

Odden

Sorry To Cut In, Part 1

The man was from Peculiar, Missouri, that is. Not that it means much, though given the course of his life after he left home, you couldn't be blamed for thinking otherwise. It is an odd place to be born, in a strict statistical sense, as it is a small town, though that very fact makes his leaving of it at the age of twenty-three remarkably unremarkable. At least by our standards. Though, prior to the commencement of our travels, neither of us were all that unusual. Still memorable to the people who knew us, I admit, though I'd wager that's mainly down to our names.

His was Ebenezer, mine Valentina. He hated his for its excess of syllables; unwieldy and uncomfortable to bear, he said. I almost meant to tell him that his opinion was unreasonable, but I did have to admit that I disliked my own name for precisely the same reasons. We settled on a mutual moniker shortening, in part to solidify our partnership and partly for practical reasons. After I did some thinking we settled on the shortest options: Eb and Val. And that's who we've been since, except to each other, and even between us we only unabbreviated occasionally.

I only introduce our names here for the purpose of narrative. It's easier to follow a story with characters named from the start, even if we didn't know each other's names at first, so take Eb and Val as our names for the sake of clarity throughout the rest of this. Believe me, clarity in this narrative should not be wasted. You will find that it is in short supply.

I met Eb, as most people do, at an awkward moment in my life. I was out of sorts, for a variety of reasons, and had landed myself in what was a frankly embarrassing predicament. Eb's arrival made it worse, as Eb arrived at the very bank I was party to robbing as said robbery was

occurring. Of course, Eb didn't arrive in the normal way - he never did - and instead introduced himself to an already tense robbery in the worst way imaginable. He knocked on the door to the vault. From the inside.

To my knowledge, this was (to date) an utterly unique occurrence, and no one took it well. The robbers, all three of them – Henry, the leader, Peter, his best friend, and a third so quiet and unknown to me his name eludes me now – jumped at the sound, turned either red or white upon realizing its source, and grew somehow twitchier than before (a high bar of twitchiness, believe me). For my part, I was rapidly losing hope of writing the robbery into a half-decent story. I had vague plans of constructing a 'profile of an actual band of dustbowl bandits live from the scene,' a weak pivot off the infamy of Bonnie and Clyde, and had asked to accompany this band during their robberies in exchange for good press. This was, looking back, a bad idea (in time you'll find I'm full of those), especially given they had never robbed a bank before. And it was a decision I probably could not have morally justified if asked to. Fortunately for my reputation, Peter decided to sever our semi-professional relationship at the second round of knocks. He had his left elbow around my neck and the barrel of his 1911 pressed into my right temple even before Henry had finished growl-shouting "Open it!" to the bank manager.

I don't know if Peter meant to use me as a hostage or as a shield. I don't know if he had a proper plan at all. I wasn't fit to think myself, as I was contradictorily experiencing the soothing onset of warm unconsciousness and the enlivening pressure of panic emanating from the cold steel held against my skin. My heart was racing like a man running from a train in a tunnel, and my brain got so confused that it plain gave up and just loosed my mind's grip on reality a little. As such I watched with mere vague interest as the vault door swung inward and a figure stepped into the gap from the other side. He blinked against the sun a few times, lowered his arm after a

moment, and looked about the scene with snappy eye movements. Eventually he settled his eyes on mine and twisted the corners of his mouth up just a little before speaking: “I guess it’s a bad time to ask where I am.”

It was a bad time. Peter made that clear: “*Move and she’s dead!*” he whispered violently. I suppose he didn’t want to draw outside attention to the bank, though the town was sparsely populated enough I hadn’t been worried about that possibility prior.

Henry took a longer pause consider Eb before speaking: “You heard my partner, right?” Eb nodded. “Good,” Henry said, “and we aren’t joking, so don’t waste my time. Who are you, and how did you get in that vault?”

Eb sat in silence for quite a while. I don’t know how long – my asymptotic descent into unconsciousness stripped timefulness from the moments. I noticed his cheeks protruding in a passing wave as he ran his tongue over his teeth. He one eye narrowed, and search Henry’s face with both. After a few long seconds, he looked to me, raised his eyebrows, and asked, “You alright?”

“Not particularly,” I said, after a few second’s thought; the ever-encroaching darkness made the question difficult to grasp at first. I glanced over, idley, and noticed Henry’s eyes wider than I had ever seen before.

Eb nodded. “I figured,” he said. “You know these guys?”

“A little,” I said. *How did he figure that out?* an internal voice asked.

“Do you think they’ll shoot us?” Eb asked. Henry’s jaw was properly hanging, by this point, though Peter’s gun still jittered against my skull.

“They could. I wouldn’t put it past them. Apologies don’t generally fly down here. Shoot first, all that.”

“Here?” Eb asked.

“Texas,” I said. I figured he wouldn’t be asking twice if he knew the answer already, which probably meant he actually didn’t know how he found himself in the vault. *Why would he?* I mused, *It’s not like he was in there on purpose, with no way out.*

Henry was done figuring by this point, and stalked over to Eb, grabbed him by his collar, and stuck the barrel of his revolver under Eb’s jaw. Henry’s face was possessed both of hypertension and a strong red hue. “You fucker,” he said, “last chance. Tell me who you are, and what business you had being in that fucking vault.” A little spittle landed on Eb’s face.

Eb looked Henry dead in the eye, a real feat given how close Henry was and how much height he had on Eb, and said, “No.”

Henry’s facial hue mellowed a little; he tried a few different expressions on in a row, though none stuck. “Why?” he asked at length.

