Phoebe Blake

All in a Day's Work

Zoe brought the note down to the store. "Help!" it said. "Save me from the boring little bird with the broken wing. Also need a quick run to Wink's. Kevin's due this afta. Lunch on me. XXX & OOO's, Lizzie."

"Who's up there," I ask, and the child says Cousin Margery, who would drive anyone to drink. Not that Lizzie needs excuses. "What time's Kevin due?" She shrugs and I give her the candy she's been eyeing in the case. "Tell your aunt I'll be up at noon."

So instead of eating a cheese sandwich in the back with Wally, I leave. I have worked for him ever since high school, since two weeks and three days after graduation, to be exact. Mr. Wall I called him then. Then, even then, he seemed to be a year older than god.

You take the road going south out of town, over the bridge; turn left on the sea road; left again; and at the end of the lane, on the edge of the marshies, sits the retreat. (The Dunns are great ones for dressing things up with names.) "Retreat from what?" my father would say. "Respectability and work?" He was jealous, I think, of all the time I spent there. "Why don't you move your bed over and be done with it?" And the thing of it was, if there had been room, I probably would have. But besides Dunns the place was always filled with friends, boyfriends, girlfriends, husbands, wall to wall, laughing it up, drinking, ice in the sink, from the fourth of July on, people who said right in front of their faces, "Who do you think's more beautiful, Lizzie or Laura?" Or, "...Diana or Kate?" Or, "...Virginia or Lizzie?" And I never saw one of them blush. It was fun.

Around here they're still called "the Dunn girls," although at least a dozen husbands can be divided among them. (Baby buzzer Kevin is married, too, and just turned forty, though I doubt he'll admit either. His kids call him Kevin or K.D.) Lizzie, herself, has been married five times in her own peculiar way. Never takes their names. Never lives with them either. She visits them like she visits everyone else, if it's on the way to where she's going. Four died of natural causes, including

one suicide—no divorces, I mean—and the current one, someone she met on a boat, is alive in New York City. She never talks about them until they're gone and then it's days in her room crying and carrying on. Don't ask me. I gave up asking questions long ago.

I was twenty-four when Lizzie came into the store for the first time and asked what month I was born in and told me I'm good with figures and with my eyes and coloring, a blonde, and she'd fix it for me because sometimes nature slips. My father would not look at me for weeks after that, and said that anyone who listened to a Dunn deserved to look like a poor unfortunate.

I turn down the lane and see the screen door open and the dog fall out, and I say to myself that dog is not getting in this car and neither are those kids. It's unnecessary. Then Lizzie steps out and all I can think of is what my father would say. (He always said the Dunns were gypsies.) She's dressed in a maternity top and one of those jungle skirts left over from the shop that hangs to her feet. She wears maternity clothes because her body will not tolerate restricting garments. No bras. No panties. No nothing. But she used to be a dandy. Always in beige. Head to toe beige. "In this man's world," she would say, "a businesswoman has to impress. Beige sets me off to advantage, and one pair of shoes goes with everything." I wave. She waves like she's brushing a hair from her face. Did I say she was forty-seven? But her hair is always neat. Dyes it coal black, and zips her lip.

Thwuck, thwuck, thwuck, thwuck—the screen door slamming after the kids who divide themselves on either side of the car. "What's going on," as if I didn't know.

"Cousin Margery's holding the fort in case Kevin pulls in." While she's saying that with no expression whatsoever on her face, she's thumbing over her shoulder. In the kitchen window are two gloved hands; one holds the curtain back, the other waves.

I smile and wave at Cousin Margery. "Can't the kids stay and hold the fort with her?"

Lizzie puts her cigarettes and change purse on the dash. "Kids don't bother me."

"What about me?"

She gives me the hate look over the top of the car and says that they have to help her at the library, *if* I don't mind.

O.K., I tell myself, lost on that one but hold firm on the dog and I ease in behind the wheel. The kids aren't bad, but their hands and faces are never clean because they don't have to do anything they don't want to when they're with Aunt Lizzie. It's a law with her. The next thing I see, out of the corner of my eye, is the dog being tented under her jungle skirt. "Dogs are domestic an-eee-mals," she says in her bored voice, pulling down her nose like Mrs. Astor's horse, "which means they are snatched from their natural state by man who, having robbed them of their protective instincts, has the responsibility of caring for them."

