

Final version:

CHAPTER NINE: AUGUST 10, 1916

SIOUX CITY, IOWA

EARL rose from his chair to signal Emily as she came through the doors of the Rutland Hotel, a woebegone four-story brick building at the intersection of Iowa and Fourth Streets, where he'd reserved a room. She was wearing the royal-blue shirtwaist he remembered she'd worn the first night they'd danced in the ball room in Waterloo. Seeing she'd chosen it, he felt for an instant a sense of reassurance and he resented the thought -- that he needed a signal from her in order to feel it.

He watched her walking briskly toward him through the long, dim lobby, past the unmanned cigar counter stocked with no cigars, past an enormous grandfather clock and a large brass spittoon and a tall, dead fern standing sad and valiant in its pot. The last time he'd seen her she'd stood with him, holding a closed umbrella and starting to get drenched in a late-arriving rain. And he'd been carrying that memory, that picture of her looking pale and wet and lost. But here she was, her beauty all afresh. Through the summer, their charmed summer, it had often happened, his being abruptly taken with her beauty, even if she'd simply turned away for a moment and then back to him. Now watching her approach, she looked somehow changed, he *sensed* a change in her, while at the same time she looked lovely in just the same way and in every detail he'd worked the month to forget.

She reached him and they greeted one another awkwardly as she offered him her hand. Then they sat down in overstuffed chairs that showed a remarkably similar pattern of stains.

She said, "I trust your trip was comfortable."

On the train from Waterloo, when he looked out the window, he'd heard the landscape, nearly harvest-ready and nagging as a shrew, asking him if he'd made up his mind. "It was fine," Earl said.

She said, "The Illinois Central is usually quite reliable."

Her words -- *I trust . . . Usually quite reliable* -- they were as rigid as her posture in the chair. It made him think that, however she'd been faring, she was as nervous now as he was and with everything he felt, he had the impulse to calm her. Here they'd barely said hello and he was already caught in some emotional middle, looking for signs that she was who she'd been, wanting to draw her close while feeling, threaded through it all, how badly she had hurt him.

He said, "It's the Land'o Corn Limited."

"What?"

"The name of the train."

"Oh," Emily said. "I'd forgotten that, if I knew."

Earl said, "It's the Illinois Central line, but the train's called the Land'o Corn Limited," and his thought was that he couldn't possibly be sounding more stupid.

He looked around the empty lobby. Its air smelled of mold. Its dimness had the quality of a sepia veneer. He cleared his throat. "It just occurred to me. How'd you get here, from the farm?"

"I drove!" she said.

"You drove?"

"Daddy's taught me." And she was suddenly lively with this to talk about. She said her

father had shown her how to set the spark and throttle. "He says I've got a safecracker's touch. Plus he showed me how to stand so I'm strong enough to turn the crank." She said they'd started in the pasture so she wouldn't run into anything. "I'm always looking for an excuse to drive somewhere. You should see the stares I get! 'Is that a *woman?*'" Now he watched her blush as she hurried to add, "I didn't mean I thought of coming to see you as an excuse."

He said, "I didn't think you did."

"Good," she said. "Because I didn't."

They sat, cautious as litigants, and looked around at everything but one another.

Emily had vowed that no matter how this went she wouldn't tell him how unhappy she'd been. She knew she had no right to, and who would want to hear it? Certainly *she* wouldn't, listening to herself whining on. But as she sat there in her overstuffed chair with its very ugly stains and heard the air's beating stillness, she felt herself wanting, despite her vow, to describe for him what her life had been. *I walk around dropping things and bumping into things. I forget to eat. I feel like I'm watching myself from somewhere outside my body.*

Wanting badly to tell him, and she sat looking down at the dark folds of her skirt and picking at lint that wasn't there. She was wondering hard. Wondering, and yet not really surprised that she felt only Earl knew how to hear her speak of her days without him. She knew she'd made him miserable, but she'd made herself miserable too. The same person had caused them both the same misery, so in that sad sense weren't they joined, meaning he alone would understand?

Momma asks me if I'm ill, but of course she knows what's going on, the way she always does.

I lie awake and I berate myself because I haven't been brave enough to follow you.

She sensed that a rush of these words, these self-pitying words, were about to leave her lips if she didn't say something else right now. "You wrote that you wanted to come so we could talk."

Earl was flustered. He'd been trying and failing to get some guiding sense of her and it seemed to him his best chance was first to listen to *her* talk. "You go ahead."

She nodded, hesitating. "I've been trying to think things through every which way."

Earl said, "Aren't there only *two* ways? Me here, this life, or not?"

He watched her face, but her expression, that deep stillness, told him nothing. He remembered the first time he'd seen her, waiting tables in The Good Day, when her smile had erased her solemn face and he'd felt an outsized relief. *She's not sad!* he'd thought. *And she's lovely!*

She closed her eyes and held them closed for some seconds. This somehow moved him, stirred him, and he felt his wanting her, right there, sitting across from him in her special-occasion dress in the ugly high-backed chair. And yet, with that, still furious at all her saying, 'no', had caused him these past weeks.