Under normal circumstances, I would have been just as nonplussed as Henry, but in my emotionally detached state Eb’s response seemed quite natural. I decided to defend him: “Because you will shoot him either way,” I said. Eb side-eyed me and smiled slightly. “Just grab the money while you can, Henry,” I paused for breath, “then kill us, or don’t. I’m tired of you wasting time.” The third robber, the quiet one, apparently agreed with me. He grabbed his rucksack and scuttled into the vault. I heard papers shuffling and drawers opening.

Henry looked over at me, eyes meeting mine for a moment, then nodded. “Watch them,” he said to Peter, then removed his revolver from Eb’s chin and strode into the vault. Peter was stricken by his newfound responsibility and the gun against my skull shook even more. His grip on my throat tightened too. *I hope he doesn’t have his finger on the trigger*, I thought, though that consideration wasn’t inspiring much fear in me. I guess I didn’t have much left to spare.

Eb, for his part, was taking notice of the danger I faced. I could tell he was looking over my shoulder at Peter. Eventually he said, “Can I suggest something?” There was a pause, followed by a vibration I assumed was a nod. “Why don’t you send her over by me by the door here?”

“Why?” Peter spat; spittle landed on my ear.

Eb smiled. “Well, the gun won’t even fire like that, fore one, and you’ll have an easier time watching all of us if you aren’t so busy choking her out, ” he said.

There was a long pause, and then the arm around my neck relaxed off it and the gun moved from the side of my head to my back. I didn’t wait for the command. I walked to the other side, doing my best to manage a straight line in spite of the shakiness my freshly oxygenated brain produced. I stood by Eb and turned back to Peter, who was busy pointing his gun at the bank manager and teller behind the counter. My head was clearing, but I was still shaking, which probably meant my body was feeling fear I wasn’t. “Breathe slow,” Eb whispered, and I did. My pulse slowed, my ability to hear returned as the pounding in my ears quieted, and I caught the first gravel sounds of a car moving down the road outside the bank. Then it stopped. Then doors slammed. And footsteps started up the front stairs of the bank.

Peter panicked immediately and fired a shot through the roof. “STOP!” he roared. “STAY RIGHT OUT THERE!” I say roared, but the ringing in my ears meant that I was guessing the volume merely from the movement of his lips. *1911's are LOUD*, I thought.

“TEXAS RANGER!” one voice yelled over my receding tinnitus.

Another followed up: “AND THE SHERIFF! YOU BOYS BEST COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP!”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Henry and the third robber quiet-sprint out of the vault, faces white. The third robber made for the back door we had scoped out ahead of time, which led right out to the gang’s car. (The poor design of the bank had predicated the robbery in the first place.) Henry tapped on Peter’s shoulder, then paused, looked back at me, and jerked a thumb towards the back, eyebrows raised. I didn’t move. Eb whispered, “Go with them. I can buy you time. Just ditch them after.”

Now, at this moment, I made the decision that resulted in everything after. It was a bad decision, by all rights. Most reasonable people would have opted for the opportunity for a clean escape. I had taken some measures to disguise myself: heavy makeup, which was not usual for me; a carefully bound cloth wrapped over all the hair on my head; and clothing a far cry from my normal fare – a dress. What with the employees’ likely focus on the armed assailants and my spartan use of language, I was unlikely to be pinned for the crime if I just vamoosed and hunkered low for a bit. However, this stranger I stood beside, who had taken care to ensure my safety and assuage my fear, would likely be shot, or, failing that, certainly arrested and then executed. (Bank robbers weren’t popular then, especially with Rangers.) It seemed to me that he wasn’t due any punishment. He was certainly not in the situation through any fault of his own –

*how could he have ever been locked in the vault on purpose?* – and he had already risked a great deal to calm the situation and keep me and the others safe. It seemed only right to return the favor.

And so fool that I was (and am) I shook my head at Henry. He shrugged and mouthed “Your funeral.” I shrugged, then pointed at the bank manager, still cowering behind the counter, and mimed smacking a fist into my palm with my eyebrows raised. Henry nodded. Peter narrowed his eyes, but rattled another shot through the roof to drown the managers sudden protests. Henry’s solid pistol whips to the employee’s heads, served with an apologetic smile, left them properly unconscious. Then he and Peter sprinted out the backdoor without another word. Eb raised his eyebrows at me but didn’t have time to speak before the lawmen surged through the door, guns pointing in a remarkable number of directions given they only stemmed from two men.

It was the town sheriff, a portly fellow I was not familiar with, and a Texas Ranger I was, much to my consternation, familiar with. I would have recognized his sallow, creaky body anywhere; it was just unfortunate that seeing him here was such a danger. I set my mind to work at finding a solution to the problems at hand, since I had committed myself to them.

Eb opened the negotiations, cautiously: “We’re unarmed, officers.” He took my right hand and raised it with his left. I took the pointer and lifted my other.

The sheriff kept his gun pointed at the pair of us stolidly, and barely bothered to look about. The ranger spared a glance for us, a long one for me especially, then set about searching the establishment. He tested the bodies for pulses and then entered the vault, all within seconds of entering the lobby. *I hope this man didn’t leave anything behind in there*, I thought. A second

thought intruded as well: *I hope he's on the up-and-up*. I tamped it down and stayed focused on the officers, analyzing everything I could in my still-addled state.

“Well, who was shooting then?” the sheriff asked.

“The bank robbers,” Eb said in as earnest a voice as I had ever heard.

