

Lisa Slage Robinson

Devil's Hole Road

Dalton left me stranded in the parking lot, clutching my briefcase and the Judge's order to get the hell out of his courtroom. Dust and pollen floated in from the fields just beyond the town's solitary block of businesses, the diner, the dressmaker, the bank. Everything weary, parched from the heat and lack of rain, sweated in a yellowish-green patina that stung my eyes and lumped my throat. Even the courthouse clock tower yawned, exhausted as its hands ticked through the thick, panting air.

"No use looking for him. He's already gone," Liza Abbott said. My patent leather heels sank into the gooey blacktop as she climbed into her snub-nosed pickup truck. Rust dappled its brickly hood and fenders. "Might as well come with me."

"I don't suppose you've got cabs out here?" I said.

"Nope. And even if we did—they wouldn't drive you to the farm. It's too far out."

The hinge creaked as I opened the door. It was late August. The weatherman had said to expect record heat, possibly in the three-digits, pop-up showers, maybe even a tornado. Sweat pooled at the waistband of my hose, then trickled down my panties. More sweat collected at the back of my knees. It seemed like ages since the morning, when Mad Dog shoved a new case file in my hands and announced that it was to time rip off the training wheels. If I could muster up the courage, I was going to kill him when I got back to the city.

Liza had already pulled off her Keds and her white ankle socks. Underneath her shapeless farmhouse calico, she was shimmying up a pair of cut-off jean shorts, hips lifted as she zipped and buttoned. She pulled the dress off over her head. For a moment she was topless. I looked away as she slipped on a white tank top. When I looked back she was taking the pins out of her hair, releasing a wave of black curls, which she fluffed into a messy nest. She looked over at me, all buttoned up in my gray suit, and said, "You're gonna suffocate in that get-up, you know."

Earlier, when Liza was sitting on the witness stand, she told the Judge she hadn't planned on buying new windows the day

Dalton showed up in his long white Cadillac complaining of car trouble and wanting to use the phone. Liza had been reluctant to accommodate the man, but then Mama came out of the kitchen, sized up the handsome stranger on the other side of the screened door, appreciated his pleated khaki trousers, his crisp white button-down, cuffs rolled up two turns, admired his forearms, boyishly freckled but manly in the wrist, and said they might as well invite him in.

Liza's brown-suited attorney, Mr. Dalrymple, coaxed the story from her. She had been timid on the witness stand, first tugging on her big lacy collar, then twirling a coil of hair that had escaped her schoolmarm bun. She recited with a bit of a twang how Mama had taken a liking to the man, offered him a limeade, took him on a tour of the house. Dalton examined all the windows, asked if they were original, did they open, let in cold air. He pointed out a few cracks, a broken sash, a bullet hole. "It was obscene the way he caressed them windows," Liza said, first speaking to the Judge and then directing her gaze towards Dalton. "Almost like he'd dipped his fingertips in honey, like he was stroking a lady."

The Judge coughed, looked over at me, and inquired as to whether I'd like to object, but I had nothing. I'd been hypnotized by Liza's flawless skin, wondering if she had a string of rock candy hidden deep within her *Little House on the Prairie* pockets.

Dalton slumped in his chair, drummed his fingers, his fake Rolex bragging with a rhythmic click against the scarred Plaintiff's table, until the Judge hollered at him to cut that shit out and ordered the bailiff to turn on the big fan. The Judge advised Liza to speak louder for the remainder of her testimony.

"That's when the Plaintiff told Mama that he was in the window business. The next thing you know he's got out his tape measure and we're signing papers. Never did make his phone call. After Mama handed him a check made out to Galaxy Windows Inc. for the down payment, he closed the hood of his car and just drove away. I told Mama that I was worried, that something just wasn't right, but she said she was investing in my future."

"Did you ever get your windows?" asked Mr. Dalrymple.

"Yes. A crew of men showed up one day. Spent hours. But Dalton never came back. Not that I'm aware of. Even in the winter when the windows iced up and got all foggy. Some of them didn't fit at all. Mama was kind of disappointed about that."

The Judge sighed. Looked at his watch then zeroed in on Dalton. "You ever go check on those windows?"