"In other people's cars?" I say and she says that life is too short for argument and tells the kids to wave to Cousin Margery.

Fay, I tell myself, you lose; two in a row, you lose. But don't for a minute think that because Lizzie's won she is happy. Oh, no, she's in the sulks, smoking like a stack and bracing herself against the dash, as if she's in pain, moaning and groaning every time we go over a bump because I've, what, questioned her?

(She does snap out of this long enough to count the cars at the Nautilus Motel. Lizzie has a thing about the Nautilus Motel, because she had the idea first, of turning the retreat into the town's first motel, but the others wouldn't let her. Occupancy, one hundred per cent, equals blacker mood. I step on the accelerator.)

Ellie Perkins, the librarian, wears her hair just the same as in school only now it's gray and stringy instead of brown. I wish I had a nickel for every time Lizzie's said that someone should introduce her to a jar and a bar—a jar of deodorant and a bar of soap—but now the two of them are huddled together like two peas in a pod.

"What you need is massive doses of B-12," Lizzie is telling her. "It will calm you. Calm you right down. Noise won't bother you. Or the kids...." Lizzie gives her the old snake eyes like no one else existed in the world and Ellie's bobbing up and down, hands shuffling those cards in and out of the books like lightning. I don't think anyone's paid her this much mind since she wore diapers. On my time. Never mind.

The summer people, the rich ones from the Landing, are looking at Lizzie and you can tell what they're wondering. "Vitamin B-12! Massive doses," Lizzie repeats and slaps down

her hand on the counter and everyone who wasn't looking before looks up now. Then Ellie mouths a thank you in her library whisper and Lizzie strikes out across the floor with the kids trailing behind, poor little things, hunchbacked with astrology books ordered from the capitol on inter-library loan. "Por nada," she calls over her shoulder and salutes. She takes the three granite steps carefully: left foot first; left foot first; left foot first.

After that performance I figure she's out of it. We all pile in and I check the kids' feet in the rear view then move slowly down the street, out into the sunlight and over the wooden bridge. It will be good seeing Kevin I say. "Will it," and she lets out one of those long, airy, suffering sighs that sounds like death itself. So at Wink's I stay outside and watch the dust settle.

At this time of day it's always busy. They can't get off the road fast enough for their ice cold beer and rat cheese. That's something Wink orders special from Vermont to have something different. It's a fifty-pound block he keeps just inside the door, and it sweats all summer. If he'd sweep the floor, he'd have something different. But some people you can't tell a thing. I remind myself this is my car.

"This will have to be quick," I say, when she reaches into the bag for her third. "I have to get going." We're a little further down the road and she's sitting on the running board with her skirt hitched up and over her knees and draping down between her thighs in thankful modesty, staring down the kids who are mad-faced under the tree because she's given them raisins for lunch. They toss the little boxes back and forth, just to show her. My lunch: the bottle in my hand.

"Oh, we don't want to interrupt your important busy-ness." Whoosh, the third foams a bit. "Let the chicken-necked old fart earn some of what he takes home at the end of the week." She lets the smoke out through her nose then turns to look at me. "Who does ninety-nine per cent of the work? Who clerks, pays the bills, does the ordering? Let's call a spade a spade. There has to be more return on all that work."

"Liz-zie!" (I'm not complaining.)

She has a crooked smile. She puts down the bottle to pat the dog. "Of course, if the old batch were to leave the busy-ness to you, it would be different. Now, who's your best friend? And what have I always said? Take advantage of advantage—

there's no one else waiting in the wings; he's got no family. If you want, I'll...."

I put my hand up but my best friend keeps on talking. Actually, she's more like family. I slug mouthwash and signal the kids. She's still talking. They climb in the back. The dog curls up under her knees. And still she's talking. She could have gone to M.I.T., I understand.

The afternoon was slow, what with everyone at the beach. I cleaned up after Wally, who's not as neat as he used to be. In fact, he'd die if he saw himself some days. As it is, he goes through three jackets a week. It's the starch that holds him up, I think.