“Which you aren't?” the sheriff asked, eyes narrowing. He was pacing closer, circling around our right towards the vault door.

Eb paused before speaking. He had made a series of verbal missteps, I reckoned, and I was unsure as to how to remedy the situation. *Staying was such a good decision, Valentina*, my brain taunted. I ignored it, and set to work confusing the law.

“They left through the back,” I said. “Hurried right out. Stalled you with the gunfire and booked it.”

The sheriff paused in his tracks. I had the very distinct impression of furious labor by a cacophany of dimwit monkeys behind his eyes, all endeavoring to piece together the situation with nothing but diagrams drawn in the dirt via sticks. So far, it didn't seem those monkeys were having much success. The Ranger strode out of the vault, then looked at the door behind the counter, at us, then at the sheriff. “They aren't the robbers,” the Ranger said, “or at least not all of them.” His voice both wafted and gurgled; it layered two registers on top of each other. I didn't like it the first time I met him, and I still didn't now. The sheriff looked at him confused, lowering his gun reflexively. The ranger looked at the motion with evident distaste, then spoke again: “The bank's short an awful lot. Too much for them to be hiding on their person, at least.”



I didn't speak in response, and when I heard Eb inhale to start speaking I squeezed his hand. The Ranger looked at me, probing for any glimmer of guilt. My casual disconnect from my emotions served me well. I was aware of fear, and shame, and all sorts of other nastiness boiling away inside, but I still felt no real attachment to the body that hosted them. I kept my face implacable.

The sheriff glanced at the unconscious bodies behind the counter – I prayed they wouldn't stir – then said, “Why isn't this pair like that? If they aren't the robbers.”

“I said they weren't *all* of the robbers,” the ranger said. Eb's breath caught, nearly silently, then released slowly in the manner of a man trying to stay calm. “I rather suspect that they're meant to be a distraction while the money-grabbers get away. They're doing quite well at that, either way.”

“Then we let them go, and they meet the thieves later to get their split of the cash,” the sheriff said, turning his head back towards us with a jack-o-lantern smile. *Took you long enough*, I thought. *I could have talked us out of this in seconds if it was just you.*

“She could sure use it,” the ranger said, looking down at the ground with what I can only describe as a self-superior smile. That smile, and its context, meant the Ranger did, in point of fact, remember who I was. Who I was, to him, was a victim of a recent crime that had left me near-penniless, orphaned of all family, and bereft of ties to the local community. After a pause, he half-looked at me, one eyebrow raised, and asked, “Couldn't you?” I think he figured he had me caught in rebellious crime, lashing out at society after life kneecapped me. And I did not appreciate that estimation of my character; my character was all I had left. For the first time since

my mind had set my body on autopilot, I felt something properly: I was boiling mad. *And that*, my brain whispered, *is your way out*.

“I suppose I could, since neither state nor country has bothered responding to my petitions for restitution,” I said, snapping p’s and t’s out like backfires from a shoddily maintained engine. “What with the embers left to me, I can barely afford food, for me or my horse. Not that you’d much care about that. You all are awfully busy doing absolutely anything but tracking down the perpetrators, after all.” I imagine my face was red. It was hot enough at least. The sheriff looked back and forth between me and the Ranger, eyebrows raised. For the Ranger’s part, his smile had slipped to a hard line accompanied by a dead-eyed stare after my first words. I was in no mood to stop. “How is that going, actually? Still failing to follow a single lead?” My voice lilted up in pitch. The disrespect broke the man’s cool.

“Girl,” he said, “you’d do well to watch your tone. I’m sizing you and your friend up as accomplices to bank robbery. You’re looking pretty good for it right now.” He looked at Eb and sniffed. “By the way, pretty boy, you must’ve moved in on the orphan right quick. Can’t get action any other way?”

I dropped Eb’s hand and drilled a few steps towards the Ranger. The sheriff backstepped, pailing. “’Moved in on the orphan?’” I mimicked, voice quivering. “Did it never cross one of the two synapses in your entire condescending mind that *I* might’ve ‘moved in’ on him? After all,” I said with a cracking voice, and stalked directly in front of the Ranger, “us Irish folk are famous for our big families, and it should not have escaped *your* notice, of anyone’s, that if I want one of those now, I will have to get out of bed pretty fucking early in the morning.” The ‘f’ on the word might as well have been a ‘p.’ Spittle flew. It was, at that point, unlike me to swear. I would have registered surprise if I had had the bandwidth for self-reflection. I paused and leaned close to the

Ranger, my face scalding hot. The man, even late-middle-aged as he was, leaned back and paled in sudden fear. I dropped my voice a register and dropped its volume more when I spoke again: “Now let me make this perfectly crystal clear, just so we’re on honest terms and so what passes for the law around here doesn’t come knocking on my burnt-down door later. I came into town on my horse, practically the only thing I own, to drain my family’s, sorry, that’s *my* meager savings even further to buy just enough sustenance to make it another week. This man was here to access his accounts - probably for similar reasons, though I hope not exactly similar - and we both got caught up in a nasty robbery. Once the vault was open the bandits knocked out the manager and clerk and started cleaning the place out, holding me and this stranger at gunpoint. They were considering dropping us dead till you pulled up and scared them off. In other words, we weren’t party to this, and your accusations and attacks on my character are as unjustified now as they were months ago.”