“No, sir.” Dalton stared at the table, shifted in his chair, glanced at Liza. “See, the windows were already made and they were manufactured according to that house’s specifications. Special order, you know? We couldn’t use them on a different job.”

To me, Dalton whispered, “Aren’t you supposed to be saying something smart right about now?”

A dark look crossed the Judge’s face. “So you never inspected the windows, after they were installed?”

“Nope.” Dalton leaned back in his chair, pushed his flop of wavy ginger hair away from his forehead. And with that, the Judge ordered everyone out of the courtroom until the windows were looked at. I had ridden in from Toledo with Dalton to facilitate my first and only review of the file but he sped away without me, hollering through the exhaust and the thumping stereo base that he’d meet me there. Left me with my heels digging asphalt, my confidence swooning in the heat.

The Abbott place was in the next county over, forty-something miles away.

“You’re gonna have to roll down the window. Henry here,” Liza said, patting the dashboard, “didn’t come with air conditioning. And take off that jacket and pantyhose for god’s sake. It must be at least ninety-something degrees out. It’s gonna take an hour and a half to get there.”

As she pulled out, Liza turned on the AM radio. It mostly crackled and buzzed. Just a thin ribbon of music audible over Henry’s muffler and the static. Liza fiddled with the tuner.

“Must be a storm coming. Can never get a station when the weather turns.”

She clicked off what sounded like INXS, pushed in the lighter, pulled out a pack of cigarettes. She offered me one before she lit hers and took a deep long drag. Blew smoke out the window. Wind whipped her hair. Perspiration collected in the sweet little hollow of her neck. Her tank top clung to her damp skin. I stared at her erect nipples pressing against the thin cloth, plummy silver dollar-sized areola, the curve of her breast.

Liza looked over at me still buttoned, encased in nylon and cotton and wool. She shook her head. “You shouldn’t be such a prude.”

Heat rose up from the pavement, wavy shimmers of curvy glass. We stopped at a Marathon station to get gas. It was an old-timey place. A lanky guy in overalls sauntered over to pump. Took

one look at Liza and started making plans to meet at Jukes on Friday night. He fetched us two bottles of orange pop, and patted the side of the car before we drove away, shouting, “Better hurry up and get home. A storm’s coming.”

“That’s what I hear,” she said, laughing.

Underneath a thin veil of hazy clouds, the sky blushed crystal blue.

Soon the roads got dustier, surrounded by a straight, flat checkerboard of corn and soybean and rich green squares of alfalfa dotted with purple blooms. White farmhouses and grain silos, red barns with Mail Pouch ads painted on the side. Deep trenches ridged either side of the highway. Cattails and jewelweed sprang from the trenches. We rumbled by patches of orange ditch-bank lilies. It felt good, the hot wind on my face, to watch the racing pavement. I rubbed the back of my neck, my fingers remembering hair that was no longer there.

Liza shouted over the din of the truck’s muffler, “That your first trial?”

The matter before the Judge was a hearing, not a trial, so technically I wasn’t lying when I said, “No. Not my first.” I wasn’t about to explain why I was the one sitting at the table instead of someone more senior, how, even blindsided, it was better than being sequestered in the law library writing briefs or fetching cups of coffee.

“Why’d you want to become a lawyer anyway?” she said.

I shrugged. Visions of lonely Saturday afternoons, black and white movies offered up on one of three channels, Hepburn and Tracey in “Adam’s Rib,” husband and wife lawyers, he a prosecutor, she a defense attorney. All that smart banter, dinner parties, she in her black evening gown, her elegant clavicles, the swan of her neck, the ribbon of spine as Tracey zipped her up. “I was a kid when I decided. I thought it would make me feel important. Not so invisible,” I said.

“Did it work?”

I didn’t answer. Just looked out the window.

After a while, I angled out of my suit jacket, rolled up my sleeves, and undid a few of the top buttons of my blouse. I kicked off my shoes and before long was shimmying out my pantyhose and rolling my skirt up to my thighs. I pulled my blouse from the stiff confines of my cinched waistband and released the bottom three buttons. For a moment, I considered stripping down to my camisole.

Liza tried the radio again. “Feel better?”

