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Vera Kelly
Lost and Found

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Vera Kelly
Lost and Found

ROSALIE KNECHT



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for Maëlle

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CHAPTER 1

Max liked to throw parties. The call would go out to the girls from the bar, the Harlem students who never went to Brooklyn except for her, and the confab of ladies we called *les grandes dames*, who lived in several apartments in a single building in Little Italy and spent their days making jam for each other and sending harassing letters to the editors of the *Village Voice*. The parties began with dinner. Max was utilitarian. She made vats of potato soup and bought loaves of bread from an Orthodox baker on Eastern Parkway, then appeared in a minidress and heels once the guests had arrived and fed the crowd like a camp cook, out of a giant ringing ladle. Afterward she put Sara Lee cakes on porcelain cake stands and set out a bowl of cigarettes. We would move the dining table out of the way, a collective heave, our shouting friends clenching their smokes between their teeth. They brought their own bottles. We supplied what we could. Max mixed sidecars and sours in coupe glasses for as long as it entertained her, then abandoned her post and came

to dance with me. Our friends wove into corners together and reappeared, flushed; eyes grew tearful and escaped to the stairs or the backyard. There were always a couple of girls asleep on cushions on the floor in the morning, and Max, who never woke with a headache in her life, made them coffee and eggs and sent them away with tokens for the train.

She had moved in with me in our first year together, after it had become plain that we were in love. I had been alarmed over it. Being in love had mostly been catastrophic for me in the past. I tried, being stupid, to give an impression of coolness, but Max wasn't fooled. "I don't think you like to live alone," she said. "Even if you say you do." She was living in a boarding-house on the Upper West Side at the time, and could have done with living more alone than that, since she had two roommates and washed up in a communal bathroom down the hall. It took only two or three trips in my car to bring over everything she had, and on the last of these trips, with her percolator and sewing machine balanced in the rearview mirror, we drove over the Manhattan Bridge just after the sun had set, the water of the harbor dark but still touched with red, Brooklyn glittering, and I understood that some journey had been concluded and I could rest.

She still worked at the Bracken, the bar in the Village where I had met her. I would go in sometimes and watch other women flirt with her, and then make a show of waiting for her at the end of the bar when she was finished, enjoying the envy of the room. I kept my office near Union Square, where I took private cases for investigation. It was mostly adultery and other emotional larcenies, but I'd also developed a specialty in

criminal matters that should have been the domain of the police, if the police had been willing to deal with people like us and we had been willing to deal with them. I collected evidence of embezzlement and fraud, bad checks, real estate scams that preyed on the owners of the theaters and galleries we all went to, and sometimes, once this evidence was assembled in file folders, my clients could force some action from the institutions involved. Sometimes not. It was hard work and often came to nothing. More to my liking was occasional freelance work I got through friends who worked in movies or television—mostly film editing, which I enjoyed for its absorption, the way I could go into an editing room and look up a while later and see that hours had passed. When I did well at splicing film together, a story cohered from the chaos of shots, and the better I did, the more the editing disappeared, leaving behind something sealed, smooth, holding itself together with an invisible tension, like a drop of water.

So the two of us kept irregular hours. Sometimes a day or two would go by when we didn't see each other, or we encountered each other only in bed at odd hours, as she finished her shifts, chatty but worn out from a long night, her feet and back aching. She would roll close and say, "My head is buzzing, help me sleep," her hands working under my clothes.

The house, which I'd bought with cash after coming back from the Argentina job in 1966, finally felt like it belonged to me. It had stopped being just a couple of narrow floors and their furnishings and had grown into something alive and particular, the way a house should. We had worked out where to put the chairs so they got the light in the afternoon, when

we were most likely to be reading in them. We'd come across enough old prints and drawings to fill the walls. The pots and pans and implements in the kitchen had settled into natural locations. Max planted tulip bulbs in the backyard and was angry for hours when she realized rats had eaten them. She had to walk up to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and soothe her feelings in the rose arcade.

I was thirty years old. The birthday had somehow come as a surprise. I had never been able to see very far into my future, and I didn't think about it much. I had lived since I was a teenager in a flexible present that extended not much past the first of the following month, when the bills were due. I think it was like that for a lot of us. The milestones that were required of women didn't really apply: I wasn't going to get married and I wasn't going to have a baby, and there was nothing else that was expected, so with each year I progressed a little further into an open expanse with no markers or boundaries, a kind of psychic heath. All I wanted for myself was money and Max, and maybe a dog someday.

Max disagreed with all this. She was twenty-nine. She said a person had to be heading toward something in order to live, but when pressed on what her personal ambitions were, she was evasive.

"I thought we had gotten over all those ideas?" I said. "The rat race and everything?"

"You can have ambitions that aren't a rat race."