I paused and leaned back out of the man’s personal space. He did not resume his authoritative posture, and his face remained a few shades whiter than normal. “Now, seeing as this bank no longer has any paper money for me pull out of my account, I guess I’m going to ride back home and see if I can stretch a can of beans for a day or two more. And you know what,” I said, and looked back at Eb, whose face was perfectly disciplined, aside from the smile at the corners of his eyes, “I think I just might ask the pretty boy to come with me. I don’t have much of a reputation to ruin, seems like, since not a single person in the tri-county area has been willing to hire the desperate and remarkably smart orphan girl to do even minimum wage work, so I might as well treat my loneliness and have some fun while I’m at it.” I looked Eb up and down: “How about it, ‘pretty boy?’” I asked, lilting the phrase.

Eb smiled broadly and said, “After all the action, I’d love nothing more than to give you a bad reputation and a good time.”

“Well, I guess that settles my business here. Come on,” I said, then turned from the stranger, the sheriff, and the Ranger, and strode right out the front door towards horse and frantic flight. I didn’t bother to glance back. I could smell the shame wafting off the lawmen, even after me and Eb had galloped blocks away on clattering hooves.

We made it to my property at a good clip. The air was choppy with wind (it was cold by Texas standards, somewhere around the beginning of November, though the exact date eludes me) so we didn’t speak en route. I didn’t have much to say, anyways. I would have been planning my next move if my mind was clear– the bank manager’s testimony would put the lie to my story, righteous anger or no – but it was so fried from the full-throttle processing that I simply let it be.

We arrived at my property as the cold properly set in. It was dark, nearly nighttime, and once I slowed my horse and Eb struggled off it, I pointed him towards the log pile and said, “Start a fire, if you would. It’ll get cold. Well, colder. I’ll see about food.” He nodded, and I hopped off my horse and herded it into the barn. I fed Dandy – the horse – as best I could with my remaining feed, and made sure to fill his trough with water from the well. I grabbed myself a bucket and heaved it around to the other side of the barn and to my ramshackle storage-room-on-the-side-of-the-barn-turned-house. Eb was tending a moderate fire out front. I hauled the bucket into the shed and poured it in the bowl I was using as a sink. I washed my face thoroughly. Where the makeup proved resistant to water, I turned to my bottle of grain alcohol bought for the purpose. I doffed my hair covering and swapped from dress to slacks and a long shirt, both donated after the murders by nearby neighbors without any daughters. I didn’t mind so much –

the clothes did billow off me to an inconvenient degree, but were more in line with my typical practical disposition than dresses and white gloves.

Once adequately defeminized, I looked for food. There was none. I regretfully swallowed my hunger and strode outside. Eb was crouched by the fire, which was mostly self-sustaining and quite hot at this point, *praise be*. I watched him for a minute. I felt the confused nature of our interactions so far quite keenly. He didn't look at me, but he wasn't exactly looking at what he was looking at either. I was sure he was trying to figure me out before speaking, just as I was trying to understand him. I circled the fire and sat across it from Eb, but not directly; I ensured he was in clear view. I folded my legs under myself; he stayed on his haunches. "No food, sorry. I *am* short on money."

He looked at me with a half smile and shrugged "I'll live," he said.

"And about the whole 'pretty boy' thing, I—"

"I know acting when I see it, believe me. I appreciate the get-out-jail-free card well enough on its own," he said. "By the way, that *was* one hell of a speech." He paused for a moment, and though his furrowed brow indicated he wanted to say something more, he didn't, and instead looked back into the fire in silence.

I considered him, then. It was the first time I had to actually study him, in a visual sense. There had been much more pressing matters, so far. Now there weren't, so I took the time to take an inventory. (Mind you, this initial remembrance may well be corrupted by all the subsequent time I spent with the man, years by some measures. I apologize, but there's no getting around it. I'll do my best.)

In my estimation, he looked a little Mediterranean. I was no authority – I’ve never paid too much attention to geographicality – but he was darker than you would expect from a northerly European man, enough that his appearance would probably be unusual above France (though I guess not impossible). I pegged him as Greek, at the time. He stood about five-eleven (my height – I had noticed the comparison earlier) with a lean frame, and bore an excess of curly deep-brown hair, worn at neck length.

As for features, he was not unpleasant to look at – handsome, actually, though I wouldn’t have admitted it then – but he was oddly... illegible. I don’t mean to imply he wasn’t distinctive looking, as he was quite the opposite, but he was distinctive in a way that didn’t tell you all that much about where he was from. He could fit most anywhere. He had a solid brow, not noticeably heavy, a defined, but not sharp, jawline, ears that protruded, but only slightly more than usual, and hazel eyes, not *too* pretty, but plenty enough to draw a gaze and manage to charm, given the right circumstances. He did have a long, aquiline nose, one that he’d probably suffered abuse over at times, and his cheekbones sat a little high above deeply sunken cheeks. His face was narrow at the bottom, populated only with thin lips around a wide mouth. The whole effect was rather like a child’s drawing of a skull, an impression exacerbated when he noticed my contemplation and flashed a quick smile my direction. His wide mouth flooded his face with white teeth, and the expression curled the corners of his eyes as much as his lips. I smiled back reflexively, though I managed to keep it more demure than sunny.

