

Damned Pretty Things

Damned Pretty Things

by

Holly Wade Matter



Aqueduct Press
PO Box 95787
Seattle, Washington 98145-2787
www.aqueductpress.com

This book is fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2020 Holly Wade Matter

All rights reserved

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020943635

ISBN: 978-1-61976-185-8

First Edition, First Printing, November 2020

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover Illustration Courtesy Delaney Alonso

Quote from Knut Hamsun's *Pan*, translated by
W. W. Worster (p. 226).

Printed in the USA by McNaughton & Gunn

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank the National Endowment for the Arts and the Seattle Office of Arts and Culture for their generous support during earlier incarnations of this book.

I'd also like to thank Nora Lee, Jean Anne Matter, Jim Comer, Elizabeth Finan, L. Timmel Duchamp, Kath Wilham, Dylan Eakin, and Nisi Shawl for encouragement, advice, critiques, editing, and inspiration.

Above all, I'd like to thank to Brad Matter for all his love and support.

In loving memory of Farley and Jane Wade

“F” is for Fortune in Fingerless Gloves

There were times when I would step into the Bel Air, the only interior space I can say belongs to me, and a soft scent would brush past my nose, subtle and teasing because I didn't know whose it was. The scent was old-fashioned. It could have been that of pale violet, powdery sachet wafers that ladies used to slip into their underwear drawers, or it could have been something else. Sometimes I stopped and asked aloud, “Whose is this?” Was it mine from an unremembered past when there were grandmothers in my life, or from my far future, when my skin is soft and wrinkled, and I have (I hope) a fixed address and an underwear drawer to call my own?

When I was feeling blue, I imagined it was the perfume the Devil's girlfriend wore the night I sold my soul.

Would you like to hear that story?

(I always ask. As I've learned from hard experience, the Devil plays better in some towns than in others.)

I imagine it probably happened like this: one night, I hiked out into the silent country and waited in the crossroads with my steel-string guitar on my back and my thumb stuck out. You might think I was being overly optimistic, trying to hitch a ride at that lonely hour, but if there's one thing I know about the psychology of the spirits, it's that they like you to ask for help in ways that are both gaudy and embarrassing. At midnight, the Devil drove up in his 1956 Chevy Bel Air two-door hardtop, Matador Red and Onyx Black (and yes, I do know the factory never made one in that particular color combination). He stopped an

Holly Wade Matter

inch short from hitting me in the knee with the gleaming chrome bumper.

His girlfriend was with him. The dress she wore probably came from the shop in a heavy gold-foil box with three layers of coral tissue paper and a gold seal. Pumpkin-colored silk chiffon with a pattern of coral chrysanthemums. “Oh, baby!” I see her throwing her arms around the Devil’s neck and giving him a kiss after she opened the box. She wiggled into that dress, which was barely able to contain her curves, smoothed on her seamed silk stockings, stepped into her gold ankle-strap sandals, and sprayed on some of that perfume. They got in the Bel Air to drive into town for a big night of drinking and dancing. Except there I was, standing in the crossroads, blocking their way.

“Oh, baby, don’t be working on our night out.”

He didn’t listen. Like many a salesman, the Devil has a hard time distinguishing between the professional and the personal. He is always ready with a handshake and a pitch.

Have you met him? I didn’t think so. Well, let me tell you what he looked like that night. Tall, dark, and handsome doesn’t even begin to touch it. Heavy-lidded eyes that seemed black, except for gleaming pinpoints of garnet red. Skin so dark and flawlessly smooth that you wanted to reach up and brush your fingers against his cheekbones to make sure he was solid. Lips made for persuasions of all kinds. He was dressed in a black suit and shirt, a blood-red silk tie, a black snap-brim Fedora. He held a lit cigarillo gracefully between the knuckles of his middle and ring fingers... maybe to draw attention to the gold seal ring he wore, with a bas-relief rooster upon it.

“Well, hello there, young lady.” His voice was smooth but with a subtle bite to it that reminded me of the taste of iron in blood. “And what is a fine young lady like yourself doing out at the crossroads at this hour, with that guitar on

Damned Pretty Things

your back and that thumb sticking out? Are you attempting what I think you're attempting?"

"I don't know. I can't claim to be a mind-reader," I said, "though I do have some skill at reading palms."

"Do you, now? Well, then, have a look at mine and tell me what they say."

He secured his cigarillo between his teeth and presented his hands. I held them, palms up, in my own, where I could see them in the headlight beams. His skin was every bit as soft as I'd imagined, and hot, and buzzing with low-voltage electricity. What I read in the many lines and creases was a list of goods and services offered, complete with corresponding price... "One Soul."

"It says nothing I want to hear," I replied. I imagine I had a smart mouth in those days.

The girlfriend sighed and shifted her weight from one hip to the other. With an impatient flick of her wrist, she snapped open a gold fan and commenced to cool her cleavage.

"Ahem..."

"Just hold it, Sweet Honey," the Devil told her. And to me, he said, "What were you looking to find?"

"A certain ability with the guitar, bordering on genius," I said.

"Only bordering?"

"I'm modest."

"I can see that. A rare and precious quality in these troubled times. Guitar's easy enough. I've done that one before. Ever hear of Tommy Johnson? Of course you have."

"Robert," I said. "It was Robert Johnson."

His eyes flashed. "Look who thinks she knows everything. Maybe she already knows how to play that guitar, too. Maybe I'll be on my way."

"I always heard it was Robert Johnson."

Holly Wade Matter

“And you always heard wrong. It was Tommy, sure as I’m standing here. Wasn’t it Tommy Johnson, Sweet Honey?”

His girlfriend huffed out a sigh. “Tommy Johnson.”

“You see? Tommy.”

Just like the Devil, to give you what you want and still let you fade into obscurity. I almost told him, *Considering I’ve never even heard of Tommy Johnson, maybe you didn’t do him any favors.* But I held my tongue.

“Skill with the guitar.... Don’t know why you couldn’t find it. I know it’s on here somewhere. Guitar, guitar, guitar...ha! Here it is.”

