her head the idea that someone was always watching you. Beth Nunnally, the young woman who'd befriended Audrey, and Laura Abbott, the plump one, both said that they had been in prison. Laura had a daughter somewhere in the foster care system. Her eyes were red, as though she, too, were not far from tears.

Martha, the gray-haired woman, took them in no matter what, Beth said. "We grow all our food. We have a fish pond. One girl shoots deer."

"Men?" Audrey asked.

Beth smiled, and Martha finally spoke. "No men," she said neutrally.

Audrey had to think about that for a moment. Inmates could talk of nothing else, and flirted with even the homeliest guards. But after being married to Larry, Audrey thought the idea of doing without men somewhat daring. You'd only see them at Walmart, as in a zoo. "No men, and you work all day. You read . . . *books?*"

"A book a week," Laura said.

"What about TV?"

Martha almost snarled. "They *spy*."

"Yes, ma'am," Audrey said.

"*Look*," the old woman said, holding out an arm, and Audrey lifted her eyes to the eaves of the building, where a camera had been mounted. Cameras were everywhere in the prison, even in the shower nozzles, inmates said. The Walmart camera, its red light blinking, pointed directly toward them.

"If you watch TV, they know what you buy, who your friends are, if you say things against the government," Laura said.

“The Internet is even worse,” Beth put in.

“And cell phones,” Laura said, daubing her eyes with a Kleenex, and sniffing.

“They say it’s for your own protection,” Martha said. “But you can’t trust them. They spend their days dreaming up enemies. *You’re* their enemy.”

“Oh,” Audrey said, staring at the blinking light.

“Martha worked for Homeland Security. She knows everything,” Beth said.

“My goodness.” Audrey didn’t understand what the women were talking about, but at least they were serious women, unlike the flighty types, the bullies, and the sickos in prison. “I want to come with you,” she announced.

“What about your parole officer?” Martha asked, her blue eyes suddenly fierce.

“Don’t have one. I served every last minute.”

“Carrying any electronics? Tablet? Laptop?”

“No.”

“DVD player, I-pad, camera, pedometer?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Cell phone?”

“No.”

“You’re sure,” Martha said. “No cell phone. Don’t lie to me, Audrey.”

Audrey held up her wrist. “Just this old watch.”

At the weekly convocation Audrey ate more of the delicious bread, this time with strawberry jam, though she could have had venison and pork, potatoes, even Morel mushrooms. The bread and jam, with mint tea, made her feel like a little girl, nestled by her grandma’s woodstove.

Martha spoke. She cautioned how everyone needed to seem meek when in town, so not to arouse suspicion, then dropped into a harangue about electronics and government spies, citing stories of how the government had hauled away innocent families in New Jersey, and Arizona. Audrey didn't perfectly comprehend, except that the world was monstrously unfair and dangerous, and that she was lucky to have blundered into this safe place.

Where they even had cigarettes. She shared one with Beth as Clubbers gave boring reports on how well the field corn was pollinating, the health of calves and goat kids, and projections for the Muscadine crop. Finally, they broke into small groups for book reports. Book reports? Just like in junior high.

Audrey didn't read well, but it wasn't her fault. She grew up with her grandparents, kindly people, though not much for books. She never knew her dad, and her mom jerked her from school to school before she herself went off to prison. Some example! No, Audrey never had the advantages, but she got hold of Laura Ingalls Wilder, and read about pioneer life in the fearsome north woods. What Wilder described was pretty much like life at the Book Club, except for the lack of men.

"We work like pioneers, and there are no men!" She didn't mean this as a joke, but everyone laughed. It seemed she'd made a good book report.

Plump Laura Abbot just opened her Bible and read, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Silence followed, rather than discussion. What could you say? Laura wept, and everyone was embarrassed, and maybe contemptuous. Audrey hadn't read any rules, but she sensed you were supposed to be strong in this place.

"Why do we do this?" Audrey asked.

"They've always done it," Beth said. "Though lotsa folks wanta drop it. Who reads anymore, right? Or you see people out in the world, they read on their phones, and you know we won't be

doin' *that*. I believe, back when they started, Martha thought it would be kinda inspirin', and relaxin' for the girls."