I suppose I should describe myself, too, since I’m a figure in these stories just as much as Eb. I mentioned I stood as tall as Eb at five-eleven. Where and when I grew up, that height was quite notable on a woman, and my frame matched it then and matches it still, for good or ill. I’m thin and narrow, and always land somewhere between reedy and gaunt. Then, at nineteen, I was

gaunt. I have the sort of soft, round features you'd expect of a woman of Celtic descent, only set on a face just as narrow and long as the rest of me. I have a defined, quick-rising jawline, a button nose with a long bridge, and high cheekbones that flow smoothly into pale cheeks, which are never quite as freckled as you might expect. (Even having suffered the Texas sun for years, as I had then, my skin remained porcelain white. I'm pale enough that I typically just burn.) My ears barely protude, permanently pinned back by whatever high wind stretched me longwise in the first place, I expect. My brow is not heavy, and my eyes are large, round, and lively under it. They're possessed of 'sparkly' verdant irises. The word is my mother's, not mine.

I expect my eyes would be more noted if it wasn't for my hair: It's an accursed shade of bright red, like 'flames.' (That's my father's word of choice.) It's a color noted in every time and place I have been to – believe me, that's quite a few times and places – and my hair is doubly troublesome as it is abundant and loves to curl at the slightest provocation. I keep it shoulder length, at minimum; that effort keeps it more wavey than curled. I'll grant, by the by, that my auto-description here may seem harsher than my description of Eb. I claim less culpability for this on grounds of the inevitable negative cast of self-assessment. I guess I should mention, by way of record correction, that most people describe me as reasonably attractive, though few have verged on describing me as striking.

Eb broke our shared silence first: "I guess I never introduced myself. My name's Ebenezer. What's yours?"

I thought for a second, then spoke, the sense of irony at our equally long names adding humor to my voice and a smile to my face: "Valentina. It's the longest my parents gave," I said, then paused for effect. "Frankly I wish they had saved a couple of the syllables for my siblings." I saw a flicker of a smile on Eb's face and felt satisfied that the line, long-practiced and never

used, had found its mark, if just a little. (He was, after all, the first sympathetic chance I'd had to use the joke. Texas, where I was, at least, didn't feature many long names.) Eb did not respond quickly, though. Several times, he inhaled as if to speak, only to then pause, exhale, and look away. *He's going to clam up again, isn't he?* "Ebenezer," I said, "A long name doesn't mean you need to spend a long time asking a question."

He smiled and shook his head, before saying: "Well, I'm trying to figure out the right way to ask it."

"Clearly, in English, and in short order is what I typically prefer. Especially after a day like this," I said.

"Alright then. Why did you help me instead of going with your gang today?" he asked.

I looked at him, aware that he was concerned about the directness of the question, given how slow he'd been to ask it, and decided that I was not. It was a good question, and answering might help me make sense of it. "They weren't 'my' gang," I said. "They were just a gang I was traveling with. I was intending to write a story about them. For a paper, or a magazine. A series on real life bank robbers. I wasn't planning on taking any of the money."

"Hm," Eb said. He didn't speak further. I felt forced to continue.

"Today was their first. It went worse than I thought it would. Granted, that was mainly down to you, but they did put a gun to my head. Seemed best to get out of Dodge," I said. I looked into the fire. I couldn't see much of Eb out of the corner of my eye, but I did see him cock his head after a few moments.

"You still could've left with them, right? Seemed like they were offering," he said.



I didn't think he was asking the question he was asking, but I answered it anyways: "I suppose, but, again, gun to my head. I don't trust it would have gone well if I left with them." Eb tutted, rather than spoke. I looked at him and saw that he was now looking into the fire himself. He wasn't happy with my answers, I could tell, or was at least uncertain of them. On balance, I felt the same. "And I thought you'd make a better story," I allowed. "You walked out of a sealed bank vault today, and I'm not convinced you know how you got in it. I guess I was hoping to write about you instead."

Eb turned to me and stared me straight in the eye for a good while. "I'm honored," he said, "but I don't buy it."

"Oh?" I asked, eyebrows raised and confusion genuine.

"Not fully," he said, thoughtfulness turning the words breathy and quiet. He looked as if he was fixing to stall for time again, then shrugged, shook his head, and started in: "You asked me to be frank, so I will. You *should* have left with them. I understand not trusting them, but this way you're certain to get made. Your outfit was enough to mess up a description, but since you talked to the cops, they'll know who the bank manager means when he mentions the 'girl with the robbers.'"

"I wasn't exactly expecting a man I personally knew to show up," I said, leaning on my right hand.

"It wouldn't have mattered which cop saw you at all, and," Eb said, leaning towards me, "the odds *were* good they would know you." His eyes were narrowed, and searching at pace. I made no special effort to hide the contents of my mind. I wanted him to understand my motivations, as it clearly mattered to him. "It sounded like you've met enough Rangers to be

seriously risking recognition.” He paused, as if for me to speak. I chose to wait. “I think you’re clever enough to have known that. In fact, I *know* you are. So why did you stay?”

I followed my own advice and answered the best I could in short order: “Well, I did want to write your story, and you were dead if I didn’t help. You seemed innocent of ill intent, and I didn’t want to see you hang. So, to save you, I guess,”

“You probably ruined your life for that,” he said, quietly.

I screwed up my mouth in thought as is my habit, taking time to consider both his point and my response. “I suppose I did,” I said. “That doesn’t mean it wasn’t the right thing to do.”

Eb looked at me for a long moment, then nodded. “Thank you, Valentina.”