She said, "That night, when you were so angry, telling me what Daddy said, I realized how much I'd been thinking about our future."

Earl said, "And what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong with that, except, I hadn't known how frightened I was."

"So I gathered. So you said that night in so many words." His voice was sharp. "But you know what, Emily? It would help me, I'm serious, it really would, if I knew just what it is you're so damned frightened of."

Again she was studying the folds of her skirt. "Earl." Her voice was soft after his sharpness; she was trying to keep a pleading out of it. "You *do* know. Surely you know."

He shrugged. "I guess I'm just a dunce. I guess I'm your Uncle Melvin."

"The uncertainty," she said. "I'm afraid of the uncertainty."

"About what?"

"About *everything*. About where we'd be living year to year. And how often you'd be gone. And what work you'd find when your season was finished if you couldn't say for sure where we'd be for the next one." She lifted her eyes to him. Whatever his resentment, his face looked attentive and she saw in it that sincerity she'd loved right away and hadn't known young men his age could feel. And she was reading it now saying something in particular; that he was realizing suddenly what he truly hadn't known, or hadn't let himself know. That the life she was describing, as against the one he saw, they were, yes, on the surface the same life, but beneath it they had nothing in common.

She shifted in her chair. "I've been thinking these weeks, about us being married, and that we'd settle, at some point, into a . . . day-to-dayness. A sameness. I don't know how long it would be before that happened, but I'm sure it would."

Earl said, "Why would that be so bad?"

"It wouldn't! That's what I'm saying. I've loved thinking of us that way." She thought she saw his face change, close slightly. "What are *you* thinking?"

That he'd been hurt, and angry, and that much of him still was. But that wasn't thinking, it was feeling. As for thinking, his thought was that she'd read his face exactly. He was thinking how far her uncertainty was from the life he saw ahead for them; the life she said she feared. "Just, everything. All of it," he said in answer to her asking.

She looked at him again and risked a small smile and seeing it Earl felt his heart lift; pure reflex. It was defenseless, his love; he couldn't keep it from behaving. He said, "You know how much you're asking me to give up?"

She slowly nodded. "I watched you play. And I listened to you talk about –"
"Pretty much everything. That's how much."

He saw her wince. He'd stung her, and he knew he'd wanted to. He felt certain he was justified, but it came to him too that he was beginning to grow weary of that feeling: he had no wish to go through life feeling that some woundedness he was nursing was justified.

He saw her shaking her head strongly. She said, "This will sound completely selfish. Never mind 'sounds', it *is* completely selfish, I hate myself for it, and besides selfish, it's arrogant, but –"

"Emily. You know a million words. Please. Just choose a few."

She shifted again, her body tight with tension, and she had the urge to stand, but that would look ridiculous, like she was speechifying. "I just keep coming back to thinking how much better a wife I can be to you. Better here than there." She waited, then added, sounding suddenly shy, "And a better mother too, I dearly hope."

So much was alive in Earl now. Desire; anger; that rascal delight of wanting her as she sat there in her chair; a wish to comfort her; the anger coming around again.

They let a long silence happen. The grandfather clock near the varnished double doors was making its pendulum sound, the metric noise of time, and Emily was thinking of what she hadn't been able to say just now: That he might give so much to baseball he could not give them enough. She couldn't say, even to herself, give *me* enough. But how many times over the past month had she felt deeply ashamed to remember the day she'd watched from

the grandstands and sensed in the way his body moved that there'd be times when he was someone who wouldn't need her?

Finally, she said, "Don't hear this as advice. How could I give you *advice* about any of this? But it's to maybe help you think about it. Help *both* of us. At least that's how it sounds to me when I --."

"Please. Really. Just go ahead."

She nodded. "If you decide you . . . *can't*, my heart will break. Snap! I'll feel something that deep. That awful." She paused. "But I think, I *have* to think, I'd start to heal. I can't imagine how long it would take or all the ways I might be changed." She paused again. "And so would you, heal. *Your* heart would. Which I guess means -- doesn't it -- that I'm assuming it would need to."

"Yes," Earl said. "I guess that's what it means." He'd been trying to give these words a bit of mockery, but he felt instead the pull of what she'd said. That she had faith in the strength of both their hearts. That they would heal, their hearts would; much the worse for wear, scarred and halting, they would heal. From the same kind of hurt, in the same determined way, and he felt, not yet fully wanting to, allied with her in this business of their hearts.