“But,” I added, “with that Bel Air of yours thrown into the bargain.”

That brought him up short. “You want my car.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I hiked all the way out here, and I’m pretty tired, and I don’t feel like hiking all the way back.”

“You couldn’t just ask for a lift, could you?”

I shook my head. I imagine I was pretty stubborn in those days, too. “Besides,” I said, “it’s damned pretty, and I happen to like damned pretty things.”

He thought a little bit, and then, as if he had somehow missed the last few seconds of our conversation, he said, “So you want my car.”

“Yes.”

“And a certain ability with the guitar, bordering on genius.”

“Yes.”

“Both.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Tell me something,” he said. “What do you have written in the lines and the creases of your own palms?”

Damned Pretty Things

“I have my history,” I said. “I have my identity. My name, and my family, who I will love, how I have lived, and how long I can expect to live.”

“Tell you what I’m going to do,” he said. “I’ll give you the things you’ve asked for, in exchange for your soul...and for the lines and creases of your palms.”

“What do you want those for?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Just want ’em.”

Well, it seemed like a strange thing to want. But it also seemed like a strange thing to want to keep—especially seeing as I was bartering my soul, which you might say ranked higher in importance.

“Mister, you’ve got yourself a deal,” I said.

“Let’s shake on it.”

First he shook my right hand, and then he shook my left, and I found the ignition key in my right hand and the trunk key in my left.

“Now hand over that guitar of yours,” he said. I put the car keys in my pocket, unslung the guitar from my back, and handed it to him. He sat down on the bumper, patted his pockets, and came out with a set of strings, ordinary-looking ones, too. I wondered about that, while I watched him restring my guitar. He spent some time tuning it afterward, leaning in close, eyes narrowed with concentration. He’d hum a note, pluck a string, twiddle the tuning peg, hum again, pluck, twiddle, until he got it right where he wanted it. He had a perfectionist streak in him; and he, like most men, could futz his womenfolk into the grave. His girlfriend and I both let out sighs of relief when he finally handed the guitar back to me.

“Now then, young lady, how’s about you give us a tune?”

When my fingertips touched the strings, they buzzed with the same low-voltage electricity as the Devil’s own hands, and I understood. It wasn’t me that had changed.

Holly Wade Matter

Maybe it would never really be me. It was the strings. They spoke to my fingers, instructing, guiding, and my fingers spoke back, translating the language of the strings so that my head and my heart and my hips could be in on the conversation, too. I couldn't tell you what I played. The song had no words, no name that I knew of; and I have never played it since. But it made me feel so glad at heart that I didn't much care that things hadn't worked out as I'd imagined they would.

When, at last, my fingers stilled, and I could trust my voice to speak, I asked the Devil, "What happens when a string breaks?"

He smiled. "You'll have to wait and see." His voice made me think of sugar and sulfur. "Now won't you?"

I didn't know what to reply.

"I bid you goodnight," he said. He snapped his fingers and there appeared, a little ways down the road, a red 1959 Cadillac convertible with a black top.

"Least you got rid of that old grandma Bel Air," the girlfriend muttered, as the Devil went to inspect his new vehicle. She took a gold compact out of her handbag and refreshed her lipstick. Then she glanced up and, for the first time, seemed to really see me. We eyed each other suspiciously.

There are women whose beauty lies in symmetry, and there are women whose beauty lies in incongruity. The Devil's girlfriend was an incongruous beauty of the first water. She'd got a girlish, almost innocent face, framed by straightened hair that had been cut into a shingle, with two spit curls like little arrows pointing to her dimples; but her body was a topography of deadly curves that filled the dress to capacity and spilled out the front. She'd got that rich, burnt umber-toned skin I, too fair for my taste, had always envied, and yet her eyes were bluer than the waters of a Caribbean lagoon.

Damned Pretty Things

“Well, aren’t you a mess,” she said.

I looked down at myself: wrinkled black skirt, sweat-stained white T-shirt, and an enormous pair of hiking boots coated with road dust. I guess she’d assessed me pretty well.

“Never mind.” She stepped nearer. “I’ll give you a little something, too, if you ask me real nice.” She nodded back toward the Devil, who was leaning back in the driver’s seat of the Caddy, enjoying his cigarillo and ignoring us completely. “He cheated you, anyway.”

She raised her left arm. A heavy gold charm bracelet, chiming with the tiny bells on it, slid to the middle of her forearm. Among the other charms, I saw a peacock, a hand mirror in the shape of a scallop shell, a turkey vulture (of all things), and a gold champagne bottle.

“Pretty, isn’t it? This one’s yours, is what I’m thinking.” She unhooked a charm and held it out to me on the palm of her hand. It was a miniature bee skep, woven out of plaits of gold wire. It was the cleverest little thing I’d ever seen. I could all but hear it buzzing with tiny gold bees. When I made to touch it, she drew her hand back.

“Ask me nice, Miss Mess.”

“You don’t really want to give that to me, do you?”

One eyebrow went up, one scrunched down, and her mouth tightened into a rosebud.

“Guess somebody else might want it,” she said to the sky.

Quickly, I said, “May I please have that charm?”

She smiled sweetly. “You most certainly may.”

Even back then, I wore my hair in micro braids. She took hold of one, unraveled it, and then plaited the charm in. “Don’t ever take it out, and don’t ever cut off that braid. May come a time when you want some help. May be nobody but Sweet Honey will be able to help you. When that time comes, you just tell the bees.”

Holly Wade Matter

“Thank you.” That didn’t feel like enough. “Thank you very much.”

She kissed her fingertips and pressed them to my forehead. “You’re most welcome.” Then she walked, sensual and swaying, to the Caddy. She turned once and pointed at me with an imperious forefinger. “About telling the bees? Make sure it’s really important, you hear? Some folks have made the mistake of wasting my time.” She smiled in a way that made me shiver. “And didn’t I make them sorry?”

“Wait!” I took a step forward, then stopped. “Don’t you want anything in return?”

“Why, yes, I do. First money you make from that guitar?”

