North · *Frederick Busch*

IN THE PICTURES of us you can see how willing we were from the start. We smiled so hard for the camera. We did what we were told. You go explain that to a dry-goods salesgirl in the largest independent variety store in the Mohawk Valley (except for Utica), New York.

I told her, "No. It wasn't the Starving Artists Show. It wasn't the Adirondacks. That's just a silly thing of mine. Look. Finally, it worked out to where it was, you know, time. There wasn't anything. I mean, we'd got to the point where I had a framed picture of him hanging up next to the little Drexel cherrywood desk where I sat when I paid the bills."

"Good reason," Franchot said. She was a tall blonde with a high waist and yellow teeth. She didn't mean it unkindly, and she blushed to prove it as she lit another Kool.

"It was the picture his parents had shot when he was eight years old, Franchot. With the white shirt with the big collar? And the wide, short necktie with big raspberries on the bright blue background?"

"Oh. Well, that's cute."

"Sure is. Sure was. And you know what he had in his office? Well. His cubicle. You know what?"

"*Your* picture."

"My picture. Me, six years old, in the pinafore with the white buttons and the white lace collar."

"What color pinafore?"

"The picture was in black and white."

"And you don't remember the color?"

"No, I don't. That's not the point, is it?"

She shook her head. Her fine light hair spun. She waited for me to tell her what the point was—why I had left a husband after four years.

Vigary came into the back room of the store, just then. "Hi, girls," he said. Franchot smiled, but I nodded coldly. I was not about to be called a girl by a man who was wearing the bottom half of a green clown's suit, wide flat blueberry-colored feet and all. His upper half was in a light blue oxford button-down. I could tell it wasn't good cloth. It was one of those drip-dry combination fabrics with the wide pores. All those cheap shirts have a kind of weave to them. If the man wearing one doesn't have an

undershirt on, his belly hairs stick out the tiny little holes. So there was Gene Vigary, with his belly hairs and his blue plastic clown's feet.

He looked at my face, but I refused to smile for him. He'd have to learn. He set down a large carton and he sighed. He smiled at Franchot and she showed her yellow teeth in return.

"United Parcel just came through again," Gene said. He motioned at the opened carton. "Our costumes."

I said, "My former husband used to wear shirts like that. Every day. He had eight of them. He rotated them so the armpits didn't get, you know, stained or stale. They can turn yellow on you, from the sweat. I washed one a night. For four years. One thousand four hundred and sixty-one shirts."

Vigary nodded. He closed his eyes, the way you do when you count up in your mind. I knew from the way he nodded that I talked too much about my former husband. Women my age do, I noticed: widows and divorcées, as my mother liked to call us. I thought she thought *divorcée,* being French, was something like *whore.* "You figured in an extra day for Leap Year," he said at last.

I said, "What did you mean, Gene, our costumes?"

He pointed with pride at the carton as if, in the storeroom consisting mainly of steel shelves with cartons on them, it had already earned pride of place.

"All the way from Athens, Ohio," he sang. He rubbed his hands as if they'd done some work. I looked away, because I knew the news was bad. I didn't have to watch to know his jowls shook, and his red-orange hair threatened to fly off from where its one lank hank, parted starting at his left ear, tried to ride his bald head as if it belonged up there. He said, "Beel and Steinberg, Costumes and Wigs."

I wanted to ask him if he'd bought himself a red-orange wig to wear in place of the dye-job-and-hair-shaft he was featuring. But I needed a job, and this was a job. I looked at boxes of one-size-fits-all baseball caps, and rabbit-shaped cookie cutters. On the far wall was the framed picture of young Gene Vigary standing next to a dark-skinned man named Sandy Amoros. He'd told us proudly how he'd seen him make some wonderful catch off of some famous baseball player in New York City. Nobody else who shopped in the store seemed to care either. This black man in the picture with Gene wasn't Jackie Robinson, and that was all I knew or cared to.

"I don't intend to wear a costume on Hallowe'en," I said.

"Oh, I want to," Franchot said. "I love dressing up."

"I love dressing up, too," I said. "But dressing up isn't wearing huckleberry-flavored shoes. With all due respect."

"None taken," Vigary said. "But there is a costume in there for you, and I think you're gonna love it. I do hope so, on account of tomorrow, the 31st of October, the employees in Vigary's Dry Goods are gonna be wearing the uniform of the day. And the uniform of the day—well, lemme see," and he sounded like his mouth was full of honey and Hershey kisses, "Franchot, she'll be wearing"—like a clown sent to cheer up the orphans, he slowly pulled it out—"a Playboy Bunny costume!"

