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The Other Typist

Written by Suzanne Rindell

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THE OTHER TYPIST

SUZANNE RINDELL

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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

For my parents, Arthur and Sharon Rindell.
I owe you everything.

THE OTHER TYPIST

1

They said the typewriter would unsex us.

One look at the device itself and you might understand how they—the self-appointed keepers of female virtue and morality, that is—might have reached such a conclusion. Your average typewriter, be it Underwood, Royal, Remington, or Corona, is a stern thing, full of gravity, its boxy angles coming straight to the point, with no trace of curvaceous tomfoolery or feminine whimsy. Add to that the sheer violence of its iron arms, thwacking away at the page with unforgiving force. *Unforgiving.* Yes; forgiving is not the typewriter's duty.

I don't suppose I know much about the business of forgiveness, either, as my job has so much to do with the other end of it. Confessions, I mean. Not that I extract them—that is for the Sergeant to do. Or for the Lieutenant Detective to do. But it is not for me to do. Mine is a silent job. Silent, that is, unless you consider the gunshot clacking of the typewriter that sits before me as I transcribe from a roll of stenotype paper. But even then I am not the originator of this ruckus, as after all, I am only a woman—a phenomenon the Sergeant seems to observe only as we are exiting the

interrogation room, when he touches my shoulder gently and says with great and solemn dignity, "I am sorry, Rose, that as a lady you must hear such things." He means the rape, the robbery, whatever it is we have just heard confessed. At our precinct, located in the borough of Manhattan in what is known as the Lower East Side, we are rarely left wanting for more crimes to hear.

I know that when the Sergeant uses the term *lady* he is being kind. It is 1924—soon to be 1925—and I am somewhere between what passes for a *lady* and a *woman* these days. The difference, of course, is partly a matter of education, which, in having matriculated at the Astoria Stenographers College for Ladies, I can—to a very modest extent—claim, but is also partly a matter of breeding and affluence, which, as an orphan with an income of fifteen dollars a week, I cannot claim. And of course there is the question of employment itself. Tradition holds that a lady may have *pursuits,* but never a *job,* and I, preferring a life with a roof over my head and regular meals to one without such things, am obliged to maintain the latter.

That is most likely what they meant when they said the typewriter would unsex us—it would deliver us out of our homes, not into the sewing factory or the steam laundry, but into law offices and accounting firms, where previously only male steps have fallen. That we would unlace our apron strings and instead button ourselves into the starched shirts and drab navy skirts that promise to neuter us. They feared the perpetual state of being surrounded by all those technological contraptions—the stenotypes, the mimeographs, the adding machines, the pneumatic mail tubes—would somehow harden us, and our soft, womanly hearts would grow rigid in an envious imitation of all that iron, brass, and steel.

I suppose it's true that knowing how to type has brought the fairer sex into some rather masculine work environments—like the police precinct, where we typists constitute a feminine minority. True enough, one has probably heard about or even glimpsed the occasional police matron in Manhattan—those stodgy old grandmothers employed to save the men from the false accusations of impropriety that all too often come along with having to herd prostitutes like so many sheep on a daily basis. But the Sergeant does not believe in police matrons and refuses to hire them. If it were not for the fact they need so much typing done and cannot do it themselves, there would be no women employed at our precinct at all. The typewriter is indeed my passport into a world otherwise barred to me and my kind.

Typing is not a brutish, masculinizing sort of work, mind you. In fact, one might even go so far as to argue that the work of a typist—the simple act of taking dictation, the crisp dance of fingertips with their dainty staccato over the shorthand keys—is perhaps one of the most civilized forms of work our modern world has to offer. And they needn't worry about the rest of it; a good typist knows her place. She is simply happy, as a woman, to be paid a reasonable income.

In any case, if typing were truly a masculine activity, you would see more men doing it, and of course you don't. It is always women one sees typing, so it only follows that it must be an activity more suited to them. I have, in all my time, only met one male typist, and that particular gentleman's delicate constitution was even lesser equipped than my own for working in a police precinct. I should've known from the first he would not stay long. He had the nervous carriage of a small bird, and his mustache looked as though it was trimmed daily by a barber. He wore a pair of very

well-kept white spats over his shoes. On his second day a criminal expectorated a large stream of tobacco juice on them. The male typist, I'm sorry to report, turned very pale and excused himself to go to the lavatory. He only stayed one more week after that. *White spats,* the Sergeant had remarked, shaking his head. The Sergeant's clucking is often his manner of confiding in me. *White spats have no place here,* he said, and I knew he was probably glad to be rid of such a dandy.