I nodded and waited.

She looked me up and down. “You take that money and buy yourself a pretty dress.”

She got in, the engine roared, the lights flashed on, and the Devil and his girlfriend drove away.



Well, it could have happened that way.

It could have.

Anything’s possible, isn’t it? If I chose to, and I frequently do, I could change my story in each town, and each time the story would be neither more nor less true than the last. These are the core facts: that I play the steel-string guitar exceptionally well, that not one of my strings has ever broken, and that I am searching.

I am searching for my history, my identity, my name, and my family. I am searching for the one I will love. I am searching for how I have lived, and how long I can expect to live.

And I always wear fingerless gloves because my palms are smooth, without a single line or crease.

Damned Pretty Things



I could see the question in Maud's eyes. I've seen it more times than I can count (at least on my fingers and my toes): *But what really happened?*

In reply, I wanted to ask her a question of my own: *What is your definition of real?*

Instead, I picked a desultory tune on my guitar and said, "Did you ever hear a lie you knew was a lie but you wanted to pretend, just for a little while, that it wasn't? Did you ever hear a whole flock of lies, one after another, and wonder if maybe, somewhere among them, there flew a story that was real? And did you wonder which one? Did you think you'd be able to tell? Would there be something about the teller's face that would show you? Would her eyes shift, or blink, look at you differently or just look away? Would her words feel different to you, lighter, able to fly higher? Would you feel something sliding up your backbone, soft as a feather, that would tell you true from not-true?"

"And did you ever wonder if it even mattered in the end?"

As I played, and as I spoke, I looked right at Maud, who leaned so far forward that it was a wonder she didn't fall out of her chair. The way she held her hand over her mouth, I wondered if she were afraid it would give her away to me before she was ready to be given away.

If that were true, she should have covered her eyes, too. But I'm getting ahead of my own story.



What I remember of the night I (may or may not have) sold my soul to the Devil, is finding myself standing in a crossroads, with a guitar in hand and a couple of car keys in my pocket. The Bel Air was at my back, engine ticking and snapping as it cooled. The headlights flanked me, illuminating motes of dust that had been scuffed up from the

Holly Wade Matter

dirt road. I looked up into a sky so big and dark, with so many stars, that I knew I had been transported to a different world. I was certain that where I came from, the sky was never that dark, the stars that absurdly abundant. Crackling sounds came from the woods, and strange scents that I didn't know. There were animals out here. I had a sense of bears and cougars and things with sharp antlers and no friendliness for me. What about splintercats? What about Sasquatch?

Did I drive myself out here? Was this really my car? Why couldn't I remember? Why couldn't I remember *anything*?

I felt tipsy, wanted to sink down right there in the middle of the dirt road, but that desire scared me in its own right, so I opened the car door and sat down inside. I watched my scared eyes in the rearview mirror, hoping they'd tell me something.

Then I caught sight of the single charm braided into my hair. When I touched it, it shocked me; and the impression of a man and a woman like ghosts, like gods, like carnival creatures, played hide-and-seek in my mind.



Some people have told me, in so many words, that a girl who could lose her name and her past must be pretty careless and basically untrustworthy.

If it makes me mad to hear it, it's only because I know they're right.



I'd been on the road for 'round about a year since that fateful night, traveling from town to town, from campground to campground, playing in cafes, taverns, farmers' markets, wherever anybody would let me. A story, a song, and palm-reading on the side kept me alive. Taste in music varies but never, I've found, the desire to know the future. Some days I could make a decent chunk of change telling

Damned Pretty Things

fortunes at one of the rest stops along the interstate. Then I'd treat myself to an inexpensive motel, with a real bed and a real shower, and have a poached egg with my pancakes for breakfast.

If anybody asked me where I was headed, I'd tell them I was working my way toward the city. No matter how much folk and blues I played, anybody could tell, just by looking at me, that I was an urban child. But the city might as well have been the center of a maze, with no direct road to lead me to it, since every time I got within twenty miles, something else enticed me away...an intriguing road, an invitation to play, and sometimes, just my own pitiful sense of direction.

It was a direct commission that brought me to the red bridge to Sky. Whether something more than chance and a bent nail caused my right rear tire to blow out before I could cross the bridge, I leave to your discretion.

Fate or chance, the fact remained that I was stranded on the shoulder of a narrow, two-lane highway, on what had to be the hottest July day the west side of the mountains had ever known, with a spare tire that gave like bread dough when I poked it, and the knowledge that I hadn't passed a single vehicle, filling station, farm house, or trailer since I first turned onto this highway. When I opened the map and found it was another five miles to Sky, I strongly questioned the wisdom of having accepted that commission.

I boosted myself up to sit on the trunk, my feet on the bumper, and fanned myself with the road map. I'd had a headache since morning; now my head felt stuffed to the splitting point. Hunger had a lot to do with it. At noon, I'd held my nose and eaten the bruised and half-fermented peach floating in the warm melted ice in the cooler. The only food I had left was a random assortment of cellophane-wrapped crackers and bull's-eye mints from diners

Holly Wade Matter

all over the state. But my head throbbed, too, from a coming storm. The overcast made me think of an iron lid clamped down on a near-boiling sky, pressure building until it was enough to send the lid rattling and clattering and the sky boiling over.

I shielded my eyes from the glare and squinted at my surroundings. Grassland lay on one side of the highway, a sprawling thicket of hazel, red alder, and big leaf maple on the other, and the valley itself lay cozy between foothills that didn't look recently logged. All around me, the countryside made its usual summer racket: grasshoppers springing in the dry grass, a garter snake slithering into the salmon-berry bushes, bees hovering and darting, mosquitoes whining, and a couple of jays squawking from a lone Douglas fir in the meadow. A hawk, deceptively lazy, glided on the air.

All the while, the brick-red, WPA-era steel bridge seemed to mock my predicament. I hopped down and went to visit it. It spanned a shallow ravine and a shallower creek. The pitted macadam road on the other side continued straight for a space, then gently curved to the right and disappeared behind the trees. Wild grass and asters grew in the cracked macadam along the railings. The red paint was peeling, and there wasn't any graffiti.