“Anytime, Ebenezer,” I said. After a long moment, I looked towards the fire and he let me be, standing and walking away. *He’s right*, my mind said. *You are quite screwed. You’ve made quite the mess of your life.* That truth was evident; the question was not whether the Rangers would come, but when, unless the bank employees proved unusually amnesiac. *Of course*, I thought, *my life is already a mess. I suppose it’s time to figure out what to do with it.*

Minutes of careful consideration – or at least, the best thinking I could manage after a day as long and exhausting as mine had been – turned up very few rational options. It was either flee, or risk prison. Normally, fleeing the law would be a worse decision than confronting it, especially for a woman as young and as recently traumatized as I. The option of pleading bad choices as a result of grief was open to me, even six months later; the murder of one’s entire family tends to carry weight. But I felt that that was a dangerous game to play, after months of burning bridges with the community and law enforcement, *and*, I thought, *I want out*. So the choice was simple, and I made my second, all-guts-no-brain commitment of the day, doubling

down on the apparent mistakes of my earlier decision. When Eb returned to the fire, maybe ten minutes after leaving, I looked at him with my most charming smile and said, “Hey, Ebenezer? I have a question for you.”

“Oh?” he said, looking at me, clearly dragging himself out of long minutes spent in his own mind.

“I was wondering if perhaps you would be willing to allow me accompany you wherever you’re headed next. Since we’re both now in flight from the law, and given that I still think you’d make an interesting case for a story, it seems the best path for me to take into the future.”

I was prepared to call in the obvious debt he owed me as an argument for getting my way, but Eb just smiled broadly and said, “I’d love to have you along.” He circled the fire towards me and I stood to meet him. He said, “To the degree I can control it, you are welcome to come with me for as long and as far as you want,” and then extended his left hand. I took it and shook it.

“Good,” I said. “I do think, however, that we should consider a quick adjustment of names. It’ll do us well to disguise our identities a little.”

Eb nodded and said, “What are you thinking? John and Jane Doe?” The turn at the corner of his mouth belied the earnestness of his question, raised eyebrows or no.

“Certainly not,” I said, playing along with some feigned offense. “Neither of us deserves a normal name, not after today. Besides, our current monikers do us no real shame.”

Eb looked at me for a moment, then rolled his eyes in realization. “Oh, don’t start. I’ve been trying to shorten my name forever. It just doesn’t stick.”

“Eb,” I said. Declared, even. “Your name should be ‘Eb.’”

He looked at me for a few seconds; I felt I could see the word rolling around in his head. “Single syllable names are too weighty,” Eb said, eventually. “I’m not a strong enough character to merit it.”

“I disagree. After today, and with what may well come, I rather think you’re up to it,” I said, “And to ameliorate your fears on that front, I’m willing to be ‘Val.’ I’ll suffer greatness with you,” I said, and winked.

Eb looked at me, considered, and then said, “Alright then. Eb and Val.”

“Good,” I said. “We’ll be putting Bonnie and Clyde to shame in no time. Though I would suggest, based on our performance today, that we should pick a different crime to inscribe our names beside.”

Eb snorted, then said, “Trouble will come, I expect. It always seems to.”

Just then a cold gust tore through both us and the dying fire, killing my thoughts and the residual heat. “Well, we should go inside,” I said, “Unless you like freezing.”

“Not at all,” Eb said. I led the way into my makeshift house post haste and loaded the wood stove with the driest logs I had. Eb washed his face of the days dirt in the now near-frozen water. In short order, thanks to some gasoline, the fire was burning hot. It proved inadequate to fully counter the gales wriggling through the cracks in the walls, but it was enough heat to live through the night. I buried myself under blankets on the undersized bed (a child’s bed - a kindlier neighbor had donated it soon after the incident) and Eb did the same on the floor.

In time, though, I realized I couldn’t sleep, not as it was. The day had worn me out so much my body had settled in for sleeplessness and was busily pouring every drop of spare

energy it could find into my bloodstream. The hunger kicked in pretty soon after I laid down, too. I hadn't eaten for a day and a half. My stomach felt it. The gnawing pain, the wind-become-howls via odd pathways through the wood, and my pounding pulse left me restive. *I wonder*, I thought, *does Eb actually believe my motivations? What's stopping him taking off if he doesn't?* I was tired, so I let my anxieties sort through the day's events on my behalf, listening for any reasonable points. And one hit me in short order: *Eb doesn't know I'm alone. An orphan, sure, and he's probably guessing that's recent, but he doesn't know. Not all of it. No one's told him.* After a moment's thought I chose the simplest solution to alleviate most of my fears, which entailed doing something I wanted to do before I skipped town anyways. Something I hadn't had the will to do properly since the murders. *Odd how you feel up to it now, isn't it?*

"Eb," I said, "You awake?"

"Unfortunately," he said.

"Figured," I said, and got up. I rummaged through my hovel, found my electric torch, and then asked Eb, in the darkness, "Do you want to see it?" I paused, *how very coherent Valentina*, then tried to clarify: "The house, I mean. Where they died. I want to look one more time before I leave."

"Your parents, you mean?" he asked. Exhaustion made his voice deeper and scratchier than it had been so far.

"Everyone, I mean," I said, then paused and tried to formulate the most coherent sentence I could. "I figure you got questions about why I'm so quick to come with you, still. My whole family's dead. They were murdered six months back. That's why I know the Rangers. That's what he was talking about."

There was silence for a moment, and then Eb switched on the light in my hands. He had sat up without me noticing. He looked at me for a long moment, clearly trying to dig around in my eyes for a glimpse of my soul, or at least an idea of what I was thinking. “Yes,” he said at length, “I would.”

I nodded, stood, and started looking for a outer layer of clothes. The wind slipping through the cracks felt like forty degrees Fahrenheit, at best; I wasn’t thrilled at the prospect of walking through it. I quick glance told me Eb was underdressed, too, so I tossed him a few items too large for me, put on my own too-broad coat, laced up my boots, and led the way out the door with the lamp.

