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Sea Glass

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Published by Abacus

Extract

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Honora

Honora sets the cardboard suitcase on the slab of granite. The door is mackereled, paint-chipped – green or black, it is hard to tell. Above the knocker, there are panes of glass, some broken and others opaque with age. Overhead is a portico of weathered shingles and beyond that a milk-and-water sky. Honora pinches the lapels of her suit together and holds her hat against the wind. She peers at the letter *B* carved into the knocker and thinks, *This is the place where it all begins.*

The year is 1929. A June day. A wedding day. Honora is just twenty, and Sexton is twenty-four.

The clapboards of the house are worn from white to flesh. The screens at the windows are ripped and flapping. On the second story, dormers stand like sentries keeping watch over the sea, and from the house a thicket sharp with thorns advances across the lawn. The doorsill is splintered, and she thinks it might give way with her weight. She wants to try the pitted knob, though Sexton has told her not to, to wait for him. She steps down into the dooryard, her pumps denting the springy soil, unleashing a scent that collapses years.

Sexton comes around the corner then, his palms upturned and filled with dirt. He is a man with a surprise, a stranger she hardly knows. A good man, she thinks. She hopes. His coat billows in the breeze, revealing suspenders snug against his shirt. His trousers, mended at a side seam, are loose and ride too low over his shoes. His hair, well oiled for the wedding, lifts in the wind.

Honora steps back up onto the granite slab and waits for her husband. She puts her hands together at her waist, the purse she borrowed from her mother snug against her hip. Sexton has an offering: sandy soil, a key.

'The soil is for the solid ground of marriage,' he says. 'The key is for unlocking secrets.' He pauses. 'The earrings are for you.'

Honora bends her face toward the pillow of dirt. Two marcasite-and-pearl earrings lie nearly buried in Sexton's hands. She brushes them off with her finger.

'They belonged to my mother,' Sexton says. 'The soil and the key are an old tradition your uncle Harold told me.'

'Thank you,' she says. 'They're very beautiful.'

She takes the key and thinks, *Crossing the sill. Beginning our life together.*

The man came into the bank with a roll of tens and fives, wanting larger bills so that he could buy a car. He had on a long brown coat and took his hat off before he made the transaction. The white collar of his shirt was tight against his neck, and he talked to Honora as she counted out the money. A Buick two-door, he explained. A 1926, only three years old. It was the color of a robin's egg, he said, with a red stripe just below the door handle. A real beauty, with wood-spoke wheels and navy mohair upholstery. He was

getting it for a song, from a widow who'd never learned to drive her husband's car. He seemed excited in the way that men do when thinking about cars that don't belong to them yet, that haven't broken down yet. Honora clipped the bills together and slipped them under the grille. His eyes were gray, set deep beneath heavy brows. He had a trim mustache, a shade darker than his hair. He brushed his hair, flattened some from the hat, from his forehead. She had to wiggle the money under the grille to remind him of it. He took it, folded it once, and slipped it into the pocket of his trousers.

'What's your name?' he asked.

'Honora,' she said.

'How do you spell it?'

She spelled it for him. 'The *H* is silent,' she added.

'O-*nor*-a,' he said, trying it out. 'Have you worked here long?'

They were separated by the grille. It seemed an odd way to meet, though better than at McNiven's, where she sometimes went with Ruth Shaw. There a man would slide into the booth and press his leg against your thigh before he'd even said his name.

'I'm Sexton Beecher,' the handsome face dissected by grillwork said. At the next window, Mrs. Yates was listening intently.

Honora nodded. There was a man behind him now. Harry Knox, in his overalls, holding his passbook. Growing impatient.

Sexton put his hat back on. 'I sell typewriters,' he said, answering a question that hadn't yet been asked. 'The courthouse is one of my accounts. I need a car in my job. I used to borrow my boss's Ford, but the engine went. They said

it would cost more to fix it than to buy a new one. Don't ever buy a Ford.'

It seemed unlikely she would ever buy a Ford.

The courthouse employed at least half of the adults in town. Taft was the county seat, and all the cases went to trial there.