I ran my palms over the painted steel, the bumpy rivets, of the nearest truss. It was hot even through my fingerless gloves. I peeled off a patch of red paint and let it fall.

My temples throbbed. My feet ached, hot and swollen in my boots. Sweat trickled down the back of my neck. Not even a baby breeze stirred my skirt. The subtle creek music enticed me. The bank was steep but not high...it should be easy enough to climb down.

"That five miles to Sky isn't going to walk itself," I said with authority in my voice.

But the child in me...that child wanted the creek.

Damned Pretty Things

I climbed down the bank, holding on to vine maples and alders along the way, pausing partway down to pee discreetly among some sword ferns.

I took off my shoes and stockings and tender-footed my way across the dry creek pebbles to the edge of the water. Then I dropped my boots on a boulder, tied my hair back with one braid, and knelt down. I didn't take off my fingerless gloves (I almost never do), just splashed water, cool and soothing, on my face. A little ways downstream, I found a good boulder for sitting, with a cushion of dry moss, and dangled my feet in the water.

Every day, two or three times a day, I'd touch each of the charms woven into my hair, counting them, naming the places where I'd chosen them and the circumstances of the choosing. I did it to reassure myself that I could remember the past year, at least.

I tapped the bee skep charm and said, "Hey, bees! I've got no money, I've got no food, I've got no friends, and I've got no spare tire." I almost asked for help. Almost. But even in those straits, I wasn't far gone enough to actually believe my own stories.

The scent reached me first—the intoxicant of petrichor rising from hot macadam. Then the desultory patter of rain on alder leaves, the pop and ripple of drops on the surface of the water. I looked up at the sky and got a raindrop square in my right eye. The first sound of thunder came, distant and blunt, as if it had been dumped from a rusting wheelbarrow on the other side of the mountains.

It occurred to me that if lightning chose to strike me at that very moment, it would not be out of place with the current tenor of my life.

It also occurred to me that I'd left the Bel Air's windows rolled down.

Holly Wade Matter

I snatched up my boots, hopped across the dry rocks, scrambled up the bank, and made it to the road while parts of it were still gray and dry. I threw my boots into the car and rolled up the windows, then stood on the shoulder and watched the road grow black and steam, as if the pavement were bound with spirits that only rain could release. The scent was delicious, like nothing else on earth. If it had been a perfume, I would have sprayed it all over me, every single blessed morning.

The iron lid above me shifted with an ear-cracking roar and a crooked vein of pure electrical passion, and more water than I'd thought existed rattled down upon me. It drummed on the roof of the Bel Air and ran off it in sheets, washing away weeks of road dust and bug corpses. It filled the pot-holes to overflowing and rippled across the road. I danced in the rain, my bare feet smacking down on the warm, wet road and sending up spray. I laughed, and leapt, and shook my braids. I stumbled a bit once my skirt got soaked and clung to my legs, but I didn't care. Didn't I have monsoon in my blood? And wasn't I, above all things, a shameless exhibitionist?

When the old green Ford pickup drove up and stopped, for one wild moment I believed I'd conjured it by dancing. The driver's window rolled down and a real, live human being leaned out and shouted, "You need some help?"

"More than you could possibly imagine," I shouted back. I think I was giddy from sheer relief.

The driver seemed taken aback and squinted up into the sky as if asking for an explanation (or a favor). He didn't even flinch at the next lightning bolt, which seemed to find a home about half a foot away from the far end of the bridge.

"You want me to," he shouted, "I'll change your tire now, but it might be better to go into town and wait it out."

"That's okay. My spare is flat, too."

Damned Pretty Things

“What do you want to do?”

“Not die, for one thing,” I shouted. “Please don’t take offense, but I don’t know you, and for all I know, you might be a killer maniac.”

He tilted his head a bit to one side and looked at me, considering. “For all I know, you might be one, yourself. And I’m not much looking forward to dying, either.”

I laughed. I knew he’d be all right. I might not know my name or my birth date, but I did know to trust my instincts. “Wait. I need to get something.” I fetched my boots and stockings and my guitar out of the car, and locked up.

He leaned across the seat and opened the passenger door for me. I got in and arranged myself and my guitar so that neither of us were on his lap.

“This isn’t a high car-prowl area,” he said, amused. It surprised me to hear him use a city term like that.

“I’m a hayseed for only part of the year,” he explained.

“Did I say anything?”

“You didn’t have to. You have an expressive face.”

“Oh.” I gazed at the water running off me and onto the seat. “Sorry about the water.”

“It’s just a little rain.”

When he drove onto the bridge, the hairs rose on my nape and my arms. I couldn’t tell you why—maybe I was just lightheaded from hunger—but it seemed to me that I was leaving the ordinary world behind and entering a world where the spirits weren’t strangers.

I looked him over. He seemed human enough. He was a tall man, with a strong, slender build and a baked-in tan that made me think of cowboys. His hair, which had recently been cut, was mostly brown, with uneven chunks that had been bleached out by the sun. He was clearly a working man; the backs of his hands were marred by all kinds of little wounds and scars, some still pink and healing. The sleeves

Holly Wade Matter

of his chambray shirt were rolled up past the elbow. The hairs on his forearms were golden. He smelled good, like cedar and pitch and coffee. His eyes were pilot-light blue, he was probably close to thirty, and he wore no wedding ring.

“Thank you for picking me up.”

“Pleased to be of service.”

“What’s your name?” I asked him.

“Everybody in town calls me Lightning,” he said.

I blinked at him, and then I laughed. “That’s a powerful nickname. Funny, me meeting you during a storm like this. My name’s Fortune.”

He glanced at me sideways. “I always hoped I’d run into you someday.”

“Any puns on my name that you might be thinking of springing, let me assure you I’ve already heard them. All of them. About two thousand times apiece.”

“So much for conversation,” he said. I liked his smile. “Do you carry that guitar everywhere you go?”