The house wasn’t that far, but it could sneak up on you in the dark, what with it being so low-lying now. It was a far cry from its former glory. I walked up to the oak front door, charred, but, unlike the rest of the house, otherwise unharmed. It stood alone, propped up by the low (about knee-height) stone base of the house. I felt Eb beside me and started narrating for his benefit. “It was three stories. Little bit of basement, too,” I said. “They repainted pretty often. The last go around Pa tracked down a nice green. Forest green, I think.” Eb nodded, but stayed quiet. I opened the door, well aware of the futility of the act, and stepped inside. Eb followed and quietly closed the door behind me. “This was the parlor. The stairs were right in front of us. Narrow hallway went past them there. The room on the right was the dining room. It opened right into the kitchen, back there,” I said, pointing towards the back right of the house. “High ceilings. Archwork around all the doorframes. Pa’s father was a carpenter, and he hobbied it. It was a big kitchen, and a big dining room.” I walked through where I knew the door to the latter room to be, carefully stepping from scorched floorboard to scorched floorboard, testing each for strength. The linoleum flooring in the dining room and kitchen was still mostly whole, somehow.

“There were two tables in here. We used benches from a train. They said they stole them off one of the trains we rode here from Georgia, but I think the company just sold them to us for a song because they were so old. There were a lot of names carved in them, all over. By the time I was old enough, half of those were worn illegible.”

I glanced at Eb. He was looking where the tables would've been, had they not burned so furiously. “Lots of hearts carved into those benches?” he asked.

“Quite a few,” I said, and smiled. “My Pa and Ma did one. On the underside. Only place they could find a blank space.”

“You in any of them?” he asked, one eyebrow raised and one corner of his mouth upturned. His eyes still looked serious, though. I figured he was probably analyzing me, trying to get a reaction to understand me better. *Good*, I thought, *that's the idea*.

I shook my head in response to his question. “Too spirited, I think. Too smart is what my Ma said, but I don't think that bothers people as much as my...” I searched for the words, right hand beckoning in the air as if to summon the correct turn of phrase.

Eb snorted. “Ability to shout down a Texas Ranger after a bank robbery?” he supplied.

“Something like that,” I said, smiling. After a pause, I led the way back to the once-hallway and continued the tour: “That on the left was the library. It was supposed to be the living room, but my Pa redid it as I was nearing school age. I ‘asked too many good questions to be raised to be a slackjawed housewife,’ he said. By then I'd worn him down, I suppose. When I was younger, back in Georgia, he didn't like all the questions.” I paused to consider. “Or his parents didn't, and he yelled at me on their behalf. He was less prickly once we moved out here, and he started bothering my mom to teach me pretty soon after.”

“Your mother taught you a lot, I take it?” Eb asked. I looked at him sidelong, eyebrows raised. “Well, you’re pretty damn clever. Someone had to teach you, right?”

I smiled in spite of myself. “Yeah, she did. Not that she wanted to, at first. She didn’t want me growing up like her, I think, though she’d never say... never said as much. Then one weekend she went to see a friend a ways off with me in tow, and we came back to a library. Floor to ceiling bookshelves, hand-carved and ‘built for strength.’ Some delivery workers were halfway through unloading what was apparently a third cart of secondhand books, with another set to come later. She couldn’t stop laughing. She was already teaching me to read, so she sped that up, and kept on teaching me in everything as far as she could. And she found me the books I needed to keep teaching myself when she couldn’t. Did the same for my siblings, though they didn’t take to it as much.”

“Educated lady?” Eb asked, carefully pacing around the rim of the once-library. He picked up a scrap of paper, which looked to be the second page of *Frankenstein*, in my estimation. It had been well-read, particularly by me on stormy nights to my siblings.

“Her father was a history professor at Trinity. He didn’t mind educated women, and taught her well,” I said. “Trouble was, she wasn’t popular for it in Ireland. She left once he died.” Eb looked at me, eyes narrowed, then shook his head and looked away. “What?” I asked.

“Well I just... Why did she have more luck in the States? I mean, you said you haven’t,” he said.

“How polite of you to note that,” I said, smiling sidelong. He stuttered, then caught the expression and mirrored it. “She did better out East. More education generally, more taste for women like her. And she met Pa quick, her second week in Boston. I was only barely born out



there, so I only know what they told me, but they were well-liked enough initially. Moved down to Georgia after a spot of trouble, when I was maybe one, then out here when I was six. My Pa set up as a tradesman and my brother came along soon after. Then my sister.” I paused, then snorted. “Then another brother, and then another sister. I wasn’t joking about Irish families, I guess.”

Eb smiled and shook his head. “I never doubted it.” I failed to speak for a moment, and he looked at me, searching my face. At length, he asked, “Where’d you all fit?” It seemed to me like a stop-gap question. I answered it regardless.

“Second and third floors. My parents had them framed up for six rooms and finished them as we came along. They lived back there,” I said, pointing to the back left of the house, “by the bathroom.”

Eb glanced at the far corner, cocked his head, and looked for a long moment. Then he turned back to me, and asked: “What were your siblings like?”

“Bright enough, well-liked. A lot younger than me, of course, and they only grew up out here. They were friendly, easier to get along with, I think. My sisters were less” – I gestured vaguely at myself – “and that was to their credit around here. And none of them studied like I did.” My mind surprised me with a glimpse of a few memories and I smiled in spite of myself. “They looked less Irish, too - no red hair. That helped their case. I got along with them just fine, either way. Read them the best books I read, sorted out trouble they had with the neighbor kids, helped them learn. All the usual things.” I trailed off then, and lost track of Eb’s face. I found myself looking past the burnt house in front of me, trying out more my memories. The past six

months hadn't filled in the inevitable accompanying pit of despair all that much. My breathing stuttered, and I lost my place in time for a while.