Of course, I did not point out to the Sergeant that the Lieutenant Detective also wears white spats. The Lieutenant Detective and the Sergeant are two very different sorts of men, but they appear to have long ago struck an uneasy alliance. It has always been my distinct impression that I am not to outwardly tip my favor in the direction of either man, lest it upset the tenuous balance that allows for their cooperation. But if I am being honest, I will tell you I feel more at ease around the Sergeant. He is older and perhaps a little fonder of me than a married man ought to be, but I feel it is a fatherly sort of fondness and that he became a police sergeant in the first place because he is a righteous man and he honestly believes it is his mission to uphold the proper order of our great city.

Moreover, the Sergeant likes *all* things to keep proper order and takes great pride in following all rules to the letter. Just last month he suspended one of the officers, sentencing the man to a whole week without pay, because the officer had given a homeless waif who was waiting in the holding cell a ham sandwich. I could see why maybe the officer did it; the vagabond was such a sad spectacle—the outline of his ribs whispered indiscreetly against the thin cloth of his shirt, and his eyes rolled like haunted marbles caught in two deep, dark sockets. No one accused the Sergeant of

being unchristian, but I believe he could tell some of the other men were thinking it. *Feeding such a man only sends the message that there is no profit in hard work and following the rules—and we can't afford to bankrupt these ideas*, the Sergeant reminded us.

The Lieutenant Detective outranks the Sergeant, but you would never know it. While he can certainly intimidate others at will, the Sergeant is not a tall man, although he is large in other ways. The great bulk of his weight sits around his waist, just over the rim of his uniform trousers, giving him a reassuringly paternal paunch. His handlebar mustache has taken on a sprinkling of salt and pepper in recent years. He wears it curled and also lets his sideburns grow long, which is no longer in keeping with the latest fashion, but the Sergeant cares little for changing fashions, and he does not go in at all for the newest shocking ones. Once while he was reading a newspaper, I heard him idly remark that today's modern fashions are proof of our nation's degeneration.

By way of contrast, the Lieutenant Detective has no mustache and keeps his face clean-shaven, which happens to be rather in fashion these days. Also in fashion is the haphazard style with which he combs his hair back using hair cream. Almost always, a lock or two comes loose and falls quavering over one eye, only to have him run a hand through his hair and push it back up. On his forehead is a sizable scar that runs from the center of his brow toward one eye and has the strange effect of enhancing his features. He is young, perhaps no more than one or two years my senior, and because he is a detective and not a patrolman he is not required to wear a uniform. His clothes are quite smart, but he wears them in a peculiar manner; he always looks as though he slid out of bed and just happened to fall into them. Everything about him has a jaunty slack to it, down to his spats, which have

never once appeared nearly as white or as clean as the male typist's did. This is not to imply the Lieutenant Detective is unhygienic, but rather that he is simply not tidy.

In fact, although he appears perpetually rumpled, I am fairly confident the Lieutenant Detective's hygiene habits are regular. He used to lean over my desk frequently to talk to me, and I noticed he always smelled of Pears' soap. When I asked him once, wasn't that brand of soap generally preferred by ladies and not men, he colored up and seemed to take it very roughly, even though I hadn't meant anything by it. He left my question unanswered and avoided me for almost two weeks afterward. Since then he no longer smells of Pears' soap. The other day he leaned over my desk—not to talk to me, but rather to silently retrieve one of my transcripts—and I noticed now he smells of a different soap, one whose perfume is meant to imitate the aroma of expensive cigars and old leather.

One reason I dislike working with the Lieutenant Detective and prefer working with the Sergeant is that the Lieutenant Detective mainly investigates homicides, which means if I am asked to go into the interrogation room with him, it is most likely to take down the confession of a suspected murderer on the stenotype. There is no apology in the Lieutenant Detective's voice, as there would be in the Sergeant's, when he requests that I join him. In fact, sometimes I think I detect a hint of challenge in his voice. On the surface, of course, he is all very brisk and businesslike.