“Most everywhere. I can stand to lose just about everything else but this.”

“Must be one special guitar.”

We lapsed into a friendly silence, and I all but pressed my nose against the window. Since I’m never a passenger, I don’t get much chance to look at the scenery.

The lonely country gradually gave way to human habitation...first a few isolated houses with pastures out front, and horses standing around looking miserable as only rained-on horses can manage. Then a dairy farm with a big barn and silo. The windows of the farmhouse were warm with light that cut through the gray, pelting rain and the storm darkness. It seemed to me that it would be the nicest thing in the world to be inside and cozy during the storm. My sodden clothes had gotten cold. I had goosebumps all over and was trying hard to keep my teeth from chattering.

Damned Pretty Things

We passed more houses, with smaller pastures and fewer horses, and then houses nearer together with no pasture at all but tidy, little front yards. Then the speed limit changed to 25 mph, and we were in town.

I liked little foothills towns like this, too far from the city to be suburbs and too far from the ski slopes to be resorts, kept tidy and archaic with their false fronts, their cast-iron street lights, their grocery stores that looked like converted airplane hangars. This town was true to type. Railroad tracks ran parallel to the main street (called Main Street, of course). Older model cars parked along the curb. Bicycles leaned against the street lamps. There were even piles of horse manure in the road here and there.

We stopped at a seemingly unnecessary stop sign in front of the Diamond Dress Shoppe. The plaster mannequin in the window was wearing an enormous, 1970s Afro wig, was missing one hand, and had part of its nose busted off. To add insult to injury, it was displaying a pink dress with an elastic waistband, patch pockets, and a ruffled front. In a flash, I apprehended the mannequin's sad history... a decade or two forgotten in the stock room of one of the big city department stores, removed and then sold cheap when the department store went bankrupt.

We passed a tiny white stucco church with the name Nazareth Temple in bas relief over the red door. I craned my neck to make out the details of the carved wooden sculpture in front of the Tribal Cultural Center. There was another, similar sculpture in front of City Hall.

Off to the left, on a little hill, higher than the rest of the town, stood a three-story brick building with a cupola that I later learned was the high school and had been since before the first World War.

When we came to the movie house, Lightning put the truck into park but didn't turn off the engine. The vertical

Holly Wade Matter

neon theater sign, intricate and deco, spelled out BLUE MOUSE THEATRE. An animated blue mouse ran up one side and down the other. According to the marquee, the theater was currently showing a movie called “Marmots in the Family.”

Lightning laughed. “I wonder if they’ve really got it this time. They’ve been trying to show it for years but they always get sent some other movie by mistake. Once it was a Bollywood musical. Half the girls in town went saree-crazy that summer. Maud says she went to every single showing.” Something brought him up short, and he turned and looked at me funny. “She was dancing, too, the first time I saw her. Up at the very top of Wolf’s House.”

When he said the name “Maud,” the hairs stood up on my arms, as they had when we crossed the red bridge. “Maud,” he said, just like that. Just as if I’d never heard her name before that moment. Just as if I hadn’t come looking.

Maud dancing at the very top of Wolf’s House. I had a sudden, vivid vision of her as a circus girl in pink, with a parasol for balance, spinning and teetering on the apex of a steep roof to the anxiety of the gasping audience below. Wolf, I knew, would have to be the local lumber baron, complete with a villain mustache, a 1920s tuxedo, and wicked designs on Maud: *Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.*

“Where is Wolf’s house? Are we going to go past it?”

“Wolf’s House is that mountain up ahead.”

“Oh. Is Maud your girlfriend?”

He blushed to the tips of his ears. “No,” he said emphatically.

I smiled and sang, “Long Maud, Long Maud is neat of foot, Long Maud is soft of tread...”

His hands twitched on the steering wheel, as if he’d gotten a shock of static electricity. The windshield wipers

Damned Pretty Things

slapped back and forth, back and forth. “She’s long enough, Maud is. She’s nearly as tall as I am.” Then, irrelevantly, “It’s her birthday today.”

“How old?”

“Eighteen.”

“Old enough at last. If you like, I’ll read your palm and tell you what your chances are.”

“I don’t need my palm read to know that.”

“Aw, let me. It’s the least I could do,” I said. “Payment for the ride.”

“No need to pay me.”

I thought for a while. “Maud,” I said. “Tall. Eighteen. Astrological sign of Leo. Runs the filling station?”

“Waits tables at the Sky Cafe.”

“I wonder...is that the type of place where I could sing for a sandwich and a cup of coffee?”

He gave me another funny look. “I’ve never heard that particular question before.”

“Well, to be brutally honest, I don’t have enough for a sandwich, let alone a new tire.” My stomach growled like a mean dog. I couldn’t have timed it better if I’d tried. I sighed. “No matter. Even in a barter economy, the artist is always the first to get stiffed.”

“You think so?”

“I have been a grasshopper in this world for as far back as I can remember. Believe me, I know. It’s a value perception problem.”

“Tell you what. I’ll buy you a sandwich, just for the fun of it.”

“I won’t say no.”

He drove on about a block and pulled up in front of the aforementioned Sky Cafe, which was sandwiched between an antique shop on one side and the Avery Photography

Holly Wade Matter

Studio on the other. “Go on in. I’ll be along as soon as I park the truck.”

“I can’t go in barefoot.”

“Sure you can.”

So I got out, toting my boots and my guitar with me, and made a run for it, through the pelting rain, to the Sky Cafe.



I didn’t so much walk into the cafe as I was blown inside. The door sucked shut behind me with a bang and the hysterical tinkling of the bell.

When you enter the Sky Cafe, the first thing you see is yourself. Even when you’re expecting it, it startles the hell out of you. The front doors open into a foyer, where a massive oval mirror, probably seven feet tall at its highest point, hangs in an ornate, blackened silver frame. It’s quite an old mirror, speckled, tinted a murky, grayish-blue, and rippled in a way that makes you want to believe that glass, over time, flows like ice. The tinted glass leeches all the warm tones out of your skin and hair and clothes, and the overall effect is that of seeing yourself in a tintype, as if you had become your own ancestor.