Around three-thirty I look out and there's Zoe with another note clutched in her hot, fat hand. This one says, "And pick up eighteen ears of corn at Bunting's on the way, O.K. XXX & OOO's, Lizzie."

On the way two things cross my mind. The first is how Lizzie's told me that of all the places she's been, the retreat's her favorite and she wants to be buried right behind the house where the view's the best. The first time she told me, I told her about marshland and she gave me the hate look, so I've never mentioned it again. But, if I know Lizzie, she'll get her way and be pickled in the brine just like she says. That flitted in and out of mind; the second crossed slowly: I must be the only woman in America who's not had a little you-know with Kevin. He could be in movies. He'll tell you that himself. No, none of the Dunns is shy except Cousin Margery who, when I come through the kitchen door, is perched on a chair with her hat still on (and one glove), staring up at Kevin.

"Fay, baby, you look great! You athletic ones look better longer, that's for sure. But let me put you down, darlin', and get you a drink. I was just telling the ladies here about my drive up. Ough!" he says, making a face and stamping the heel of his boot. "What a bitch!"

There is no expression on Lizzie's face. She's on tippy-toe, red nails poking through her canvas shoes, moving things from one place to another to no purpose that I can see. She has the longest, skinniest legs, bar none. Her belly's sprung, but her legs are just the same; aristo-legs, short for aristocratic.

I sit down at the table opposite Cousin Margery, and from where I sit it looks like prune juice in her glass. I listen. There is no other choice. The kids are singing, "Hello, hello, little

early bird. What have you seen? What have you heard?" And Kevin talks; I'd forgotten how Kevin talks. A flood of words. Details galore. I fear it's going to take longer than the trip.

He stands with all his weight on one foot, knee cocked out to the side, a beer in one hand, a cigarette in the other that he ashes by a violent snap of his entire arm, as if he's flycasting. He describes driving under a truck (almost) in Virginia and Cousin Margery squeaks. Behind him Lizzie rolls her eyes up into her head. On the stove two blue kettles steam. One for corn. One for lobster. I am ready for the feast. "Remind me, Fay, to get back to that," he says, "but before I forget it, did you see my Doonie?"

"Outside?"

"Isn't he a bu-tay?" He ashes again and misses. The ash rolls softly off the table and crumbles to the floor. "Maa-Maa bought him for me for Christmas. Got him from a little beauty queen herself up in West Palm. Former Miss Citrus Products and a great squeeze. I'd seen the daddy dog at the Dade show last fall and began negotiations that were rolling smoothly until Maa-Maa rested her eyes on Miss Citrus. Almost did not get my Doonie, which would have been a shame."

"A shame." Behind him Lizzie is rotating a finger by the side of her head. I put my head down, so he won't see me smiling.

"But, Fay, to get back to what I was saying. I had to go into D.C. on business...."

"Lucky you married well." It's plain Lizzie's been into the pantry once too often. They're both talking at the same time, taking turns growing louder. And the kids won't let up. I wish they'd learn another song.

"...monkey business, I'm not kidding."

"I bet you aren't."

"One of my clients was bitten by a monkey that some tourist from D.C. brought down on vacation...."

"Jesus H. Christ!"

Cousin Margery blesses her pale forehead, and her pale lips, and her chest. She never stays too long.

"I wanted to see if I could short circuit the case. Have a friendly with their lawyer, who incidentally has a fancy schmancy address on Pennsylvania Avenue."

"The President is el stupido," comes loudly from the pantry and Cousin Margery jumps. Here we go again, and the next

thing we hear is that the President is a god-damned fool, el stupido, and what we really need is a businessman to run the country. "A businessman. Not that self-important, god-damned fool. At least someone with a brain. In a better world than this, things will be run according to a strict hierarchy of intellect, if they know what's good for them. The big brains doing the big jobs. It's very simple."

"People like yourself, you mean."

"People with a business sense, what's wrong with that? What is government anyway?"

I get the feeling that no one in the room knows why the conversation's gone this way, not even Lizzie. But you get two or more Dunns together and it's often like this. I get up and drag the barrel to the table and begin husking corn. Just to get things going. If Lizzie had her way, the cocktail hour would never end.

"We did very well," she says and he shrugs. "Two hundred and fifty thousand, first year. Not bad. Not bad for the Depression."