They think we are the weaker sex, but I doubt the men have considered the fact that we women must hear every confession twice. That is, once I've taken dictation on the stenotype, I must type it all over again in plain English on the typewriter, as the men cannot read shorthand. To them, the marks on the stenotype

rolls appear like hieroglyphics. I don't mind typing and retyping these stories as much as I know I'm *supposed* to mind, but it *is* a bit off-putting to go over the details of a stabbing or bludgeoning just prior to, say, the lunch or dinner hour. You see, the trouble is once they've abandoned the notion of denying their crimes and they've decided to go ahead and come clean, the suspects are frequently very specific about the mess that results from such acts. As a moral person, I do not relish hearing these gruesome details, although I would be loath for the Lieutenant Detective to perceive my discomfort, as he would surely see it as evidence of my weak and womanly stomach. I assure you, my stomach is *not* weak on this score.

Of course, I'll admit there is something indirectly intimate about hearing these confessions along with another person, and I can't say I enjoy sharing such moments with the Lieutenant Detective. Quite often the suspect being questioned by the Lieutenant Detective has killed a woman, and more often than not in such cases the suspect has done some rather wicked things to his victim first. When taking the confession of a suspect who has attacked a young woman in the most brutal way, it feels as though all the air goes out of the room. Sometimes I am aware of the Lieutenant Detective glancing at my face when the confessor recalls the most violent parts, observing me impassively. During such moments I feel like a science experiment. Or perhaps like one of those psychological studies that have become all the rage these days. I sit and type and try my best to ignore him.

And yet—unlike the Sergeant, who worries out of consideration for me—the Lieutenant Detective doesn't seem particularly concerned that I'll hear something that will violate my supposedly pure feminine mind. To be honest, I'm not at all sure what

he's searching for in my face. He is very likely wondering if I'll faint and crumple face-first over the stenotype. Who knows—he may even have a betting pool going with the other officers. But we live in a modern age now, one in which women have enough to do without having to trouble themselves with the obligation of fainting all the time, and I wish the Lieutenant Detective, for all his other modern manners, would stop glancing at my face like a curious puppy and simply let me do my job. Which, by the by, I'm quite good at. I can type 160 words per minute on the regular typewriter, and can get up to nearly 300 on the stenotype. And I am largely indifferent to the content of the confessions I must take down and transcribe. Like the typewriter itself, I am simply there to report with accuracy. I am there to make the official and unbiased record that will eventually be used in court. I am there to transcribe what will eventually come to be known as the truth.

Of course, I have to be careful not to let my pride over these facts get the better of me. On one occasion, as we emerged from the interrogation room, I called out to the Lieutenant Detective in a voice that was perhaps a bit louder than I'd intended and said, "I'm not a ninny, you know."

"Pardon me?" He stopped and spun around, his eyes traveling up and down the length of my person, that scientist-observing-an-experiment look on his face again. He took a step or two toward me, as though we were being confidential, and I breathed in another soapy hint of cigars and leather. I straightened my posture, gave a little cough, and tried to make my stand again, this time with more poise.

"I said I'm not a ninny. It doesn't frighten me. None of it. I'm not a hysteric. You can forget about having to fetch the smelling

salts." I said that last part for effect; we don't really keep smelling salts at the precinct, and I doubt anyone travels with them in their pockets anymore these days. But I immediately regretted the exaggeration. It made me sound too dramatic, like the hysteric I had just claimed I wasn't.

"Miss Baker . . . ," the Lieutenant Detective began to address me. But the rest of the statement trailed off. He stared at my face for several seconds. Finally, as though someone had suddenly pinched him, he blurted out, "I have every reason to believe you could take the confessions of Jack the Ripper himself and not bat an eye." Before I could formulate an appropriate rejoinder, the Lieutenant Detective turned on his heel and strode away.

I am not sure he meant it as a compliment. Working in a precinct full of policemen, I am no stranger to sarcasm. For all I know, the Lieutenant Detective could have been having a laugh at my expense. I don't know much about Jack the Ripper. I do know that he was rumored to have been abnormally skilled with a knife.