At that moment, with the dull summer heat furnacing about me, the wind in my face, Duran Duran singing “Hungry Like a Wolf,” Liza’s hair whipping like a black funnel cloud, I knew I would always feel better riding in the truck with Liza.

Finally, we turned left onto a dirt road, a skunk stripe of greenish-brown grass running down the middle. We bounced, wobbled over a rock or two, and stopped in front of an old farm house with a covered front porch. Most of the white paint had peeled off, revealing a ghostly gray underneath, something like prairie driftwood.

“Well. Here we are.” She reached under the seat for a pair of short white boots.

“Welcome to the Great Black Swamp.”

I looked at the endless flat landscape, treeless except for a single magnificent weeping willow out back. I thought swamp meant the Everglades, murky water, algae, mosquitos, alligators, foliage, somber trees searching for light. Not farmland. Not Ohio.

I was tucking in my blouse, slipping back into my black patent leathers when Liza came around the back of the truck, looped her arm through mine and hollered.

“Mama, I brought the lawyer out to see the windows.”

Mama emerged from the house, the screen door clacking shut behind her. She had long, thick, gray hair with wavy flourishes of white that curled at her temples. She wore frayed, bell-bottom blue jeans, clogs, and a white peasant blouse. I had been picturing a matronly woman with a gingham house dress and white apron, not a glamorous middle-aged hippie. She skipped down the front porch steps.

“Welcome, lawyer!” she said, hugging me like I was a long lost friend. I wondered if she knew that I was the enemy, for the other side, possibly the wrong side.

She hugged Liza as well.

“I didn’t know you’d be bringing a *lady* lawyer. She’s precious, bless her heart,” Mama said smiling at me. “Big day in the city?”

“Yeah, if you call Wauseon a city,” said Liza.

“That old worthless hound dog lawyer of ours bail on us?”

“Yep.”

“And the Galaxy Window Boy?”

“Not coming.”

They both had a good laugh about that. But suddenly I wondered what the joke was. Not coming? What did she mean they’re

not coming? How was I going to get home?

“Not to worry, dear. Liza will drive you home as soon as you take a look at the windows,” Mama said. “And I’m not a mind reader. You wouldn’t do well in a poker game, I’m afraid. I’d stick with the truth if I were you.”

I followed the pair up the rickety steps onto the porch and into the house. I’d expected to be greeted with a velvet settee, wingback chairs, side tables covered in lace doilies and porcelain knick-knacks. Instead, the house was littered with buckets of dirt, boxes of rocks, piles of clay, a potter’s wheel. Clay figurines of the human and animal variety posed on dented metal erector shelves. Large canvasses, with their backs turned, lined the walls; tubes of oil pigment, brushes, and a blank canvass set up on an easel. An oak bookcase housed mason jars, watery prisons filled with curls of bark, lemongrass, allspice berries, cardamom pods, and lavender buds. I held one up to the light, shook it. Sugar snowed then sank to the bottom.

“Tonic syrup,” Mama offered. “Ancient recipe. Cures all sorts of aches and pains, fevers and what-not. Those jars have to steep a few more days.”

Mama insisted on stirring up some fresh limeade so I could give it a try. Liza slipped out the back door, grabbed a bottle of homemade tonic water from the cellar, and pinched a handful of wild mint growing next to the back stoop.

Meanwhile, I examined the first floor windows. My fingers trailed the window sills, the rotten wood, the bullet hole. I unlatched the locks, pushed a window open that banged shut the minute I left it. Mama laughed when she heard the crash. She emerged from the kitchen. “Those aren’t the new ones, honey,” she said. Mama handed me a tall frosted glass.

The room darkened as if it were night and just like that a torrent of rain thudded, pounding the roof, and a gust of wind ushered in the smell of earth, dank and rich with decay before slamming the front door shut. I sipped my limeade, both tart and bitter. Mama turned on a lamp, and I could see my reflection in the window, hawkish features hidden in the swell of a little girl face. It was distorted, wavy in the pock-marked glass, the bullet hole piercing my breastbone on the left side. I felt a brief electric twitch in my heart. I took another sip. It tasted like childhood. It tasted like climbing forbidden trees, like the day I fell and got the wind knocked out of me, unable to breathe and no words to speak. Splinters. It tasted like the day I didn’t make the cheerleading

team. Waiting 'til midnight for the phone call that never came. Like the time that man slid his fingers into places they didn't belong. In the window, I saw empty vessels, sorrow, regret. All swirling with the storm outside.

