

## Toad by Beatrice Colin

It must have been one of the hottest days of the 1929, the kind where the heat rises off the sugar cane fields and makes the air shimmer like it was melting right back into the sky. I want a dress made of that, said my sister Rose-Mae. Like the finest silk from China, I said in a whisper. But better, she replied. Much better.

It was a game we used to play, dreaming up stuff out of nothing; a pair of stockings made out of fast-running creek water, shoes out of the belly of a grass snake, earrings from the black polished wings of a stag beetle, and for a wedding dress, Rose-Mae would always say, a dress made of stars.

Rose-Mae lay on the hard cracked ground of the yard and looked up through the leaves of the red maple at the power lines. An ant crawled across her cheek and she swiped it away with the back of her hand. Aint no-one who will want to marry me anyways, she said. Not lookin' like this.

Since Daddy defaulted on the harvester, went looking for work and never came back, we'd been living on credit. Rose-Mae was fourteen. I was ten. There'd been a brother in between us but he'd died. We wore cut-downs and turn-ups and patched together and darned the hell out of until our clothes were so faded and frayed and our boots so worn out that we said couldn't go school no more. My mother said she didn't have the wherewithal to argue. She came out with words like that sometimes. She had grown up in Charleston in a house with a maid and a pianola. And then she had met our father, come to this Godforesaken place and everything, she said, had gone to pot.

And so we lay in the shade and read old movie magazines while our mother sat in the house and wrote letters to distant relations who she thought must have something stashed and could be persuaded to part with some of it if her hand-writing was neat and her vocabulary accomplished.

I closed my eyes and listened to the crickets down by the creek and the rumble of the odd pick-up truck as it passed by on the highway. Rose-Mae opened her mouth started to sing, softly at first, French songs she'd learned from our Daddy that he'd learned from his, songs which had been handed all the way down from our ancestors who had come, we had been told, to Louisiana by way of Nova Scotia. My sister sang like meadowlark. Everybody said so. Before Daddy left and we used to get invited, she used to get asked to sing every single potluck dinner or picnic for the fourth of July.

As the sun poured down like syrup and wind riffled through the trees like it was looking for something, her voice rose up cool and clear, shimmering a little like the August heat in the air. She never sang inside no more. If she ever heard her, Mom would sit down at the beat-up piano and belt out mine eyes have seen the glory. We all knew why though none of us would ever say.

Suddenly Rose-Mae stopped singing and sat up. And then I heard it too, a car turning off the highway and coming along the rutted lane to the farm. We jumped up and ran to the gate. It was a great big black Roadster covered with dust. A man I'd never seen before was at the wheel.

Mom grabbed us both by an arm each and marched us back to the shade of the sagging porch. Her eyes were the faded blue of her housedress and her lips and fingers were stained with black ink like she'd been sucking her pen instead of writing with it. But she was still strong and beautiful. Even when she was scared.

The car pulled into the yard with a skid of dust and a croak of brakes. The driver turned off the engine, put on his hat and climbed out.

Maam, he said.

You from the bank, my mother said.

The man smiled and shook his head. He was tall with thick black hair and a way of blinking like he'd just come out of the dark. He wasn't handsome but he wasn't ugly either. He had the kind of face that looked like he only ever laughed on Sundays. Although he couldn't have been old, his shoulders curved in on themselves and his hands dropped out of the cuffs of his shirt like they were only half-sewed on with thread.

I could see him looking round our place, at the rusted-up machinery, the flower beds where the buds parched on their stems before they ever opened, at the skinny hens in the coop and our old dog Jake who lay in the shade and was too hot to do anything but wag his tail at the world. And then he looked at Rose-Mae.

I got a gun, you know, said my mother.

I'm sorry, the man said. I should have introduced myself. My name is Dr Milo Frank. I work at the University of Ohio. I'm a folklorist specialising in music.

The man stepped forward and offered his hand to my mother. She stared at it for a second and then wiped her hands on her apron and shook it.

Well then, you better come inside and out of this sun, she said. Maybe I could offer you a cool beverage?

That would be mighty fine, he replied. I'm as dry as a proverbial bone. But first I need to ask you a favour. I have some extremely heat sensitive equipment that needs to be stored somewhere cool. Do you have a refrigerator I could use?

Of course, said Mom. We aint dirt poor.

It was the one thing, apart from the piano, which nobody wanted anyhow, that had not been sold. She'd paid it up in instalments and sometimes in the middle of the night I'd

find her with the door open and a cool jug of water against her cheek, hot tears splashing down on the floor.

Until they cut us off, she used to say softly. It's staying right here.