I started when I found myself looking into the eyes of a weirdly familiar girl. It took me a moment to understand that she was me; but even after my brain straightened it out, I continued to stare, examining myself from head to toe as if I were a stranger. She was an odd one, this light-skinned, barefoot black girl, with her hair all done up in fine plaits, and the plaits braided and woven with charms, and beads, and things from gumball machines; ribbons and wire; tiny bits of bone and polished wood. Odd, again, dressed in an antique chocolate-brown skirt that clung to her legs and a white armistice blouse made nearly transparent with rain. She had on a pair of tatty leather fingerless gloves that had

Damned Pretty Things

nothing stylistically in common with either her hair or her clothes, and she held her Edwardian boots by the knotted-together laces.

She was pretty—damned pretty, even—despite the anxious expression on her face and the fact that she was wet as paint. She held her guitar with negligent ease, like a child holding her doll by the ankle. She looked like somebody I'd like to know but who was certain to have one or more annoying habits and was probably outrageously dishonest. I dropped my boots and stepped toward her, cautiously, and touched my fingers to hers. The mirror misted around our fingertips.

Somebody cleared his throat and said, "It's a miracle anybody ever makes it past that mirror. Cover it up, Robin, or all your customers are going to starve to death."

"John, you know Eddy would never let me do that."

I broke out of my trance and turned. A small group were gathered at the window, as if they had been watching the storm (they had). Now they watched me, instead.

I felt like a little kid who might or might not be on the verge of a bawling-out. I smiled and raised my hand in a feeble wave. "Hi." Then, hoping this would make a positive difference in my reception, I picked up my boots and added, "Lightning brought me."

"Well, come on in and make yourself comfortable." This was Robin Avery, the owner and chef. She was maybe forty, maybe older and not showing it (black, as they say, don't crack), dressed in chef's whites, with her hair done up in a white headscarf. Her figure showed that she enjoyed her own good cooking, and her confident air that she did so without remorse. She had on a pair of gold, wire-rimmed glasses that looked distinctly Edwardian, and when she smiled, she showed a chipped front tooth she hadn't found time to get fixed yet. "No matter what anybody here says, I was not, I repeat, not opening beer bottles with my teeth," she told me later.

Holly Wade Matter

The power had gone out, and it was dark enough that Robin had lit the candles on all the tables. One table held the remains of a sheet cake—Maud’s birthday cake. That, and the scents of sausage, tomatoes, rice, caramelized onion, and coffee, made my mouth water and my stomach grumble.

Let me tell you a little bit about the people who were there.

John Jordan Caldecote, Maud’s father, edited the newspaper and did all the printing in town. He was a tall, shy white man with wavy, wiry, gold hair, a flushed face, fingers permanently stained with printer’s ink, his eyes wary behind black, horn-rimmed glasses. The whole time he was in the cafe, he seemed just seconds away from leaving, jingling his keys and pacing. I later came to learn that this was just his normal restless style.

Pat Burnett was the director of the Tribal Cultural Center, and was collaborating with Mr. Caldecote on an ever-expanding book about the valley’s history. A streak of iron-gray hair ran from his forehead to the end of his braid, and allegedly had since the time he was hit in the head with a baseball in junior high school. From the strength of his neck and shoulders, he looked like he might have been a member of his college wrestling team twenty years earlier. He’d just quit smoking the week before, but kept patting his shirt pocket out of reflex, and started at any unexpected sounds. The thunderstorm made a miserable man of him.

Mrs. Diamond owned the dress shop with the sad mannequin. She’d come down for a coffee break and got stranded by the storm. She was about fifty, petite, dressed in a peach polyester pantsuit. She wore a frosted, girl-group-era wig the color of almond butter. She was light-skinned, like me but afflicted with freckles all over her face and hands. Her fingers were loaded with rhinestone knuckle-dusters that flashed menacingly in the candlelight with every movement

Damned Pretty Things

of her hands—and she moved them a lot, ostentatiously chain-smoking in front of poor Mr. Burnett. I learned later that they had a bet on as to whether he could make it thirteen days without taking a puff.

Mrs. Diamond and Robin were first cousins, and neither could much stand the other, but Robin felt obliged to give Mrs. Diamond free coffee whenever she wanted it, and Mrs. Diamond reciprocated with a standing offer of a 10 percent discount on clothes Robin would never in a million years have bought.

The prep cook, a white boy slouching by the window with his fists jammed in his pockets, was one of the most unpleasant-looking people I'd ever seen. His body language screamed “juvenile detention alumnus.” He had shaved his dirty brown hair down to a stubble that showed all the scabbed places where he'd nicked his scalp. His cheeks and chin were likewise nicked, his lips chewed, and his face, when it wasn't animated, looked both dumb and mean. He never called anybody by name, only said “she” and “he” as if he expected you to know exactly who he was referring to. He was probably twenty-one or twenty-two at the most. Everybody called him Low, which might have been his last name or might have been a reference to his character. His full name, his history, and the source of his bizarre accent—he spoke as if the inside of his mouth had been stung by hornets—were mysteries...he'd shown up in town about a year before, claiming to be a friend of Eddy Avery, one of Robin's many nephews. Robin had hired him and let him rent the studio apartment above the cafe. Whatever Robin knew about him, she wasn't sharing.

An elderly white woman sat at a corner table, away from everybody else, and picked at a slice of cake. She was dressed like a well-to-do woman in a black cashmere cardigan, black creased slacks, and a strand of pearls in the style

Holly Wade Matter

of the 1950s. She seemed frail, shoulders bent, eyes faraway and sad. Nobody introduced her, and she didn't introduce herself. But every time I caught her eye, she smiled at me.

And then there was Maud.