I could feel Mama and Liza hovering behind me, as if watching the unveiling of my soul.

"That's enough, Mama," said Liza.

"Indeed," Mama said clicking off the light.

The rain crescendoed into a thunderous applause, faded to a hazy mist, then stopped. I shook my head. I was dazed.

Mama ushered me outside. Steam rose from the earth. A lightning bolt zagged in the distance where it was still dark as night, still pouring. A clap of thunder. The sun blinked on. It was hotter than ever. Hotter than any day I could remember.

We sat on the swing, Liza next to me gently pushing us back and forth with her white-booted foot. Our perch was rickety: it moaned and creaked as we swayed. Her arm rested on the back of the swing. She tugged at the sleeve of my blouse. "People don't like coming out here on account of the name."

"It's true," Mama said. "There used to be a sign at the crossroads with the name of our road, but the college kids from Bowling Green kept stealing it. For room décor. Then one day a frat boy disappeared. His fraternity brothers thought he was playing a prank, because of the legend that this area was sort of like the Bermuda Triangle—back in the day with the swamp. The mud in some places came up to a horse's belly. The trees? So thick you couldn't see daylight. Settlers, soldiers went in and never made their way out. Swallowed up like quicksand, sucked them right into hell, some people say. Anyway, after a day or two, the fraternity brothers got scared and went to the police. Hundreds of volunteers searched for days, made a mess stomping through the cornfields. The only thing they found was a red-laced boot and the road sign stuck in an old bog, one of the last remnants of the swamp. Now, we're just State Route 61. But everyone who's been around these parts for a while knows that this property resides on Devil's Hole Road. That squirrely Galaxy fellow is too damn scared to come here. Imagine that? A grown man on a sunny summer afternoon. And leaving you to fend for yourself. Sure wasn't scared when he had windows to sell."

Mama, it turned out, was a geologist. She was fascinated by the invisible landscape, everything that lies underneath. Bought the old farmhouse so that she could study the earth, the soil and its

ecosystem. I learned Liza wasn't her daughter. Mama had found her squatting in the house, painting huge canvasses of wildflowers and cattails and willows and dark things. Instead of kicking her out, Mama asked her to stay. They had some arrangement but didn't offer to share the details.

We continued rocking back and forth. By then, I had kicked off my pumps again. My bare toes traced the splintered paint under my feet. My big toe worked to dislodge a gray triangle. Liza scooted closer, her nearness startling. I felt a current, an unmistakable yet unnameable static in the air. Goosebumps prickled my arms. I was breathless, from the heat I supposed.

Mama sat in one of two rocking chairs. Her hair pushed back off her forehead with a pair of reading glasses revealing a widow's peak. A dark mole dotted the corner of one cheek. She stared at me with her midnight-blue eyes.

Everything slowed, time stood still on account of the heat as if we were sitting on the veranda at the beginning of a sultry Southern play. Nothing urgent. My heart rate slowed. In this moment, there were no clients, no billable hours, no stacks of briefs and case books, nothing to be filed. No angry judges. I gave in, released myself to the moment. I once again unbuttoned my blouse but this time I took it off, rolled up my skirt like a Catholic school girl in a lacy camisole. A random breeze nibbled at my skin.

I held my icy glass dripping with condensation against my forehead.

"Twenty thousand years ago, this whole area was covered by glaciers," Mama said. She nodded outward past the porch toward the barn, the fields, the silos, the deserted country highway. "Imagine that. Everything you see out there. Covered in ice, one mile thick. Seventeen and a half football fields deep." She paused so I could visualize the immensity. "It all came from the North."

"Trouble always comes from up north" said Liza. "Hockey players, lumberjacks, Mounties." Liza touched her fingers to her mouth hiding a memory, the bloom of a smile.