Franchot actually squealed. She actually slapped her palms together. It put me in mind of nothing so much as one of those TV contest shows, where women jump up and down in costumes and shout at each other about how much kitchen appliances cost.

Vigary held up a few pieces of black cloth and some mesh stockings with some sort of insects on the weave, cloth butterflies or moths, I thought.

He handed her outfit to Franchot, and she examined it, as if it mattered. He said, "Kelly?"

It was like getting news from the dentist.

"Yes, Gene," I said.

"Here."

I turned back to look. It seemed to be some kind of flimsy blue-black nightgown.

"What's that, Gene?"

"Your costume."

"You sure it's skimpy enough? I mean, will you have enough skin showing in the store tomorrow?"

"Couple of pretty girls like you, I thought we should show ya off."

"You sure did. Who am I?"

"You're Elvira."

"Elvira?"

"The lady with the big—you know! Witch lady shows the midnight horror movies on TV? She's kinda sarcastic. But really put together good. You remind me of her."

"I've been getting all the horror I need before midnight," I told him.

"Now, don't you be a spoilsport, Kelly."

"I'd really like to not have to wear this, Gene."

"But it's part of the job," he said. "Isn't it."

"It really is?"

He nodded. His face might just as well have been an elbow or a knee for all the expression it gave me. His little dark eyes looked out from behind his face. His bright hair flapped. I thought the clown costume would suit him well. I always thought that clowns were mean crazy people inside of those noses and lips.

Franchot said, "I could come over early, Kel. We could make up and everything before work."

"Great," Gene said. "Great initiative. It's *business.* It's what holidays like Hallowe'en are supposed to remind us."

"I thought it was when the dead came back," I said.

He said, "Come on, Kelly. That's for kids."

Sid had told me I should keep the house. He'd have told me anything he thought I'd want to hear. Either he was convinced that I'd wake up, like the princess on her funeral bed, and forgive him while asking his forgiveness, or he figured he was so guilty of something that he owed me all he could give. The poor man was wounded, and I couldn't give him so much as a bandage when I left. I got my own apartment, not too far from the mall on Route 12. It's north of Utica, and I could hear the low gears of the trucks. It always sounded to me like they were winding up for the long haul north. Route 12 went up to the Adirondacks, and I always thought that one day I'd pack what I could into the AMC Eagle and aim myself for some lakeside fishing town up there, and in the shadow of the mountains I would sell mosquito repellent and bait from behind a counter, and live in a little cabin, and meet people who were there to find out what really mattered—or, even better, who knew. I still could do that.

The apartment wasn't bad. The walls were made of not much more than sheetrock, of course. Everything's built that way, these days. But the moldings were nice, and the wall-to-wall carpet wasn't called Champagne. You get to appreciate that, apartment-hunting. It was a nice dark color called Toast, and the paint on the walls was closer to an Ivory, or Parchment, than just plain white that they all tried to give you. I had the old bedroom suite from Sid and me, and some old furniture from my par-

ents' garage. Every once in a while, I bought a painting of a mountain or a lake that I thought might be in the Adirondacks. It was only a four-hour drive to get there, but I had never gone. So I guessed about the high pointy mountains I had heard of, and all the lakes. Every now and again there would be a Starving Artist Sale at the Holiday Inn in Rome, New York. All these painters couldn't sell their work, so they painted mountains and lakes and cute animals, and all the pictures, all framed already, were stacked up in the convention center at the Holiday Inn, arranged by sofa-size and chair-size, according to where you needed a painting. I never saw the artists there. I'd have liked to talk to one. You need to meet people who guess at what's what and who believe in it enough to starve. I only saw Franchot and Vigary, and the ladies who dragged their children in while they shopped for incense candles and potholders and trivets with blue pictures on a white background of Dutch windmills. I didn't date. I didn't want to have to describe myself or explain myself or listen to anyone's lies describing himself to me.

I fried up some onions and peppers with yesterday's rice, and I made a hamburger. I always bought ground round because I figured you owed yourself something. I listened to the news report on the radio, and I drank a whopping belt of Cutty Sark. I learned that one thing from Sid: "Hey Kelly," he used to say, when I had a bottle of something cheap in my hand. He'd point at the Inver House and he'd say, "Kelly. You're gonna put that stuff in your *stomach.*" That was a good true thing to remember.

I took my dinner into the living room, and I finished my drink. The local news was on the TV, but they didn't really know anything I didn't. They knew the *details,* but I could have told them, walking in the door and not even bothering to turn the set on. Two-car collision at some street corner. Baby burned or beaten or neglected out in the countryside someplace. A factory closing down. A politician hoping for something out loud, or wondering if we really needed it anymore. And weather coming, a little warm, and then cooler, and some jokes about trick-or-treat, and don't let your children eat razor blades or glass. And then the sports.