I let the subject drop and did not bring it up to the Lieutenant Detective again. Life went on at the precinct in a more or less predictable harmony—the Sergeant kept to his uneasy pact of cooperation with the Lieutenant Detective, and in turn the Lieutenant Detective kept to his courteous-yet-always-curt interactions with me.

It all went on harmoniously, that is, until they hired the other typist.

I RECOGNIZED SOMETHING was happening the very second she walked in the door for her interview. On that particular day, she

entered very calmly and quietly, but I knew: It was like the eye of a hurricane. She was the dark epicenter of something we didn't quite understand yet, the place where hot and cold mixed dangerously, and around her everything would change.

Perhaps it's a misnomer to refer to her as "the other typist," as there were other typists all along. I was one of three. There was a forty-year-old woman named Iris with a gaunt face, sharp jaw, and gray, birdlike eyes. Every day Iris wore a different colored ladies' necktie. Iris was always complaisant to do extra typing when it was needed, and this was much appreciated. (*Crime does not take weekends or observe bank holidays*, the Sergeant is fond of saying.) As far as social particulars went, Iris had never been married, and it was difficult to imagine marriage had ever been one of her aspirations.

Then there was Marie, who was in many ways an opposite composite of Iris. Marie was rotund and always merry and walked with a slightly hobbled step from where an omnibus had run over her left foot when she was just a child. Marie was barely thirty but had already married twice—the first of her husbands had run off with a chorus girl. Without being able to locate him to secure a proper divorce, Marie had simply shrugged away the legal contract and married her second husband, a man named Horace, who was kind to her but was sick all the time with gout. Marie worked at the precinct because she was under no illusion that Horace would be able to provide for her. She was a sentimental woman who had married for love, despite the fact the gout was bound to get worse and keep him off his feet more and more. The crude remark was often made behind Marie's back that between her mangled left foot and Horace's gout-swollen feet, they probably danced one "helluva" waltz together. People never said these things

while she was in the room, but Marie was no fool and she was aware this joke was often bandied about. She had decided long ago to pretend ignorance. She was generally for anything that facilitated greater camaraderie, and in consequence everybody seemed to like working with her.

And then there was me, of course. I'd worked at the precinct for a little over two years and had already garnered a reputation for being the fastest and most accurate typist. Among the three of us we were able to keep up with all the precinct's needs, typing the paperwork for all the bookings, confessions, and correspondence. We were able to keep up, that is, until the Volstead Act triggered a serious boost in our business, so to speak.

In the beginning, the Volstead Act wasn't very popular among the officers at the precinct, and for a while enforcement of the act was distinctly halfhearted. The patrolmen grumbled and only offered minimal assistance as the Anti-Saloon League closed down one watering hole after another. Officers who happened upon flasks of bathtub gin often let the perpetrators off with a warning, taking care, of course, to confiscate the evidence. Despite the Woman's Christian Temperance Union's best efforts to make the nation think so, not everyone believed the devil was really in the drink. There were even judges who couldn't seem to muster the appropriate amount of outrage to earnestly punish the bootleggers who very fully and flagrantly flouted the law. *Seems only natural after a hard day's work a man should want a tall drink of something*, the Lieutenant Detective once said quite loudly for everyone to hear, shrugging his shoulders.

Things went on like this for a time. Periodically an assortment of men from the neighborhood—many of them husbands and fathers—were hauled in for selling moonshine and allowed to go

with a simple rap on the knuckles. No one cared to do much more than this.