This mystery held until I came in late one night and found all the lights on but Max nowhere around. I called her name a few times, but she didn't answer, and I climbed the stairs and

found her in the second bedroom we had turned into an office, wearing the enormous headphones that made her look like a ship-to-shore operator, listening to Ravel on the hi-fi and making notes on a sheet of staff paper. That was how I learned she was writing an opera.

“All right, that’s my ambition,” I said. “My ambition is to support you in style while you write operas.”

She covered her face with her hands.

“You’re embarrassed!” I said.

“It is embarrassing. Don’t make me talk about it.”

She was a pianist with no piano. She had a secondhand Vox keyboard that she handled like a baby, though the wiring for some of the keys was beginning to go, and in order to get her hands on a real instrument she played on Sundays for a church in the Village that had a beautiful Steinway. She had played since she was a child and had that fixed, burning relationship with the instrument that made some people ruin their lives for music. She had studied in the music department at Vassar and had planned to go to a conservatory afterward. And then things had gone another way. Her family were the Los Angeles Comstocks, of Comstock Oil and Gas. She had been raised like a princess and then thrown out when she was twenty-two, after one of their private security men caught her on a vacation up the coast with her girlfriend. She had come back East and been a bartender ever since.

I wanted to give her a piano. I kept an eye on the classifieds. I had kept up this vigil for three years already, but hadn’t managed it yet. Whenever I got a little money together, the house always needed it.

ROSALIE KNECHT

The girls around us were growing more placid as the years went by. One or two surprised us by going home to midwestern cities, marrying men and starting families. Those of us who remained vacationed together, going up to summer cabins in the Catskills. We learned how to row and fish. We guarded small pots of money for our unimaginable old age.

Some of us, it must be said, had gotten married too—a couple I knew had stood up on the steps of city hall with a pastor from the Church of the Beloved Disciple one afternoon in 1970 and took vows before news cameras, and were then cuffed and detained for blocking the public right-of-way. There were photos of them in their holding cells, flowers in their hair, holding up their ringed fingers to the bars. They were held for a couple of hours and let go. They still sometimes called each other wives when they were a few drinks in.

Winter that year had been long and cold, and we were so relieved when the first green buds opened in April 1971 that we went up to the mountains with a few friends for an early weekend. There was a cabin that we rented from an old farm couple, at the edge of a field patrolled by goats and a shrieking peacock. From the back steps, a sandy path led through ten minutes of woods to the shore of a tiny lake.

Max had been quiet as we packed in Brooklyn. She got that way sometimes, and I tried not to worry about it. She seemed preoccupied on the drive, said she had a headache, and didn't eat much when we stopped for lunch. We fought about this sometimes—she would disappear within herself and surface days later, confused about why I was upset with her. For my part, I couldn't admit to being upset, it made my

skin crawl, so I shuffled around her rigid and quiet until the clouds dispersed.

Our friends Peach and Sylvia were already there when we arrived, unpacking cold cuts and cream cheese and smoked whitefish and cartons of pickles from the deli near their apartment. Sylvia built a fire in the pit in front of the cabin, and we had potatoes roasted in foil and sausages on sticks for dinner, as was our tradition, and then mixed drinks and carried them down the dark path to the edge of the lake. It was too cold to sit, but we sat there anyway. Max seemed more cheerful, and I allowed myself to relax, putting an arm around her, looking out across the black lake at the lights from a bed-and-breakfast and a row of summer houses on the other side.

But in the morning the mood had returned. I was too embarrassed to ask her about it in the cabin, where only a plank wall separated the two rooms from each other. The day was warm and bright, and the four of us decided to take the row-boats out to an island in the middle of the lake and see if we could have our breakfast there. Later in the season it would be too overgrown.

“But that’s where I saw the snapping turtle,” Sylvia said.

“You’re afraid of an old turtle?” Peach said.

“You would be too if you had any sense.”

This was the Peach and Sylvia vaudeville revue. Peach was from Staten Island and had such a limited understanding of the dangers of nature that she had once pushed a skunk out of the outdoor shower with a broom. Sylvia was from West Virginia and was forever chasing us out of patches of poison ivy where we were trying to have picnics. We packed the bagels

and the deli things and some thermoses of coffee, filed down the path like a troop of Girl Scouts, and pushed off in the boat.

The lake wasn't deep and the water had the clarity of early spring. I could see straight down to the bottom, to schools of minnows darting over a field of silt. Green leaves opened on the surface, tethered by long umbilical stems. Far out over the water, birds dove through golden clouds of insects. "God, this is nice," Peach said to Sylvia, who was rowing.

"Why am I always the boatman on the river Styx?" she answered.

"I've got the way back," I said.

"She doesn't mean it," Peach said, looking at Sylvia fondly. "She likes to show off."