The thing about Cutty Sark is it tastes like the ground it comes out of. Especially if you drink it warm, which I did, because I didn't want to have to go for more ice cubes when I splashed in the little extra bit more. There I was, I thought, drinking the peat (whatever that was) and the water out of Scotland. That was a place I should go to, I thought.

Then they showed Elvira. They said she'd be showing movies at midnight, on Hallowe'en. She came out in her skin-tight black dress with all the skin between her tits showing down to her belly, and they were so big. Plastic, I thought, or—what was it they used?—silicon. I wondered if silicon was the same as plastic. Sid had always talked about silicon in the computers he sold, and I thought about giant tits that stood straight out in a slinky dress, ticking away inside with little computer chips. Breasts that can think, I thought. I heard myself laugh, and I hated the sound.

I made myself clean up right away. I turned the TV off and changed my clothes in the bedroom with its big bed. I was standing in there alone, pulling jeans up and sliding down my Champion Mills hooded sweatshirt that said Green Bay Packers, on sale at the factory outlet, and I stopped. I stood there next to a pretty painting of a lake and a maple tree dropping its leaves onto the still water. My pants were undone, and my sweatshirt was up around my neck, and I just stopped. I put my hand on my stomach, and I jumped because my palm was so cold.

I was remembering how Sid had cried. I think he'd been as impressed as I was, because he kept saying, "Look at me. I never cry, Kelly, ever, and I'm crying! For *you!*"

That had made me cry. We'd stood there, in the kitchen of our big house out near the Clinton reservoir, and we'd just cried at each other. It seemed to me, later on, that we were trying to see who could show the most sadness.

"Sid," I remembered telling him, "you win."

"Oh," he had said, like a little kid. "Kelly. We're not going to do this?"

I said, "I meant you're sadder than I am."

And then he'd really started in to cry.

And that night, Hallowe'en eve, in my new apartment off Route 12, I felt worse about his crying than when he had cried. It was like I suddenly understood what had happened. No. I understood how much damage I had done. You'd have thought that my belly would warm up my hand, or that my skin would get used to my fingers. But nothing got used to anything. I stood half-dressed, with my fingers feeling cold to my belly and my belly feeling hot to my hand. We'd wanted some freedom at the start, we decided, so we didn't try to have kids. I thought about Sid and me, hanging each other's childhood photos on the wall.

I was thirty-five years old, and I hadn't touched a man for almost a year. I wondered if I was going to be a new kind of nun, one of the Sisters of Annulment. My mother told me she had changed her church because she couldn't face Father Boris. I had offered to change my name, if that would help things, and she'd cried. There wasn't anybody I had not made cry who loved me.

The bodice was held together with a dark mesh. But it still didn't plunge right, the way Elvira's dress dived down between those unmoving melons. The mesh looked wrinkled, and so did I. The dress hugged me tight on the hips, and the slit seemed too far front, instead of to the side. And the bodice drooped. "I'm an underdeveloped nation," I told myself in the mirror that morning.

Franchot came over for coffee, and she looked wonderful. I was jealous of her black mesh stockings and her long round legs, and the way her breasts threatened to jump out and sing. Her little rabbit's ears flapped in her hair the way her bosom wobbled when she walked. I figured that Vigary would either throw her down on the floor in the stock room, or offer to leave his wife that afternoon.

Franchot smoked Kools and drank herbal tea, and when I came out of the bedroom wearing a plain blue corduroy skirt with a blue and gray striped shirt, she hissed out her smoke and drank off some tea and said, "I thought you might."

"I can't wear a costume," I said.

"You're so stubborn, Kelly."

"Franchot, people wear costumes, they *hide* from each other."

"So? Don't you *want* to hide from Vigary? Or do you like getting felt up near the bath mats?"

"He doesn't feel—he doesn't touch me!"

Franchot lit another Kool. "I wish I could say the same."

"Tell him not to."

"Getting felt up is the uniform of the day, Kelly."

"Wait a minute."

"I really don't want to go looking for another job again."

"Wait a minute."

"I want to make my wage, and go to school at night, and get a degree and—"

"Franchot! Wait a minute."

"What, Kelly?"

"He molests you?"

"I don't know if that's the word."

"How about he violates you."

"Kelly. He arranges his entire *day* so at one point or another he can get the back of his hand, or the edge of his arm, on my chest. That's all. I mean, it's enough. But it's also all."

"And because you want to be a dental hygienist, and because he pays you a wage, you let him do that."

"I try not to let him. But he works awfully hard at it."

"Oh, I bet you he does."