But they say it's the squeaky wheel that gets the grease, and in our case the squeaky wheel was Assistant Attorney General Mabel Willebrandt and the grease was us. I can't claim to be an expert on her legal career, but from what I've read in all the papers, Mrs. Willebrandt holds the dubious distinction of taking on issues of poorly enforced legislation her lazier and more prudent male counterparts won't touch, and then proceeding to tackle such issues with surprising gusto, often making headlines in the process. I suppose it is only natural Mrs. Willebrandt has made herself into a patron saint of lost legal causes; she is a woman, after all, and there is little risk in letting a woman have charge of the unpopular issues. When a woman fails at her profession it is considered something rather different from when a man fails at his. However, it was clear Mrs. Willebrandt had no intention of failing, and she proved herself to be both tenacious and resourceful. While she was unable to make much of an alliance with Mayor Hylan, she did succeed in talking some "good sense" into the mayor's wife, Miriam. Between the two of them, they succeeded in stirring up enough press to make the case that New York City should set more of an example for the rest of the nation and take more decisive action in trying to convert itself into a model "dry" city. I tell you all this because the result of all the political posturing was our precinct was selected to serve as a special apparatus of "the Noble Experiment." This is what I mean when I say we were to be the grease intended to quiet Mrs. Willebrandt's squeaky wheel.

The official decree was we were supposed to operate the city's first "crackdown unit." We were to set an example for other

precincts to later follow. Extra men were added to our payroll, and we were commissioned with the task of ferreting out the neighborhood's major speakeasies and conducting raids. Of course, a police precinct is a funny thing; the chemistry by which it operates is something like a recipe, and when the ingredients are altered it can take a while until relations come into harmony again. The officers at our precinct were not keen on the introduction of new men, and even less wild about the idea of participating in the chaotic raids that were sure to make them more unwelcome in the neighborhood than they already were, but they had little choice other than to comply. While the men bemoaned these changes, the Sergeant appeared to take his new responsibility seriously. I got the distinct impression he saw it as both a professional opportunity as well as a moral honor, and the inevitable day came when he announced he wanted every individual who so much as transported a single bottle of whiskey over the New York–New Jersey state line to be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, a command that kept not only the officers but also the typists at our precinct very busy. It was not long before the unprocessed paperwork began to cause a bit of a clog in the whole system and the holding cell became nothing more than a place for bootleggers to meet their competition and suggest cooperative strategies to avoid future detection by the police.

That's when the Sergeant telephoned the employment agency and asked them to send over another typist.

ODALIE'S HAIR was not yet bobbed when she came in for an interview. If it had been, I doubt the Sergeant would have hired

her, although I'm certain the Lieutenant Detective would not have minded. Even before Odalie bobbed her hair, I had my suspicions the Lieutenant Detective liked that variety of shocking hairstyle, and the kind of woman who dared to wear it.

I can recall the day Odalie came in and removed her cloche to reveal her jet-black hair swinging in a similar shape just beneath. It had been cut to her chin, the line of it very precise. I remember observing that the cut brought out something vaguely and fashionably Oriental in Odalie's face, especially around the eyes, and the sheen of her hair was very glossy, as though she wore a helmet made of finely polished enamel. I also remember catching the Lieutenant Detective regarding her from across the room. He complimented Odalie on her bravery and taste several times that day. As for the Sergeant, he did not officially comment except to mumble over his lunch, to no one in particular, that men were likely to get the wrong idea about a woman with short hair.

But all of that came later. As I said, on the day of her interview Odalie's hair was not yet bobbed. She arrived at the precinct that morning, her face demurely powdered, her hair slicked into a tidy chignon. I remember she wore white gloves and an expensive-looking ladies' suit that matched the robin's egg blue of her eyes, but it was really her voice that left the deepest impression on me, as it revealed the most about what I was later to understand was her true character. It was a husky voice with the kind of low rattling timbre that made you watch the childish curl of her lips very closely to ensure you'd caught the words that were issuing from her mouth accurately. Her voice was like this until something delighted her or made her laugh, and then it rose and fell musically, like someone practicing scales on a piano. It was a paradox of innocent surprise and devilish complicity that proved intoxicating

to everyone who heard it, and I wonder sometimes—even now—whether that voice was something she had carefully crafted over the years or if she had simply been born with it.