I knew her immediately. She was, indeed, long—probably six foot two in her cowboy boots—with an air of cool self-possession that I hadn't seen in many tall women, or many women her age, for that matter. Her movements were so flexible and unstudied that when I learned that her middle name was Poplar, I thought her parents must have possessed second sight. She'd inherited her height and her long, narrow face from her father. Her eyes were big and dark as blackthorn plums, her eyebrows heavy, her mouth cautious. Her sable-brown hair she wore in a stick-straight ponytail that ended just past her shoulder blades. That afternoon, she had on a knee-length black skirt, a sleeveless white blouse, and the previously mentioned cowboy boots. The only make-up she wore was lipstick in a shade I always thought of as “dime-store whore red.” It actually looked good on her.

As an object, Maud wasn't especially good-looking. I imagined she wouldn't photograph well—that her face would show too long, too bony. But Maud in motion was a damned pretty thing.

When I spoke Lightning's name, she flushed up to the roots of her hair, and her gaze flickered past me. Her hand went up to cover her mouth and didn't come down until I said, “I got a flat tire just before the bridge. If your resident Good Samaritan hadn't come along and offered me a ride, I might have been out there forever.” Then she relaxed and was able to look at me again.

“You must be freezing in this air conditioning,” she said. The huskiness of her voice startled me. It reminded me of blackstrap molasses because it was more bitter than sweet.

Damned Pretty Things

“Just set your guitar down and come back with me,” Robin said. She took me to the women’s restroom

“Your clothes are pure World War I vintage. Where did you get them?”

“They were given to me by an old lady I met, who told me I was the spitting image of her older sister, who’d died in 1918 of the Spanish Flu.”

“Let’s make sure you don’t die of flu your own self.” She left and came back with a Black Watch plaid rain coat lined with fake fur.

“Somebody left this here about two years ago and never came back for it. It’ll be big on you but better than going around in sopping-wet clothes.”

I stripped off my blouse and skirt and buttoned up the raincoat. It was too big but the fake fur lining was nice and dry. As I put on my stockings and boots, Robin hung up my clothes to drip, drip, drip on the bathroom floor. She glanced curiously at my fingerless gloves but said nothing, and we went back out.

“What I want to know is, what’s she doing with all that trash in her hair?” Mrs. Diamond was saying as we came out. Maud closed her eyes with an embarrassed sigh, and Mr. Burnett cleared his throat.

Low surprised me by looking me in the eye and saying, “It’s like them girls in Africa. Them Fulani girls.”

“What do you know about Africa?” Mrs. Diamond demanded. Under her breath, she added, “Or girls, for that matter.”

“Oh, he was probably a highly decorated hero in the French Foreign Legion before he came here to chop parsley for Robin,” Maud said. “Weren’t you, Low?”

He brushed near her, hissed “French *you*,” at her, and stalked away to the kitchen.

Holly Wade Matter

“Leave poor Low alone,” Mr. Caldecote said to his daughter.

“Poor Low my eye,” she said. “He’s revolting.”

“All the more reason to show some kindness.”

Maud’s mouth gave a skeptical twist. Then Lightning came in, holding his jeans jacket over his head like a tent, and she forgot about everybody else. She stood at anxious attention, looking like a child about to get a present, before she recollected herself and adopted a blasé stance.

Lightning hung his jacket on the coat rack near the mirror and joined us. Everybody was pleased to see him, even Mrs. Diamond, and he shook hands with them all. He even shook my hand, with formal courtesy, since we hadn’t really had a chance before. But to Maud, he just nodded and said her name with a complete lack of enthusiasm. He didn’t wish her a happy birthday, even though he’d mentioned it to me himself. He intrigued me.

Low came back with two cups of coffee and gave one to me and one to Lightning. “Still hot.”

“Thank you,” I said.

He didn’t meet my gaze. “Sure, whatever.” Then he gazed sidelong at Maud, his eyes narrowed to slits, and said, “Somebody’s gotta take care of things around here.”

Lightning said, “Thanks, Low. Good to see you again. Doing all right?”

“Yeah, sure,” he replied. To Robin, he said, “I’m goin’ on break.”

“That’s fine, Low,” Robin said. Low stalked off again, and slammed the back door behind him.

“Break from what?” Maud said, looking after him with disgust. “He brought out coffee. How exhausting.”

“She is merciless, isn’t she?” laughed Mr. Burnett. “Got to be hell to be single and smitten when Maud’s around, isn’t that right, Lightning?”

Damned Pretty Things

I had never before seen two people so quickly and so diligently look at anything but each other. Lightning frowned and drank his coffee. Maud covered her mouth and stared at one of the portraits on the wall, as if trying to remember if she owed that person money.

These portraits—big, framed, enlarged tintypes of Native Americans, of black folks, of white folks and Asian—covered the walls. There was that quality in their faces, in the way they held themselves, in their old-timey clothes, but especially in their eyes, and the way their eyes met the camera, that you don't see any more. There wasn't a face among them that you would ever expect to see in the modern world. But when you got up close, you realized they weren't photos at all but photorealistic drawings, down to the scratches and specks and haze. I later learned they'd been drawn by Robin's nephew Eddy, and that each one was of townsfolk still alive, including Mr. Burnett, Maud's mother, and Robin.

"I still want to know about that hair." Mrs. Diamond got up and came over to me. "Got to get a better look at these." She reached for my hair. Faster than I could think, I shoved her hand away.

"*Don't.*" My heartbeat gave a kick, and for a moment, my blood felt fizzy in the veins of my forearms. Mrs. Diamond looked at me in narrow-eyed outrage and nursed her wrist as if I'd hit her. I took a few deep breaths to settle down. Trying to keep my voice calm, making each word distinct, I said, "I am not a mannequin."

"Well, I never in my life," she said. "Pardon me for coming too close to the Queen of Sheba."

Robin rubbed her hands across her eyes. "Carla, for heaven's sake, just sit down and shut up."

Mr. Burnett snorted, and Mr. Caldecote quickly turned and looked out the window. And Maud looked ready to cry from mortification.

Holly Wade Matter

“It’s all right,” I said to her, and smiled. I tried to take a sip of coffee but my hands trembled so badly that I had to put the cup back down. I couldn’t make them stop.