"Yes," Franchot said.

I thought of myself in the bedroom, with my cold hand on my stomach.

"So he gets to dress you up like his dream."

"Oh, it's a costume, is all, Kelly."

"You tell me what you told me, and you can say it's just a costume?"

She nodded, and the smoke bounced out of her mouth in jagged little bursts.

"There's no such a thing as just a costume," I said. "You're either in disguise, or you're—sincere."

"I'm sincere, Kelly!"

"I know. I know. Franchot, I'm asking you for the sake of my *life*. Don't cry. All right? Please?"

She nodded. Her eyes were wet, but she sniffed and smiled and looked at a Starving Artist painting of a snowstorm in some hills. She looked back, and she said, "So you're going to wear the Elvira suit?"

"Only if I die and you and my mother lay me out in it."

"You don't mean that," Franchot said.

I carried it to work in my big leather handbag, along with my apple and my herbal tea. It was Vigary's, and he could have it back. The stores had pumpkins in their windows, and the merchants wore costumes. They all must have decided at the last Rotary meeting, I thought, when they ate steak or roast beef, and drank too much beer, and then finished the evening off with sweet liqueurs that made them drunk. Sid had gone to a few. He always came home randy. I figured they spent the end of the evening

talking about the waitress's body, trading dirty jokes. One night, he'd come in and he'd barely waited to get his overcoat and sports jacket off before he began to grope and pinch and feel. He'd been clumsy, all right, and he'd smelled stale. But that wasn't why I'd pushed him away like a girl on a date. I'd felt my face go red with my rage. I remember I'd shouted, "Oh, no you don't, buster."

"Kelly," he had whispered. His entire existence, I figured, was slightly south of his reversible brown and black belt. His face looked young and sweet, like the face in the picture on the wall above my desk.

"Yeah. Kelly. Where was my name the last two weeks? When somebody around here was too tired, and then too busy, and then had to watch the CBS late double feature? It takes getting drunk with your rowdy toads at the Clinton Inn, does it?"

"This isn't really *that* serious, is it, Kel? We're not fighting, are we?"

"Oh, no, Sid. Why should we fight? You keep getting drunk once a month at the Rotary, and then come in here and—what is it? Get your ashes shoveled?"

He'd giggled. "Hauled."

"That's disgusting."

"Yes. It's not what I'm—"

"Sid. Listen. It isn't a matter of *what.* It's a matter of *who.* Who you are with me. Who I am to you. *Who.* And what you're after here isn't me. If it was, you'd have been around before this. Not drunk. And not all worked up by whatever dirty talk you and the other merchant princes have been talking. You're supposed to want *me.* Actual, true, me. Not just—skin."

And he had said, "I never knew—you know, that you—"

And I had said, "Well, learn."

I said, "What?"

I was in the stockroom. I had stowed my purse and my coat, and I was making a cup of tea. The clown with the fat middle and bright green nose to match his suit and the blue wig that matched his feet said, "You're not in your costume yet."

I put my mug down. "I'm not going to wear one, Gene."

"Franchot's wearing hers."

"She looks adorable."

He made his green eyebrows go up and down. "You'd look adorable too," he said.

I shook my head.

"Uniform of the day," he said, like it was still a joke between us.

He held his arms out. He was pleading, the position of his arms seemed to say. His face didn't look like anyone's pleading face. It was green and red and blue, and it was a huge, happy face. That face could never plead. It laughed at whoever it looked at.

"I don't wear a uniform," I said. "Otherwise I could have been a waitress at the Inn. I'd have made good tips."

"If you didn't give the diners an argument about taking orders from them," he said. His voice made it seem like a joke. His eyes didn't.

"But you're not ordering me to wear that dress," I said.

The clown face looked at me.

"That isn't who I *am,* Gene."

The clown face said, "And whoever told you it mattered one small jot or tittle who in hell you think you are or what you think you want? Whoever lied about that, Kelly?"

Out front, a customer whistled a wolf call at Franchot. In the stockroom, I looked at the thick painted lips that had spoken. Above the round bright nose, the eyes were dark. They were like the dark jelly you figure you would see if somebody's eyes were torn out. They were looking straight at me. Who's that, I thought.

I finally said, "If you'll give me a little privacy, I'll get myself dressed."

He came closer, and his green gloved fingers held my arms.

"Good girl," he said. "Good girl."

His arms were at my sides. Each thumb was around each upper arm and was pressed against a breast.

He stood like that. The face smiled. The jellies watched me. The long thumbs pressed.

"I'm not crying," I said to him, or both of us.

He said, "Of course you're not. You've got nothing to cry about. Now, you give me a great big smile."