'Enjoy the car,' Honora said.

The man seemed reluctant to turn away. But there was Harry Knox stepping up to the grille, and that was that. Through the window at the side of the bank, Honora caught a glimpse of Sexton Beecher buttoning his coat as he walked away.

Sexton tries the switch on the wall, even though they both know there is no electricity yet. He opens doors off the hallway so that light can enter from other rooms with windows. The floorboards of the hall are cloudy with dust, and on the walls a paper patterned in green coaches and liveried servants is peeling away at the seams. A radiator, once cream colored, is brown now, with dirt collected in the crevices. At the end of the hall is a stairway with an expansive landing halfway up, a wooden crate filled with a fabric that might once have been curtains. The ceilings, pressed tin, are nearly as high as those in public buildings. Honora can see the mildew on the walls then, a pattern competing with the carriages and footmen. The house smells of mold and something else: other people lived here.

She enters a room that seems to be a kitchen. She walks to a shuttered window and lifts the hook with her finger. The shutters open to panes of glass coated with a year or two of salt. A filmy light, like that through blocks of frosted glass, lights up an iron stove, its surface dotted with animal

droppings. She twists a lever, and the oven door slams open with a screech and a bang that startle her.

She bends and looks inside. Something dead and gray is in the corner.

She walks around the kitchen, touching the surfaces of shelves, the grime of years in the brush strokes of the paint. A dirty sink, cavernous and porcelain, is stained with rust. She gives the tap a try. She could budge it if she leaned her weight against the sink, but her suit is still on loan from Bette's Second Time Around. The butter-yellow jacket with its long lapels narrows in nicely at the waist and makes a slender silhouette, a change from a decade of boyish dresses with no waists. She shivers in the chill and wraps her arms around herself, careful not to touch the suit with her hands. There are blankets in the car, but she cannot mention them so soon. She hears footsteps on the stairs and moves into the hallway just as Sexton emerges from the cellar, wiping his hands on a handkerchief.

'Found the furnace,' he says. 'In the fall, we'll have to get some coal.'

She nods and gestures with her hand to the kitchen. He trails his knuckles along her arm as he passes her.

'What a mess,' he says.

'Not so bad,' she says, already loyal to what will be their home.

In April, the typewriter salesman returned to the bank. He came through the door so fast that Honora thought at first he might be a robber. The wings of his coat spread wide around his trousers as he made his way to her station. She resisted the urge to touch her hair, which she hadn't washed in days.

'Want to go for a ride?' he asked.

'You bought the car.'

'It's a honey.'

'I can't.'

'When do you get off work?'

'Four o'clock.'

'Banker's hours.'

The clock on the wall said half past two. The sound of a woman's high heels could be heard on the marble floor. Sexton Beecher didn't turn around to look.

'I'll be outside at four,' he said. 'I'll give you a ride home.'

I don't even know you, she might have said, except that Mrs. Yates was leaning in Honora's direction lest she miss a word. Honora was silent, which the man took for acquiescence. She noticed this time that his eyes weren't really gray, but green, and that perhaps they were set too close together. His forehead was awfully high, and when he smiled, his teeth were slightly crooked. And there was something cocky in his manner, but that might just be the salesman in him, she thought. Honora laid these flaws aside as one might overlook a small stain on a beautifully embroidered tablecloth one wanted to buy, only later to discover, when it was on the table and all the guests were seated around it, that the stain had become a beacon, while the beautiful embroidery lay hidden in everybody's laps.

Sexton returns with a can of oil from the car. Honora finds a piece of castile soap wrapped in a tea cloth in her suitcase. He removes his jacket and rolls his sleeves. His left forearm is already tanned from leaning it out of the window of the Buick. Honora feels a small ping in her abdomen and looks away.

The tap retches and sprays a stuttering dome of brown water into the sink. Honora jumps back, not wanting the water on her suit.

'It's the rust,' he says. 'They said the water was turned on, but I didn't know for sure. A valve was stuck in the basement.'

Together they watch the water clear.