"It's both of those," Audrey said. She liked that the books didn't have to be profound, or even sensible. Most women read tattered novels from the library: Gene Stratton-Porter, Grace Livingston Hill, and Peter B. Kyne. Girlhood trials, Christian example, and adventure stories from a hundred years ago. People rode around on horses then.

Levelheaded Beth read a romance, *The Beautiful Entrepreneur*, about a smart young businesswoman who was pretty dumb when it came to men. She fell for the handsome, slick guy—like Audrey's own Larry, who, when he was twenty, promised her the moon. Meanwhile, the heroine hardly noticed the shy fellow who set up the business, and whose hard work made it succeed. She didn't appreciate him until almost the end, when the slick guy was revealed as an embezzler. He was a cheater, too, when that flashy, big city woman breezed through town. Finally, the shy fellow won the heart of the businesswoman. Of course, you knew he would on the first page.

Beth, Audrey said. Life ain't like that.

Beth's blue eyes flashed. "It's a *fantasy*," she said.

After the readings, Clubbers gathered around a bonfire, and drank Muscadine wine. Wine? Yes, the Book Club made wine from elderberries and plum-sized Muscadine grapes. After convocation, conversations grew intimate.

Audrey stared into the flames, and once in a while slapped at a mosquito. She lit her third cigarette of the day. "Were you married, Beth?"

"You could say. Charles was hardly never there, but we had a little boy together, Norman."

"Where's Norman now?"

Beth shrugged. "I had to give up my rights."

"That's so unfair!"

“I wasn’t no fit mother, Audrey.”

Near midnight, while Audrey and Beth hugged and cried, and drank sweet wine, someone slipped out of the darkness, raked the coals, and threw on more wood. A woman in a long dress, whom Audrey assumed was Sister Martha though she couldn’t see clearly, read from an old book. The fire, the dark, and words she didn’t comprehend thrust Audrey backward into her vague, sometimes pleasant childhood, when her grandparents took her to prayer meetings. The meetings ended with tearful altar calls, and half-drunken Audrey cried to Martha’s words, too, and would have gone forward had this been a church service, had she been called. Out of the smoke, women’s voices rose, chanting and sobbing. Hers, too.

“Bless you, Sister!” women cried, and now women did come forward, in triumph rather than sorrow, to fill the bonfire with cell phones, DVD players, even TVs. Though her old watch didn’t seem like much of an offering, Audrey approached the fire, and was startled to see a long keyboard, still in its box, slowly curling with bluish, poisonous flames. Her tears came from a deeper place, as she remembered how she’d wanted to learn the piano when she was seven. Her mother couldn’t afford the lessons.

“A brand-new keyboard!” she said to Beth. “Some little child—my Catelynn—”.

“Shh,” Beth said, and poured more of the sweet wine.

Audrey lit her fourth cigarette. Life was so unfair!

A diesel generator churned enough power to light the meeting house, and pump water to sinks and toilets. Sister Martha didn’t object to electricity, only electronics. Still, you went to bed in the dark, unless you had candles or could find kerosene for a lamp.

Audrey was too weary to care. Being new, she drew the most demanding work, hoeing rows of beans and potatoes three hundred feet long, and every third day, washing soup kettles in the steamy

kitchen behind the cafeteria. Her calves swelled and her feet grew numb, from shuffling across the concrete floor.

But sometimes, she'd wake at three in the morning, and see shapes creeping about, going to, returning from, other women's beds. She'd witnessed such behavior in prison, and it didn't trouble her, because if you were poor and lonely, love was all you could hope for. Any kind of love. If Beth had asked, Audrey might have said yes.

She dreamed of Larry, who, by the time the police dragged him away, had grown menacing and ugly. She woke in terror, but then, almost willfully, dreamed of him when he was twenty, and she seventeen. They swam in Lake Taneycomo, and afterwards lay on a blanket, on a high bluff that caught the breezes. She laughed, threw off her bra, while Larry pretended to be a hound dog, sniffing her toes, licking her. She woke drenched in sweat, and for a moment thought Larry was there. Around her, down the long hall toward the bathroom, were snoring women. And weeping women, such as Laura in her dark corner.