Eventually I noticed Eb in front of me, looking at me with a softer expression than I'd seen all day. Once I caught his eye, he spoke: "We can head back, if you want." He seemed to think he knew what he needed to know, but I shook my head.

"I have to show you where they died," I said. "I have to see it myself, at least, before I leave." Eb nodded, and I led the way to the backyard via the kitchen. The thin kitchen door hadn't fared so well as the front door did in the blaze – I imagine years of grease coated on by the nearby stove didn't help matters – so we simply stepped through the gap in the stone ring and down the steps to the backyard.

The moon had grown bright enough to see by, and see we did. Six posts in a line, charred black, weak in places, all with ragged troughs where hot razor wire bindings wore down the wood while bodies writhed. I looked at them and found myself a little distant from myself for the second time that day, though here 'a little' hardly does it justice. I walked towards the posts, and described the events as a reporter on the scene, numbing myself to the memory of the experience using the facts:

"They were killed here. Burned on these stakes. No witnesses. I was out at a friend's for dinner and no neighbors were close enough to catch anything. They were tortured; the coroner told me that, though he wouldn't tell me how. By the time I got back... When I saw smoke I pushed my horse hard, but it was just incoherent screaming when I got here. Nobody else around, either. They didn't even stay to watch." I paused, swallowed, steadied my voice. "The two youngest were dead already. I don't think any of them saw me. All my siblings were missing

eyes before I got there, and as for my parents I... I imagine the fire took their senses. I couldn't help them. The house was half-cinder and the only other water is that well out by the barn. No way to... to put them out." I paused, struggling to keep the shake I felt in my body from touching my voice. I tutted, as if to make the pause meaningful. It didn't convince me. "It was chemical, gasoline, I think, so water wouldn't have done it anyways."

I paced towards the closest post, the one that had held my immediate younger brother. I rested on my haunches, set down the lamp, and looked up at it. "I stayed with them, until they were dead. It was all I could do. I got the law after. Wasn't anything to be done. No evidence."

Eb put a hand on my shoulder and lowered himself to sit beside me. He asked, haggard voice low, but warm, "Do you know why?" That was the inevitable question. *It's why you brought him here, to help him understand. It's not an accusation, he doesn't mean ill by it. You'd ask it, in his shoes.*

"I don't.... I *think* it was to do with the trouble in Boston that sent us to Georgia. And I think there was trouble in Georgia, too, that sent us here, though Ma always said they just wanted me to grow up somewhere newer. They never talked much about it, but ... Well, a young Irish man on the East Coast? He could've tangled with the Mob, right?" I paused. "Who else would even do this?"

After a moment Eb asked, "Well, why now?"

"I don't know," I said. It wasn't entirely true, though what I knew was a suspicion at best. "And if you're fixing to ask me why they didn't get me, too, you can skip it." My voice raised on its own, my anger at the Rangers and the townsfolk and all the questions bubbling up again. "It was chance, that's all. I wasn't home. And I guess my family didn't tell." A morbid smile curled

the corners of my mouth, but not my eyes. “It would have been hard to say anything while on fire, anyways.”

“I wasn’t going to ask you that,” he said. I looked at him. “It’s a stupid question,” he said. He didn’t elaborate, but the sentiment mollified me and helped me numb down the pain again. We sat in silence for a while, maybe a few minutes, then I stood, picked up the lamp, and headed back towards the barn. Eb followed.

When we reached the door, I stopped to sooth my fears one more time. “Do you understand a bit better, now? I didn’t want you mistrusting me, thinking me too quick to ride off into the sunset with you.”

“Yeah, I do. Thank you for showing me,” he said, tone serious, face kind, and eyes meeting mine.

“I guess this puts the lie to my purported altruism, then,” I said, sardonic lilt creeping into my voice.

He shook his head. “No. You still ruined your life for me. And actually, this means you’re rational, which means what you did, you did in good faith while sane.”

I laughed out loud. “Good faith, maybe, but don’t you ever accuse me of sanity again, Ebenezer. I am sanity adjacent, no more and no less.”

He chuckled, then said, “Noted.”

I led the way into the shack and threw a couple logs onto the fire to keep it hot. “Speaking of sanity and rationality,” I said, turning back to look at him while he removed the

coat I lent him, “Why don’t you do the rational thing this time and sleep up here with me so we can share some warmth?”

“No,” said Eb, shaking his head, “I can’t. It’d be in bad taste. I just met you.”

I shrugged. “Either you misunderstand my point, or you give my honor and reputation too much credit. I promise you, you can hardly sully those further.”

“I understand you perfectly well, Val. I just don’t think it’s right to sleep alongside a woman I just met,” he said.

“Alright then, suit yourself. It’s foolish to be freezing cold for nothing, though. It’s impractical, and it’s not like anyone is going to find out about the ‘impropriety,’ anyways.”

But, after I turned off the lamp, de-winterized, and crawled under my stack of blankets once more, tired and calm enough to sleep, time proved us both fools. Eb gave up and crawled up next to me within minutes, dragging his blankets with him; the shared warmth did indeed help us sleep. And, when we woke once more to the cold, someone did get to know about our impropriety. Many someones.