Dr Milo Frank went to his car and opened the trunk. Underneath a blanket was a machine with dials and cylinders and a big metal horn. He pulled out a wooden box and cradled it in his arms like it was his baby or something. The smile had gone and he looked at us sideways.

This mustn't be meddled with, you hear?

We shrugged and kicked the dirt with the toe of our boots. He was staring at my knees. I tugged and pulled my dress down but it was still too short.

Which one's Rose-Mae, he said.

Why, Rose-Mae replied.

His eyes took her in from her face and right down to her scuffed-up boots. She looked right back. And then he slammed the trunk.

A pitcher of lemonade had been placed on the kitchen table alongside a bottle of Bourbon I'd never seen before. The piano lid had been raised and the keys polished over.

Round here folks don't really play, my mother was saying. It's not what you'd call a cultured place.

But the Doctor didn't appear to be listening. First he poured himself a glass of lemonade and drank it. And then he wiped his mouth on his sleeve and opened his box.

You want to see what music looks like? Take a look.

The wooden box held a dozen cylinders made of soft yellow wax. I wanted to touch them, to run my finger along their smooth curved surface and breathe in that sweet honey smell, but no sooner than he had opened it than he shut it again.

This here is months of fieldwork, he said. It's a lifetime's research, a unique survey of the songs and music of rural America that are in the process of being lost in the mists of time.

Must be worth a cent of two, said Mom.

Priceless, he replied.

And then he opened the refrigerator, removed the pitchers of milk, boxes of eggs and pats of butter, gave them to my mother, and unloaded his wax cylinders right into our icebox.

We should begin right away, he said. But first we should go over the logistics. There is a small payment for your participation, courtesy of my academic institution, if, and I stress the word, if, I think your performance is suitable for the archive. It's nothing much. Enough for a new dress, perhaps. He was looking at Rose-Mae again like she was a piece of pie.

I don't need paying, Mom said. And then she sat down and starting playing Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory at twice its normal speed.

It took my mother two verses and a chorus to realise that it was not her the Doctor wanted but my sister. She slammed the piano lid shut with a bang.

Rose-Mae, she said softly. Sing something.

The Doctor took off his jacket and hung it on a chair. And then he sat down and rubbed his hands.

I haven't got all day, he said.

The air in the house was hot and dead. The sun was starting to drop and it blazed through the window and across the floor, picking out the dust like it was tiny specks of golden confetti.

My sister was looking at the Doctor with that way she had and I could tell she was dreaming up stuff out of nothing. And then she closed her eyes and started to sing. I mouthed the words. I knew it too. La Noce des alouette . . . Ils n'avais rien a manger.

The Doctor sat there for a moment after she had finished and didn't say a thing.

She can sing another, Mom said, or maybe the Doctor would rather hear a psalm.

No psalms, the Doctor interrupted. That was the most perfect thing I ever heard. Tell me, what do you think of when you sing La Noce des alouette?

Rose-Mae shrugged.

The lark's wedding. . . It's what your song's about. Ill-fated love.

We don't speak French in this house, my mother said.

The sky turned from gold to yellow as he unloaded his recording equipment. He placed it on the kitchen table and after he had tapped the dials and pointed the horn at the

spot where Rose-Mae had been standing, he went to the refrigerator and got himself a brand new cylinder made of wax.

My last one, he said proudly. My last recording before I head back to Ohio. But wait. What's that noise?

We stood and listened. And then we all heard it, a low rumble, a kind of vibration.

The refrigerator, my mother said. You want me to switch it off?

I certainly do not, he replied. In that case, I think we should relocate. To the yard.

It was dusk by the time he'd got set up all over again. The sky was streaked with ribbons and the stars had come out. He pointed his horn at Rose-Mae, wound up the motor and set the needle on the wax.

Ballad, he said into the horn. Sub-genre Acadia or Cajun.

But before Rose-Mae could sing a note, he cocked his head and lifted the needle. Goddamit! What's that noise?

We listened.

That's just a toad, I said. It lives down by the creek.

The doctor grabbed a rusty spade and set off towards the creek. We heard him listening and then crashing about down there, listening and then crashing. And then there was silence, the almost silence of the wind in the trees and the tiny moan of the power lines.

Sing, said the Doctor.

But Rose-Mae couldn't.

The next day the sky was as clear as a pane of glass. The sun had been streaming through the windows all morning and the butter was melted and the milk was sour. The bottle of Bourbon was empty. The Doctor's jacket still hung on the back of the chair. My mother's bedroom door was closed tight.

The kitchen was so quiet you could hear the mice beneath the floorboards. Beneath the fridge was a large pool of dark yellow wax.

They must have cut us off, said Rose-Mae. But I knew by her face that she was lying.