His shirt is dirty at the back. She reaches over to brush it off. He leans against the lip of the sink and bends his head, letting her touch him in this way. When she stops, he straightens. She holds out the soap and together they wash their hands in the bulbous stream of water. She scrubs the marcasite-and-pearl earrings. He watches as she puts them on.

'Should I bring the picnic in, or do you want a nap?' he asks.

She feels herself blush at the word *nap*. 'I haven't been upstairs yet,' she says.

'There's a bed. Well, a mattress. It looks clean enough.'

So her husband had looked for a bed even before he searched for the furnace.

'There are blankets in the trunk,' she says.

After a time, Honora stopped thinking of him as 'the typewriter salesman' and began to think of him as Sexton. He drove over from Portsmouth eight times in the three months that they courted, telling his boss that he was onto something big in Taft. He was from Ohio, he told Honora, an American heading in the wrong direction. He'd had a year of college on the co-op program, but the freedom of traveling and the possibility of fat commissions had lured him east, away from the classroom. He made good money, he said,

which might or might not be true; she couldn't be absolutely sure. Yes, there was the Buick, but she couldn't ignore the too-tight collars and a sole coming loose from a shoe. The sleeves of some of his shirts were frayed at the cuffs.

They courted in the Buick with all the typewriters (Fosdick's Nos. 6 and 7), her mother's house too small for any sort of privacy. Sexton was charming and persistent in a way Honora had never experienced before. He told her that he loved her. He also told her that he had dreams. One day there would be a Fosdick in every household, he said, and he would be the man to put them there.

'Will you marry me?' he asked her in May.

On his sixth visit, Honora noticed that Sexton could hardly contain his excitement. A stroke of luck, he said in the Buick when finally they were alone. His boss knew someone who knew someone who knew someone. An abandoned house, but upright nevertheless. All they had to do, in place of rent, was take care of it and fix it up.

'It's a way to save,' he told Honora, 'for a house of our own.'

When they announced their engagement, no one was surprised, least of all her mother. She'd seen it in him from the very beginning. In fact, she'd said so early on to Harold – wasn't that so, Harold? – that this was a man who would get his appointment.

Honora reaches down to touch the fabric in the carton. Faded chintz curtains after all. And something else. A framed photograph tucked into the side of the box, as if snatched from a dresser at the last minute. A photograph of a woman and a boy. Years ago, Honora thinks, studying the dress that falls nearly to the ankle.

The stairs creak some under her weight, which even with the bedding isn't much. The sound embarrasses her, as if announcing her intentions. A crystal chandelier hangs rigidly over the landing, and she sees that the ceiling of the second floor has been papered like the walls. At the top of the stairs, a sense of emptiness overwhelms her, and for the first time she feels the enormity of the tasks that lie ahead of her. *Making a house liveable,* she thinks. *Making a marriage.*

It's just the empty rooms, she tells herself.

The second floor is a warren of tiny chambers, a surprise after the spaciousness of the floor below. Some of the rooms are painted pale blue; others are prettier, with printed paper on the walls. Heavy curtain rods sit naked over the windows. On the window seats are cushions – frayed and misshapen from overuse.

At the end of the hallway, she finds a suite of three rooms with a series of dormers facing the sea. In the bathroom there is a sink and a bathtub. In the bedroom she thumps a mattress with her fist, making a small cloud of dust in the salt-filtered light of the window. Why did they take the bed but not the mattress? She tucks in the sheets, crouching at the corners, and listens for sounds of Sexton below, her heart beating so erratically that she has to put a hand to her chest. She unbuttons the yellow suit jacket, only then realizing that there aren't any hangers in the shallow closet by the door. She folds the jacket inside out and lays it on the floor next to her shoes. She slips off her skirt, turning that inside out as well. She sits on the edge of the mattress in her blouse and slip, and unrolls her stockings.