Having proved herself a steady worker, Audrey drew easy duty, a week up at the store. Martha had broken her own rules to deal with the state of Arkansas, jumping through every hoop to make Book Club muscadine wine legal for public sale. Of course, customers stopped for noodles, jams, bread, eggs, and heirloom tomatoes, but wine was the big draw. Occasionally, one of the more comely sisters climbed in a car with a man, never to return, but Martha allowed that such liaisons were overhead.

Late in the afternoon, the flow of customers dwindled, and it began to rain. Audrey had been reading her book for convocation, *Little Women*, but the store had no electricity, and light faded with the dark skies. She napped, then was startled awake by a man standing across the counter, dripping. He wore a foolish grin, as many men did when they were attracted to you, and Audrey raised her

guard. Immediately she dropped it. The man was Howie Biggs, her boyfriend before Larry happened along.

“How are you, Audrey? I ain’t seen you in . . .” He met her eyes, and paused. “You’re pretty as ever.”

She might even have blushed. Anyhow, they were shy. They’d been high school sweethearts, or almost. How long ago? Ten years? Twelve! Howie was a senior, and maybe a little ashamed of her because she’d dropped out, and worked at the Dollar Store. She figured that’s why they never had sex, because for a guy like Howie, sex meant commitment. She was cute back then, if she did say so, and could have seduced him if she’d tried. He went on to college in Conway, but she couldn’t blame him for the breakup. She started running with that ignorant hillbilly, Larry Delacroix, and *his* wild crowd.

Even in the soft light, Howie didn’t look like much, but he was the sort you brought home to Mama. If you had a mama.

Life was so unfair!

“What is this place, Audrey? I seen the sign on the highway, never stopped.”

“Kinda hard to explain. It’s—it’s rare. Bunch a women, Howie.”

He grinned. “What you do for amusement?”

“Read books.”

“You ain’t tellin’ me the truth.”

She laughed. She hadn’t laughed much lately, and it felt delightful. “You and Suzie doin’ all right?”

“Oh, we split up three years ago. I got on with the federal governemt—”

“Howie! What do you *do*?”

“Secret stuff.” He brought a finger to his lips, and rolled his eyes. “Have to kill you, if I told you.”

She stroked his wrist. “Howie. Always such a clown.”

“I’m kinduva investigator, you might say. It’s amazin’ what goes on back in these hills.”

“Allus has been. Meth, and before that, all the bootleggers.”

“I heard what happened to Larry. And you, caught up in the thing. That little girl you had, that’s what’s unfortunate. Know where she is?”

Audrey bit her lip. “I don’t.”

“Life ain’t over, Audrey.” Howie brought out a fancy little computer, frowned, made some entries, and finally turned the screen so she could see.

“They’re offerin’ her up for adoption, see?”

Audrey studied the photograph. Catelynn had grown taller, and they’d cut her hair short. She looked sad, and she’d always been such a happy little girl!

“Here,” Howie said, passing a cell phone over the counter. “You can call her up at that place.”

“I cain’t take your phone, Howie.”

“It’s old. Got a few minutes on it, that’s all.”

The rain had stopped. Sunlight broke through the front windows and spread out on the bare wooden floor. Flies that had gathered on the screen door began to stir.

“We ain’t allowed—”

“To talk to your own daughter?” Howie snapped shut the little computer, and walked toward the door. “None a my business, but what kinda place you livin’ in, Audrey?”

“Oh, Howie, you don’t need to go!”

He opened the screen door, and stood half in sunlight. Flies took off in every direction. “You take care a yourself, Audrey,” he said.

When she could steal a moment, she stepped down a path in the woods, and punched in the number for the Alexander Treatment Center, but mostly she was out of range. If she turned the phone left or right, sometimes a mechanical voice spat out a menu. Once she reached a live person whom she could swear was that Puerto Rican at the prison gate.

“You will need to make an appointment.”

“Is she there? Is Catelynn there?”

“When you arrive, please have available proof of parentage. Visiting hours are nine through five.”

“Lemme me just—”

She lost the connection. She thrashed through the woods, and climbed toward what she thought must be a microwave tower far to the east, but now the phone didn't work at all. That night she crept out to the Book Club's barn, and climbed the stairs, and over the hay bales, to the dilapidated cupola. No answer from the Alexander Treatment Center, but she left a message for her old boyfriend. “Howie, I need to see you!”