"Roll up my sleeves then, won't you, love?"

Max was looking around at the gauzy bright green of the hills. I would have pressed for her attention, but I didn't have anything in particular to say. She was working something out, I thought. Peach glanced at us once, scanned our faces, raised her eyebrows at me. I shrugged.

The island was a patch of earth held together by the roots of little trees a hundred yards from the shore. Sylvia pulled the boat up to it and Peach threw her arms around a leaning willow, and we stepped unsteadily ashore, almost losing the bag of breakfast things.

We spread a blanket, unpacked our food, and opened our thermoses. A trio of ducks fought and chased each other on the water.

"Is it romantic?" I said, nodding at them.

"What?" Max said.

“Whatever they’re fighting over. Is it romantic?”

She was biting the rim of her coffee cup, her arms wrapped around her knees. I thought she wasn’t going to answer me, and I was already beginning to feel the suffocating warmth that I always felt when I was angry or dismayed but knew it was too trivial to say anything about. But she said, “Isn’t it always?”

I took that as encouragement. “Are you all right?” I said. Peach and Sylvia were picking their way back toward the boat for insect repellent, and we were more or less alone.

She pushed her hair out of her face and inspected the sky. I waited.

“I got a letter from my sister,” she said.



What did I know about the Comstocks in April 1971? I had known a few things before I ever met Max. I knew of the Comstock Institute, the premier educator of petroleum engineers in the United States, and by happenstance the alma mater of my mother’s father, who had inspected rigs in Louisiana and Texas. I knew of the Comstock Collection, one of the largest privately held art collections in the world. I knew that Comstocks appeared often in the politics of the West—state senators, commissioners, chairmen of infinite boards.

And I knew a little about how Max had been raised. She talked about a house in Los Angeles and a ranch in San Luis Obispo. I could sense that words like “house” and “ranch” were euphemisms, in a family like that, for immense ecosystems of people and property. I had tried once or twice to get at this

point—a misguided desire, I guess, to emphasize that I was the unlanded one of the pair of us, even though I had grown up in a plush and well-connected neighborhood outside Washington, DC, myself, and even though Max had been completely dispossessed at twenty-two.

“How big is the place in Los Angeles?” I had said. “How many rooms?”

And Max had said, “How many *rooms*?” in a way that made me understand not only that there were very many rooms but also that I hadn’t chosen the right measure. Another time she said, “I used to walk down to our post office—”

“Your post office?”

“At the ranch, yeah. It was my job to walk down to our post office twice a week and get the mail. If Dad had letters, he would drive down, but he always made us kids walk. It was a big thing to him, to make us tough. My brothers loved it.”

“You had your own post office?”

She had laughed. “Things are bigger out west,” she said. “We were our own town.”

She told me that when she was a little girl in Los Angeles, she could see the Comstock oil derricks from her nursery window, their great heads bobbing in the blue haze. I knew all that. I knew that Aimee Semple McPherson once came to the house, in Max’s grandfather’s day, to ask for money to build the Angelus Temple. “He talked about it for the rest of his life,” Max said. “Because she didn’t ask, she sort of commanded him, which people didn’t often do. And he said she wore sequins in the daytime.”

But that was all. She had told me very little, in three years together. The subject of her family was painful, and her silence

sometimes made her seem to me like an émigré from a small and distant country that no longer existed.



“They’re getting divorced,” Max said.

“Your parents?”

“That’s what Inez said.”

I could hear Peach and Sylvia splashing in the water on the other side of the island.

“Is this the first time anybody’s written?” I said. “Since you left?”

“No, not the first. Benny wrote me once right after it happened and called me a lot of nasty names and said I was killing our mother.” Her older brother, the firstborn. “And Inez writes sometimes at Christmas. She’s the only one I sent my new address to when I moved in with you.” Inez was the youngest of the three Comstock children. “Inez is sweet, but she’s not tough. I think she would have liked to be nicer to me, but it would have made them mad.”

“So what did Inez say?”

“That Dad and Amma are getting divorced.” She looked at me, embarrassed. “That’s what us kids called them.”

“Amma?”

“Benny called our mother that when he was wee. So now Amma is living in the Park Royal Hotel in La Jolla and Papa is holed up at the Los Angeles house with—I can’t really follow what Inez is saying. She’s too sweet to say unkind things, but then she doesn’t end up saying much at all. It sounds like

there's a woman living there with him. And some friends of the woman."

"Oh, no."

She drew in a shaky breath. "Why should I care at all, Vera? Why should I care at all?" Her eyes reddened, but she didn't cry.

"Well, but you do," I said, putting my arm around her.

"I don't," she said. "I just remember everything." She stared at the water. "Inez wants me to go out there."

"She does? What for?"

"The walls are falling in, you know? She thinks if we were all there . . ." She shrugged.