The kitchen was unseasonably hot and close for late June, steam rising from the iron and making droplets on her

mother's nose and brow. Her mother wore her purple cotton dress with the petunias, her low-slung weight seemingly held up only by her pinafore as she lifted the iron and set it down again on the tea cloth over the butter-yellow suit. Honora sat on a chair at the kitchen table, writing labels for the canning, both of them silent, aware of change. Her mother's hair was done up in a bun with combs and hairpins, and the stems of her glasses dug into the sides of her head. On the stove, there was the white enameled pot, the funnels and the jars, waiting to be filled with spring onions and asparagus and rhubarb jam. Even at the beginning of summer, the kitchen was always awash with jars, the canning going on late into the night, as they tried to keep one step ahead of the harvest from the kitchen garden her mother kept. Honora, who hated the peeling and the preparations she was expected to do after she got home from the bank, nevertheless admired the jars with the carefully inscribed labels on the front – *Beet Horseradish Relish, Asa's Onion Pickles, Wild Strawberry Jam* – and the way that, later, they'd be lined up in the root cellar, labels facing out, carrots to the north, wax beans to the south, the jars of strawberry preserves going first from the shelves. But this year her mother had cut the garden back, as if she'd known that her daughter would be leaving home.

Her uncle Harold, blind and papery, couldn't walk the length of the aisle of the Methodist church and so he stood by the front pew with his niece for half a minute so as to give her away properly. She was the last child to leave the house, the boys gone to Arkansas and Syracuse and San Francisco. Her mother sat in her navy polka-dot silk with the lace collar, her comfortable weight caught primly within the dress's

folds. She wore real silk stockings for the occasion, Honora noticed, and not the tan stockings from Touraine's. Her mother's black shoes, serviceable rather than pretty, were the ones Harold always referred to as her Sunday-go-to-meeting shoes. Her mother wore a navy cloche, the silver roll of her hair caught beneath it with mother-of-pearl combs.

Just before they'd left the house, her mother had polished her gold-rimmed glasses at the sink. She'd taken her time at it and had pretended not to cry.

'You look very pretty,' she said to Honora when she had hooked the stems of her glasses behind her ears.

'Thank you,' Honora said.

'You let me know, won't you,' her mother said. She took her hankie from inside the cuff of her dress. 'About what you want me to do with the suit, I mean.'

'I will.'

'Some women, they like to keep the clothes they get married in. I had my wedding dress with me right up until Halifax.'

Honora and her mother were silent a moment, remembering Halifax. 'Your father would have been so proud,' her mother said.

'I know.'

'So you let me know about the suit. I'll be happy to pay for it, you decide to keep it.'

Honora took a step forward and kissed her mother's cheek.

'Now, now,' her mother said. 'You don't want to set me off again.'

Sexton walks into the bedroom with the picnic basket in one hand, the suitcase in the other. He looks at Honora sitting on the mattress, her stockings and her shoes and her

suit folded, her garters peeking out from beneath a girdle to one side of the bed. His face loosens, as if he'd come prepared to tell his new wife one thing but now wishes to say something else. Honora watches as he sets down the picnic basket and the cardboard suitcase. He removes his coat and lets it fall from his arms, snatching it before it hits the floor. He yanks the knot of his tie sideways.

She slides backward and slips her bare legs under the cool sheet and blanket. She lays her cheek against the pillow and watches her husband with one eye. She has never seen a man undress before: the tug of the belt buckle, the pulling up of the shirttails, the shoes being kicked off, the shirt dropped to the floor, the trousers – the only garment removed with care – folded and set upon the suitcase. He unbuckles his watch and puts it on a windowsill. In the stingy light of the salted windows, she can see the broad knobs of his shoulders, the gentle muscles through the chest, the surprising gooseflesh of his buttocks, the red-gold hairs along the backs of his legs. Sexton kneels at the foot of the mattress and crawls up to his new bride. He puts his face close to hers. He slides under the sheet and draws her to him. Her head rests on the pad of his shoulder, and her right arm is tucked between them. His knee slips between her thighs, causing the skirt of her slip to ride up to her hips. He kisses her hair.

'What makes it so shiny?' he asks.

'Vinegar,' she says.

'You're shaking,' he says.

'Am I?'

He presses his mouth to her shoulder. 'We'll take our time,' he says.