The interview was brief. I don't imagine the Sergeant or the Lieutenant Detective needed to know much more about the woman to be hired as our new typist other than how fast she could type (they tested her with a stopwatch, and she laughed as though they had just come up with the most intelligent and delightful game), was she presentable, and did she have good manners. There generally just wasn't much more to vetting a new typist. And Odalie, with that voice, had them both instantly charmed. When they asked her would she mind having to hear about the often extremely unsavory acts of the criminals who were brought into the precinct, she laughed her musical, jingling laugh and then dropped into that husky timbre to joke that she was not the sort of girl you might call *squeamish*, and that it was only her meals at Mouquin's that she insisted on being particularly *savory* anyhow. I did not think the remark was really all that clever, but the Sergeant and the Lieutenant Detective both chuckled, already eager, I believe—even at that early stage—to be liked by her. I eavesdropped from across the room and heard them tell her she was hired, starting the next Monday. In that second, I swore Odalie's eyes flicked across the room and rested on my face for the briefest of instants, and that a tiny smile twisted itself into the corners of her mouth. But this impression was fleeting, and later it was difficult to be sure she had looked in my direction at all.

Damned nice girl, the Lieutenant Detective had said after Odalie departed. His summary was simple, but it actually described something I hadn't quite put my finger on at that point. The truth was I was probably younger—perhaps as much as five

years Odalie's junior—yet the word *girl* applied to her in a much more powerful way than it did to me. Part of Odalie's allure was the way she carried with her a sort of grown-up girlishness. There was an excitement in the air around her, an excitement that might include you in some way, as though you were her secret collaborator. Her voice quivered with a sort of tomboy energy that suggested, despite her refined poise and sophistication, she was a robust individual—someone not above climbing a tree or beating you at a game of tennis. And in that observation was another thing I had begun to realize: The voluptuous glee in Odalie's demeanor hinted at privilege, at a childhood that had been filled with automobiles and tennis courts, things that had been absent from my own childhood, and—I would humbly venture to guess—absent from the Sergeant's and the Lieutenant Detective's childhoods as well. Yes, her mannerisms hinted at wealth, but perhaps wisely made no concrete claim. In this regard she was somewhat exotic to us, but in a way we probably only perceived unconsciously. And just as it is with all exotic creatures, we simply held our breath as she approached, for fear of scaring her off. No one at the precinct dared to question the reason this well-to-do young woman stood before us, laughing as though delighted to be considered for a lowly typist's job. I've always prided myself on my sharp instincts and critical eye, and yet even in my early state of disapproval the one thing I did not do was to question why Odalie should want employment. I can only say we are all susceptible to blind spots when exposed to the right dazzling flash.

That day, after she made her farewells and was told to return on Monday, she strode off in her childish, slightly tripping little walk through the precinct and out the front door. But as she did so, something fell from the lapel of her blue jacket and skittered

noisily across the floor. My eyes instantly went to the tile where the object that had dropped lay glinting under the light of the bare electric bulbs. I knew I ought to call out to alert her, but I remained silent and Odalie continued on, seeming not to notice it. She disappeared through the door, and I simply sat frozen as several minutes passed. Curious, I finally shook myself into motion. I got up quietly from my seat and walked over to the spot where the object had been abandoned upon the floor.

It was a brooch—a very expensive-looking one, with opals, diamonds, and black onyx stones all set into a very modern starburst pattern. There was some quality about the brooch that seemed to mirror the very essence of Odalie herself, as though it were in some way a portrait of her in miniature. In a flash, I had stooped and quickly returned to my desk with the brooch concealed tightly in my palm, the sharp edges of its setting digging into my flesh. I sat and held the lovely object under my desktop near my lap—out of sight of the others—and simply gazed at it, mesmerized. It glittered softly, even in shadow. Eventually, I was called to do some typing and was forced to shake myself free from the brooch's spell. I opened a desk drawer and tucked it away, far into the back under some papers, telling myself I would return it to Odalie first thing when she came back to start her new job on Monday, and already knowing in the pit of my stomach that this was a lie.

During the rest of the day I carried an odd feeling around with me. I was plagued by a sensation of perpetual distraction; it was as if there were an object in my vision I could perceive but couldn't quite look at directly. Even then, I harbored the suspicion that Odalie had dropped the brooch on purpose, as a test to me. And in retrospect I realize such a tactic certainly bore her signa-

ture. With one simple act, Odalie had snared me in a trap that consisted of equal parts temptation and shame. I was bound to her from that moment on, always wondering yet eternally unable to ask if she was privy to my act of covetous theft. All this before we'd ever even shaken hands or been introduced.