"The climate changed. Canada grew frigid cold. Winter arrived and, like a bad house guest, never left, for thousands of years, dumping its massive suitcases full of ice and snow," Mama continued.

I thought of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. Like Narnia. Always winter but never Christmas.

"So much of it piled up and accumulated that a great ice sheet squeezed out from under the mound and pushed outward due to

its own weight. Imagine a giant rolling pin and a lump of dough, working the lump back and forth spreading it until the dough and everything under it is as flat as pie crust. But this glacier, it ground like a pickaxe over exposed rocks and mountains. The icy fist of nature pulverizing everything in its wake. It gouged and scraped the landscape, depositing sand, silt, gravel, and clay.”

“Don’t forget the sea creatures,” said Liza. She kicked off her boots, pulled her hair off the nape of her neck. Scooted even closer.

“And sea creatures, crushed calcified bones of sea creatures,” Mama said.

I looked out past the front porch, across the street and the cornfields beyond. I tried to imagine great mounds of prehistoric squid and eel. Ancient mermaids.

“The last ice age ended 10,000 years ago. Once the ice began to melt, great torrents of water gushed, searching for an outlet to the sea. In this area, the glacier gouged out an ancient lake, Lake Maumee, which was lined with an impermeable blue clay bottom. The lake grew and shrank over the centuries, a slow-moving, throbbing force of nature.”

Liza plucked an ice cube from my glass, sucked on it and then rolled it on the hollow of her neck, her hairline, her cleavage. I stared into my limeade—bits of light green pulp had floated to the top.

“When the water finally receded, it left behind the swamp,” Mama said. “Black mucky waters, vipers, plagues of mosquitos, malaria.”

“And swamp creatures,” added Liza. “Made of clay.”

A car rumbled up the driveway, wheels spinning in the dirt and gravel crunching.

The Judge emerged from the car in a cloud of dust.

I hastily grabbed my blouse, threw it on over my camisole, tucking it in. I grabbed my shoes.

Mama stood up.

“Hello, Lilith,” the Judge said.

“Judge. What brings you here? It’s been ages, after all. You come for some tonic?”

“I got a call from the Galaxy boy saying he couldn’t make it. Some sort of medical emergency. Thought I’d come out and take a look at the windows myself. And collect Ms. Armstrong. There’s a tornado warning.”

“Come on in, Judge.” Mama handed him her untouched glass of limeade. “You may as well have a drink while you’re here. It’s

good for your ague.”

“Thank you, ma’am. It is about time for my afternoon shakes.”

“The windows in question are upstairs.”

Liza and I watched the two retreat into the house. We heard footsteps as they walked to the second floor. Soon it seemed the entire house was rattling. Back and forth, back and forth with an occasional bang against a wall.

“Let’s get out of here,” Liza said. She jumped off the swing mid-rock, and limeade splashed onto the webby vee connecting my fingers and thumb. Liza watched me as I licked it off. I hesitated, looked up at the second floor windows.

“Come on,” Liza said, grabbing my sticky hand. “They’ll be awhile.” And just like that, Liza and I were holding hands, strolling to the gray barn just beyond the house.

I was hoping for horses, or pigs, or squawking chickens, but it didn’t look like that type of farm. Then I imagined hay bales and shovels and rakes, a rusted tractor to match Liza’s truck. Liza unlatched the barn door, and with a dramatic tug she slid the door to the right. I gasped. The barn was filled with windows. New, old, ancient. Every shape and size. Hundreds, stacked and filed every which way.

Liza laughed. “Mama has a thing for windows.”

I waded through the tangle of frames.

Each window was tagged, inventoried with a date, a place, and a name. One read: “Private John Stryker, Western Reserve Road, 1812,” another: “Abraham Tanner, Perrysburg, 1937.” Another: “Bog Boy, BGSU, 1984.”

“Are the Galaxy windows here? The ones that didn’t fit?”

Liza pointed to the corner in the back.

The Galaxy windows were wrapped in white paper, one tagged nonetheless. A flourish of calligraphy gleamed wet with ink. I looked to Liza for an explanation, but she had turned away from me. The delicate wings of her shoulder blades trembled as she stared beyond the barn doors, into the fields, where swampy things once lived.