"Gross, Lizzie. Two hundred and fifty thousand gross. That makes a big difference."

"Two hundred and fifty thousand, look at me!"

"But how many little slavies did you have to pay? All your good and intimate friends, remember? Lizzie was a great one for fraternizing with the help."

She's standing on one leg, rubbing at her shin with the other, and giving him the hate look in aces. "It was good enough to put you through two years of prep school, four years of college, and then what was it, monkey man, law school? Your own father gave up on you. Just think where you'd be, if it weren't for me. Reform school, that's where. Look at me!"

He turns grandly from the sink. "Lizzie. Everyone's best friend and lets you know it. Please, treat me like a stranger."

Then Cousin Margery, who having pulled on her other glove has been fussing with her hat with stiff, white fingers, says that she's thinking of changing her position. She has worked for the same man for twenty-four years and thinks it's time for a change. Lizzie gives that exactly nothing. "Look at me."

"Can't say I like what I see."

"What do I care?" Her voice gets pretty ugly when she's like this, and a look comes over her that makes you glad she's a friend, not an enemy. Kevin has stomped out, leaving the kitchen quiet. Then Cousin Margery smiles at me and says it's a difficult decision after all these years and she's afraid. "What's there to be afraid of?" from you-know-who, who's tippy-toeing into the pantry. She painted it earlier this year with left-over paints, so the door's one color; shelves, another; the walls, a third. All in all, a mess. Now both kettles are putting out steam. About a third of the corn is done. I figure in a half hour we could be eating. Then Kevin comes back, trailed by the jumping kids, eager to put on their show. They have powdered themselves all over and leave footprints on the floor. "I want you to sign the house over to me," she says right away, grinding out a cigarette in the sink.

"What house?"

"This house."

He stares at her with those dark, deep-set eyes. "Later, kidlings, now run along." And from the side of his mouth: "Your auntie's talking foolish."

Cousin Margery seems relieved to herd the kids. "All the energy," she says. "Don't I wish, oh my!"

"What makes you think I would give this place to you?"

"Give? Give?" she shrieks with her eyebrows up to her hairline. "You wouldn't be giving me a thing! You owe it to me. Who found it in the first place? Who made the down payment?"

"Who paid it off?"

"It was only put in your name as a convenience. You were the only unmarried one. The baby buzzer. It's mine, for...."

"Or Laura's or Ginnie's or Kate's."

"*Morally*, it's mine."

"Legally, it's mine."

"But you owe me..."

"For free loading here year after year. You're a great one for doing things for people so you can later call notes due. I believe you have a few husbands who could testify to that. They took the easy way out and died." He's yelling louder than she and I'm about to say something but think better of it.

"Welcome home," he says ironically, giving me the hard eye and calmly thumbing his cigarettes into his pocket. Then he

holds up a beer he has just taken from the refrigerator. "Put this on my tab, will you, I'm leaving."

The first thing she threw was an empty. Then her glass. "Lizzie!" he yelled and she picked up one of the kettles from the stove and burning her hands, let it go in that slowly slipping, unbelieving way you do when you've done something stupid. The kettle bounced, overturned, and the water burned my legs and feet. Nothing serious; but pain. "What were you doing there, you parasite," she said.

That was Monday. I have not been over there since. I'm thinking. I thought Tuesday and Wednesday and this morning. It's been raining, so the store's slow with people killing time. Wally didn't even come in.

Then just before noon Zoe arrives with a pot of beef stew, "to warm you on a dismal day," she recites with her eyes glued on the candy case. She's getting fat from delivering messages. This is something different, I think; how are you, I say. She says she's fine and I give her the candy.

I'm still thinking. I haven't touched the stew, maybe out of principle, maybe fear—I wonder. But I've put it on the hot plate and since all Lizzie's pots are round on the bottom, there it wobbles.

I packed a gallon of peach ice cream for a party and was glad to do it, because you can get silly from so much thinking. You see, when I look at the stew, besides potatoes, onions, peppers, and the lonely piece of beef, I see that a tall, dark woman needs a ride to Wink's. Do I sound like a gypsy? (My father must be turning in his grave.) I'm still thinking. But you get tired of it after a while. After a while you tire of anything.