"They certainly left you out when they felt like it." I was agitated in her defense.

"Yeah, of course they did."

"So why should you go now?"

"Who said I was going?" she said.

I relaxed.

"I wish I could explain it to you," she said. "I could talk for days and I couldn't get it to make any sense."

"I might understand it," I said.

"There's too much," she said. "Forget my family. Who can even understand Los Angeles?"



I thought it was settled. Maybe my mistake was in trying to extrapolate from my own family, which was so small, just my mother and me, and my mother was a redoubtable woman who would never call on me for any kind of assistance, in any

circumstances. I had no brothers or sisters, and my father died when I was twelve. I was a disappointment to my mother, and when I was a teenager she was harsh and obtuse with me. We didn't speak much now, and I didn't worry about her. Probably no one had ever worried much about Elizabeth Kelly. She once got in a wreck in our old Studebaker and arrived home in a taxi with three stitches in her forehead and all her dry cleaning, which she had made the driver stop to pick up on the way home from the hospital. She would not be dissuaded from an errand and she was not interested in the opinions of other people and she had never misspent a dollar in her life. It was a mystery to her why I couldn't master my life the way she had mastered hers.

Max slept badly when we came back from the mountains, and over the course of a few days she became distracted and irritable again. One night I got up for a glass of water at three in the morning and found the kitchen door open a crack, and cigarette smoke wafting in from the tiny backyard. Max hardly ever smoked.

"Sweetheart?" I said into the dark.

"Ah, hey," she said.

I came out onto the step. The sky was yellow overhead, but it was hard to make out her expression. She was sitting curled up in the Adirondack chair in her work clothes, her hair unpinned.

"What are you doing?" I said. "You just got home?"

"A little bit ago. I had a good night, took a cab."

"Spendy baby."

"Don't scold."

"I'm teasing. You know I don't like you on the train this late anyway." I sat. "It's chilly out here. Come to bed?"

"I'm not tired yet." She looked tired.

“Who’d you bum that cigarette off of?” I had quit the year before. The smell made me nostalgic for a lot of wasted time.

“A new girl at the bar. She was getting in my way all night.”

“Then it’s the least she could do.”

“That’s what I thought.”

We listened to a siren coming down Flatbush Avenue. “Inez wrote again,” Max said.

I took that in, examining my feet.

“He’s going to marry the new woman,” Max said.

“God, that fast?”

“Amma’s all alone in some hotel.” She rubbed the back of her hand across her eyes. “What if I did go?” she said.

Somehow I was relieved. All the tension of the past week had been an effort to avoid this, and here it was. She could do this and then we could get back to normal. “What if you did?” I said.

“Would you think it was stupid?”

“I would think it was family.”

She smiled. An airplane droned low overhead, a red-eye bound for LaGuardia.

“Will you come with me?” she said.

I hadn’t expected that. “Won’t they—”

“Yeah, yes. But I—” I think she wanted to say, *I can’t do it by myself*. But that wasn’t the kind of thing she said. “They might be awful about it. You don’t have to. I would understand.”

“Of course I will,” I said. I glowed.

She reached across the gap between us and squeezed my arm. After a minute she said, “You’re in for a ride.”



I could take a week off, I thought, without doing too much damage to the couple of cases I had. One was a young woman looking for the father of her daughter, who owed her a great deal of money and had told her he was going to pick up shifts for a while unloading cargo on the docks in Bayonne, but could not be found. Another was an older gentleman of my acquaintance whose landlord had been trying to get his rent-controlled apartment out of his grip. Construction had been going on in the units above and beside his for months, and I was fairly sure, after a few weeks of observation, that it was unpermitted and out of code, and that there were times when the only worker there was a rangy kid banging at random on the walls and floor with a hammer. I gave all parties my answering service and assured them that I would be able to wrap up work when I returned. We would fly out on Monday, April 26.

“Is that your opera?” I said to Max. There was an old shirt box on the bed, the lid not quite on, and I could see a stack of papers in a binder clip inside. I had found her packing in our bedroom, very slowly. She would take a dress out of the closet, smooth it out on the bed, fold it, and then stand looking at it for a while.

She put the lid on. “It’s a copy of the draft,” she said. “It’s not done.”

“You’re taking it along?”

“I thought I might get a chance to see my old piano teacher,” she said. “While we’re out there.”

It stung, briefly, that she would show it to someone else when she hid it so carefully from me. But then, I couldn’t read music.

ROSALIE KNECHT

“Who are we going to tell your family I am?” I said. I had been thinking about this every day.

“They’ll guess,” Max said. Now she was digging absently in the box of costume jewelry she kept on her dresser. “They know all about me.”

“I suppose so.”

“That’ll be the least of their concerns, I think,” she said.