In several days Howie didn't answer, and when she tried again, the number he'd given her had gone out of service. Audrey supposed that he'd learned the truth about her, that she'd done time. Then again, he already knew about Larry, and Catelynn.

Why had Howie shown up, just to tell her about Catelynn? He was a nice guy, but why would he care?

She grew tearful as Laura, and couldn't get through her report on *Little Women*. The women were silent, judgmental somehow, and later she had nightmares. She dreamed Larry came at her with a crowbar, and Catelynn cried out, “Mama! Mama!” Audrey woke, and Beth looked down on her with a face so kind and full of love that Audrey knew she must still be dreaming. She woke again,

and heard her child's voice, crying, "Mama!" from the backpack. She grabbed it and ran out into the darkness, away from her nosy roommates.

She didn't hear "Mama! Mama!" again, and knew she'd imagined everything. She'd broken Book Club rules for nothing. She carried the phone for several days more, like a dead baby, and then accidentally dropped it into the sudsy water with her pots. She reached down, all hope gone. Almost happily, she smashed the evil thing with a hammer, and threw it in the trash.

She looked across the courtyard, and saw a terrible thing. A van with tinted windows sped up the bumpy lane from the county highway, like firemen or policemen, responding to an emergency. The van stopped abruptly, sat idling for a long moment, until four men wearing suits stepped out, and strode purposefully toward the office.

In moments Martha emerged, staggering down the walk, wearing her blue muslin smock over slacks, and no bonnet. Her straggly, gray hair made her seem impossibly old, a relic, a pioneer who'd wandered into the hills a century before, and now emerged through a portal of time. She seemed vulnerable and confused, like a captured animal. As the side door of the van slid open, the old woman held up her head briefly, and looked over the grounds. Then the men pushed her inside, and Audrey couldn't see anything but the van speeding away, and disappearing into the woods by the highway.

Audrey didn't understand why they wanted Sister Martha. Who were they? Still, the scene reminded her of the day they came in a van for Larry, and how a week later they came for Catelyn, and how she'd sat in that little house that stank of meth, watching soap operas, smoking cigarettes, until a van came for her, too. When she finished the pots, she washed every dish she could find, and mopped the cement floor, and cleaned out the grease trap.

At noon, as women filed in for lunch, she hurried out the back way. Nothing seemed changed. The Book Club tractor churned along, and three women, their bonnets bent low, picked green beans. On the clothesline twenty powder-blue, muslin dresses fluttered.

Someone had ransacked her bunk. She owned nothing worth stealing, but her blankets and sheets had been thrown to the floor, and the contents of her dresser spilled: her two long dresses, her underwear, her stockings. A wave of fear passed through her, as she realized something *was* missing: her one photograph of Catelynn, which she kept in a small brass frame atop the dresser. She sank to the bed. "I've been such a good worker," she wailed. "It's not fair."

At dusk the women gathered by a bonfire, even though convocation was a week away. Maybe someone had word about Sister Martha, but anyhow Audrey felt a need for answers after the rifling of her bedroom. Maybe she couldn't stay here anymore.

Someone in that crowd had done it. Or several someones. Absurd to think so, but in a way she'd been raped. Of course, she'd been around rough men all her life, and rough women, and knew what rape *was*. No, not rape, but she felt unsettled, and fearful, and approached the group looking for enemies. She saw Beth, her one true friend, and hurried toward her.

Beth wore her full Book Club dress, stockings, and shoes. Slowly, she raised her head under her white bonnet. Her chin straps were untied, and fell forward. "I cain't help you, Audrey," she said, and reached out gently to place something in Audrey's hand.

As Beth fell back, the women began to gather, slowly encircling Audrey in the half-darkness. "What did I do?" she asked. She lifted one hand to shield her eyes from a sudden, sharp light. She realized that she held a brand-new package of cigarettes. "Thank you," she said, logic deserting her.

And then she whirled in panic, as hands plucked at her dress. She knew she must run. As her powder-blue blouse ripped, Audrey saw an opening between two of the oldest, and ducked through. Even as she did, a rock struck her head, and she stumbled. More rocks rained down.

"It ain't right. It ain't fair!" Audrey screamed, and then they were upon her.

Audrey screamed, and then they were upon her.