“She’s about to faint from hunger,” Lightning said to Robin. “Did you have anything ready in the kitchen before you lost your power?”

“I did, and I’m glad I’ve got somebody here to eat it up for me.” Robin made for the kitchen, and Maud, with a glance like she couldn’t stand to leave, turned and followed her.

Maud brought me a big bowl of vegetable soup, and a roast chicken sandwich bursting with butter lettuce besides, and the same for Lightning. I fell to. It’s no disrespect to Robin’s culinary skill to say just about anything would have tasted heavenly to me at that point.

Mr. Burnett and Mr. Caldecote left us to eat in peace while they discussed plumbing challenges and golf, while Robin went back to the window to watch the storm and occasionally comment on a particularly flamboyant lightning strike. Maud divided her attention between Lightning and me.

“Where have you been all these weeks?” she asked him.

“Around.”

“Not that it matters to me,” she said quickly. “But Gabriel was asking about going up to the Anvil this summer...”

“You know that’s always fine with me, Maud,” he said.

“It wasn’t once. And anyway, sometimes people change their minds.” She looked at her folded hands with a gaze so artlessly woeful that I wanted to take Lightning aside and tell him “Guess what? She’s crazy about you.”

But that was not my business.

In the meantime, Mrs. Diamond scrutinized me, even forgetting to torment Mr. Burnett by smoking. I could tell I’d come up against a champion grudge-holder. Her expression seemed to say, *You’ve got a dirty little secret, and I’m*

Damned Pretty Things

going to find out what it is. I think it must have been her clothes. Peach polyester is enough to make anybody mean.

“You’d better call your folks,” she said at last, when I’d licked the crumbs from my fingers and wiped my mouth. “They might be worried about you.”

“I can’t,” I said.

“Why not?” She actually sneered. I’d never seen a sneer before. “Did they kick you out?”

“Jesus, Carla. . . .” Robin groaned.

“Worse,” I said. “I don’t even know who they are.”

Then I pulled my guitar up on my lap and picked out a tune, slow and bluesy, while I told them my soul-selling story.

I did say I was an exhibitionist, didn’t I?



The truth is that in all the towns I’ve been, nobody has ever seen the likes of me before. I am used to being a one-woman freak show, and as far as matters of survival go, it would be to my disadvantage not to be. But in the Sky Cafe, none of them, except Mrs. Diamond, looked at me as if I were a freak. Robin didn’t blink at my soul-selling tale; she even looked as if she’d like to maybe correct me on a few details I’d gotten wrong.

Maud, leaning forward, seemingly afraid of missing a single word, a single pause or breath, listened to me like I were someone she’d waited for all her life, and now that I was here, she could hardly believe I’d finally come. I felt as if I were speaking to her from within her own dreams.

I said, “I see prophecies on billboards, and cereal boxes, and shop signs. When I look twice, the words resolve into something quite ordinary and expected, but the hidden messages remain: ‘facial torch.’ ‘Hat potatoes.’ They prove the truth that we live in a world of wonder, where magic is camouflaged in every ordinary thing.

Holly Wade Matter

“Imagine living a life motivated by the love of wonders. Our world is full of them, absolutely bursting with them. Rainforests. Fifty-foot-long squid. Shrubberies that are 12,000 years old. Fungus! Just think of fungus! Think of the Missouri River flowing backward in 1815, just as if the earthquake that caused it made time itself flow in reverse. Think of dogs in Cairo struck dead by meteorites from Mars.”

Mr. Burnett said, kindly, “How can you know all that and not know your real name?”

“I don’t know. Every day, I find myself knowing things but not knowing how I know them. When and where did I learn to waltz? How do I know to order white wine with poultry? Or that Amos Tutuola wrote *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*? And yet, I can’t find the straight path back to myself. Sometimes I remember flashes of things. Army tanks in my neighborhood, on the street the next over from mine. Selling kola nuts for cowrie shells in a hot outdoor market. Pushing up my sunglasses and hugging my books to my chest as I walk through a crowd of screaming white people. I know these memories can’t be mine, not directly mine. It’s more like they’re from an exhibit I walked through once, at the Museum of Mystery and Industry.”

“The what?” Maud breathed.

“The Museum of Mystery and Industry. Haven’t you ever heard of it?”

She shook her head.

“It’s what I’m looking for,” I said. The lie came so easily it nearly took my breath away. “Why I’m trying to get back to the city. If I could find it again, I’d learn who I was, and who I am, and where I belong.”

“How do you know?” Lightning asked.

“Because I’m a mystery,” I said. “They’d have to know how to solve me.”

Damned Pretty Things

The elderly woman laughed out loud. It was a friendly laugh. I nodded to her and smiled.

But Mrs. Diamond, skeptical, screwed up her mouth. “Why don’t you just admit you’re a liar and a vagabond?”

I laughed. “All right. I’m a liar and a vagabond. But I still don’t know who I am. These,” I said, touching one ornament after another, “are my memories. You know the saying, He wears his heart on his sleeve? Well, I wear my memories in my hair. I add a bit of something from everywhere I’ve been. It’s my history.”

Mrs. Diamond made a disparaging sound. “Most people just collect spoons, honey.”

“Most people don’t have to invent themselves from scratch.”

“Poetic,” Mr. Caldecote said, wryly approving, “but you could surely start with your name and address and work from there. What does it say on your driver’s license?”

That cracked me up. It was just the kind of dry joke I’d expect from a shy, intelligent man like him. Then I realized that nobody else was laughing. Nobody was even smiling.

It occurred to me that maybe he was testing me, trying to catch me out. “There’s no such thing,” I said. “Nobody needs a license just to drive.”

Low, who had returned from his break, whistled. He looked happier than I’d ever have figured he could. Mr. Caldecote, Mr. Burnett, and Lightning reached into their pockets, Mrs. Diamond into her purse, and they brought out their wallets. Each had a card with their photo on it, an outline of the state, and the inexplicable phrase “Driver’s License.”

“I have one, too,” said Maud. I glanced at Robin, and she nodded.

My feeling on the bridge had been right. I had entered another world.