They both started as the heavy office door behind the registration desk banged open. Emily turned and peered around the side of her high-backed chair and Earl leaned forward in his to see a hotel clerk emerge and maneuver a large Victrola around the desk into the lobby. He was dressed in a dark blue uniform with fake brass buttons and epaulettes that lay like long tongues on his shoulders. He looked like a Gilbert and Sullivan commandant. He carried the Victrola past Earl and Emily to a walnut table in the middle of the room. He set the Victrola down and adjusted its giant-lily horn. He stepped forward, his little head

was shaped like a squirrel's, and he loudly announced, as if he were speaking to a crowded lobby, "Beginning today, the Rutland is proud to feature Victrola recordings during the luncheon hour from noon to one o'clock, compliments of the management."

Earl and Emily looked at each other and they were tremendously relieved they could smile together at something ridiculous and safe. Earl whispered, "When word of this gets out, they'll be turning them away by the tens."

The clerk began cranking the Victrola, then swung the playing arm over and as he lowered the needle he said, again loudly, "'They Didn't Believe Me'. The most popular song in all of America in 1915." And after some bars of introduction a tenor voice began to sing the tune.

Returning to the registration desk, the clerk passed Emily and Earl again, nodding formally, while the tenor sang that the woman he loved had chosen him from all those in the world she could have had. And when he told his friends, as he was certainly going to tell them, they wouldn't believe him.

Earl looked at Emily and saw that she'd turned her eyes toward the tall, dead fern near the varnished front doors. He slowly took her in, from head to toe, her lustrous hair to her soft black boots. He imagined her thinking that she'd said all she could and now he was making his decision; that her looking away was as near as she could get to leaving him alone to think things through. He could believe she might be staring at that God-awful fern for the rest of time unless he said something to her.

There'd been days when his confusion had made him weak, as with an illness; and there'd been days when his anger had given him an almost bestial strength. He'd traveled here across the top of Iowa on the Land'o Corn Limited of the usually quite reliable Illinois Central line, listening to the hectoring landscape and banking on his belief that she would

tell him, judicial as Solomon, what she thought was best for him no matter what it meant for her. But she hadn't done that. She couldn't begin to give him advice.

"Emily?"

She turned away from the fern to look at him. He saw that she was composed.

He reached for her hands, then stood, and she rose with him from her chair. He led her to the middle of the lobby and she moved into his arms.

They began to dance to the sounds of the Victrola. They were silent, dancing nearly in place, a gestural to and fro, and the lobby became all at once even dimmer as, outside, clouds moved across the sun and blocked its light from coming in through the tall front windows.

Earl welcomed this, the lobby in an even denser shade; it made it intimate; it made it feel like theirs; for all its shabbiness like a room he wished to claim.

They danced and she asked him to hold her more tightly and in his head Earl heard, *It's the things that's wrong a person's got to like about the other*. If that wasn't quite what Emily was telling him, he sensed that it lived right next to what she'd said, and maybe this was what he'd come to hear from her. Her admission of what, in a life with him, she couldn't do. In hearing it like this, Earl felt all at once that, as with their equal hearts, their confusions too were equal, and they were equally desperate to move beyond confusion's sadness. And maybe, most crucial, there was *this* equation: his anger and her despair for having caused it. Maybe he'd needed to know that *they* were equal.

All of this, again, was what he *felt*; too new, as before, too unshaped to be thoughts.

They danced, taking their pantomime steps, and with the music he was hearing all the nights he'd asked himself, why, once his pain had begun to ease, he couldn't have the life he'd had before he met her. And now he heard the answer in his head: *because you met her*.

He said, "I imagined you there, on the farm." He'd just been thinking how he had, but the words slipped out; they'd felt vulnerable, unguarded, and he hadn't meant to say them.

Emily sensed she should say nothing in response and later today, driving home, she will have a kind of vision. That in her life of loving Earl there would be times when she must wait with her feelings. Wait until she knew just how to offer them, not falsely, certainly not that, but with a patience she must learn.

"I saw you in my mind, living your day." A swiftness of feeling was pulling Earl along; its strength was startling to him.

Emily looked up at him and he could read her face for once. It was curious and thrilled.

He didn't tell her he'd imagined her the cruelly mistreated girl. He didn't tell her he'd imagined reaching into the frame of her life and lifting her hair away from her damp and soot-streaked forehead. He said, "I saw every detail of the place."

"And how could you do *that*? You've never seen it."

He was reaching for a fancifulness. He sensed that's what they needed now. "I just know it."

"Prove it," Emily said.

"Well. I pictured a barn on your farm. Is there a barn?"

"Why, yes, there is."

"And fields. I saw fields, where you grow things. Are there fields by any chance?"

"There are."

“I saw a house, with a kitchen, and in the kitchen, a stove.”

“That’s amazing,” Emily said.

“I’m a wizard,” Earl said.

The song had finished some time ago, the lobby sounding with the static of the needle plowing the end grooves. They’d come to a stop, still holding one another. The clerk at last appeared and bent down to change the recording. He lifted the arm, the static ended, the lobby going silent, and in the silence Earl could hear their breathing. Which meant their hearts. He could hear their equal hearts.