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ACT TWO

leanora sutter

there was a boy in chicago,  
a rich boy.  
he was kidnapped.  
the kidnapers wanted \$10,000  
from the boy's daddy  
to bring the boy back alive.  
only he was already dead.  
even before the ransom note came,  
the boy was already dead,  
naked in a ditch, miles away from his house.  
that boy was fourteen.  
and now he's dead.  
and he was rich.  
and he was white.

esther hirsh

my brain did get hurt yesterday.  
doc flitt says -  
it did get hurt a little like senator greene.

i was having chasing games with margaret  
and i did fall and hit my head on a rock.  
the rock made big heart beatings in my eye.  
i did find my way home to sara chickering  
with the good dog jerry helping me  
but i didn't feel any good feelings anywhere.  
and then my eyes did see only darks  
and i did get confused and  
thinkings i did drown in sand  
the way lewis did with his lame leg.  
and then lewis did take my hand  
and he gave me showings of the way back home  
to my nice little bed in sara chickering's house.

this morning i did wake up  
and my brain is all good feelings again.  
and i can have seeing again and the darks is all gone  
and the big heart beatings is just a little thump thumps.

doc flitt says  
i am like senator greene  
only i did get better so much faster.

erelle johnson

the chicago police did it.  
they solved the case of that murder  
of fourteen-year-old bobby franks.  
it was the spectacles that  
led detectives to the slayers.

nathan leopold, jr.,  
son of a millionaire manufacturer,  
and richard loeb,  
his companion,  
were taken into custody  
for kidnapping and killing their neighbor.

the reports say both leopold and loeb are smart,  
students at the university in chicago.  
they made full confessions to the charges,  
said they'd been planning the job  
since november.

if leopold had not dropped his spectacles,  
if the spectacles had not been so uncommon,  
they would have gotten away with it.  
they would have gotten away  
with murder.

merlin van tornhout

it took two of them  
my age  
to kill one skinny jew boy.  
two of them.  
planning every detail.  
they rented an automobile, killed the kid,  
dumped the body, buried the boots and belt buckle  
in different places.  
they planned for weeks to kidnap,  
to kill.  
to see how it felt.  
to prove they could.  
it didn't matter about jail,  
or being haunted by a ghost,  
didn't even matter about going to hell.

if i wanted to, i could kill someone all by myself.  
wouldn't need anyone's help,  
and i'd make damn sure i got some money for my trouble.  
but they were rich jew kids.  
what do you expect?

ara chickering

caught a  
german  
trp  
just below  
the falls.  
measured  
two  
and  
one-half  
feet and weighed  
67 pounds.

caught it on  
plain old  
silk line.

esther helped.

leanora sutter

my daddy said mr. field, the uncle of miss stockwell, our landlady,  
was feeling poorly  
and i might take myself over to see  
if i could be of any use.

when i got there i washed up his dishes  
and swept his floor  
and boiled some potatoes for his supper.

while i worked he talked.  
at first i didn't listen.  
mr. field is a white man  
with cheeks shrunk in enough to make his  
ears and his eyes too big for the rest of his face.  
and a neck so scrawny,  
not a collar exists that could tighten around it.

he started in on war stories.  
civil war.  
he told me about being a bugler for his regiment.  
but he said that didn't keep him out of danger.  
he was standing right beside a colonel who was shot through the middle.

mr. field said: i saw the brigade of negroes under general burnside.  
like a long streamer of dark silk they were.

he stared off through his wire spectacles,  
the lenses so dirty  
even if his eyes were clear  
he couldn't have seen much.

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they were a sight, he said.  
that line of negroes,  
marching toward the rebels,  
straight as a dress parade.

what happened to them, i asked,  
expecting nothing good.  
mr. field said: why,  
those negro soldiers chased the rebels out.  
every one.

i made a pie for mr. field.  
he kept talking.  
i don't know if he could see me well enough  
to judge the color of my skin.  
i don't know if my color mattered one whit to him.  
he just said:  
you come by anytime, miss sutter.  
you move nice and quiet  
and you make my kitchen smell like it  
did when i had a wife here. and i do  
like a flaky apple pie.

i marched home in a straight line,  
with my back tall,  
and thought about that regiment of men  
like a streamer of dark silk.

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esther hirsh

when the barn cat did have her six little kittens  
sara chickering had takings of the baby kittens  
away from their mamma.

what did you do with the little things?  
i did ask sara chickering.

sara chickering said the kittens did go far away.

that is what they said about my mamma, too. she did go  
far away on the train to heaven.

will the kittens come back? i did ask.

no, sara chickering said. the kittens won't come back, esther.  
if the kittens come back they will eat the birds.  
if the birds are eaten they can't catch the bugs.  
then the bugs will come and kill my crop.  
that's why the kittens are gone.

i do like the little kittens. even when they are blind  
and have no fur and move around like  
pink baby tongues and smell like  
warm rubber balls. i do like to watch them.

i did go along the railroad tracks to find where  
sara chickering left the little kittens. i did think i could find them

before they had leavings on the train to heaven and  
i could be their mamma and keep them in the woods  
and make them eat only warm milk and biscuit.

but i could have no findings of the little kittens.

harvey and viola pettibone

hey, vi, harvey says.  
did you know the average woman  
is happiest when she prepares food in her own kitchen  
and sits down with the family to enjoy it?

viola is cutting up chicken in the back room.  
where'd you hear that, harv?

harvey says: johnny reeves was in the store  
picking up groceries for old mrs. reeves.  
he had a crowd gathered around him  
and he was preaching. he said we'd all be better off if we  
got the family  
out of the restaurant  
and back to the dinner table.  
he said the average woman,  
she loves her home and family first.  
she might have got distracted  
when she was earning wages  
while her man fought in the great war.  
but the trend is the other way now.

viola says:  
was iris weaver in the store when he was doing this preaching?

harvey says:  
no. matter of fact he waited until she left.

viola nods and smiles.  
i guess he did.

lara chickering

it's not hard putting up with mr. hirsh.  
he isn't like my father.

maybe since he's so young.

he washes dishes,  
helps with chores,  
he even does a turn at the stove every few days.

he bathes esther,  
reads to her in all manner of voices,  
makes us both laugh till our sides hurt.  
he washes her clothes,  
gets her to school and helps her with her homework.

best man i ever saw.

iris weaver

i know i shouldn't be running liquor.  
and maybe i'll end up in jail.  
but i paid for this restaurant  
by transporting hooch  
and i've made enough  
to fork out tuition for two of my brothers  
and my baby sister, who is smart as sateen,  
and would have been trapped in this valley forever.

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eanora sutter

when i was taking care of mr. field,  
doing the light chores,  
keeping him alive with my plain  
cooking and housekeeping,  
i told him about helen keller and how she was blind all the way  
and how i wrote her a letter.  
and he showed me a  
remington portable typewriter,  
almost new.

you have any use for that? he asked.  
for your letter writing and all?

no sir, i said.

i would have liked a machine like that to write on.  
but if i went carrying a big old  
typewriter home from  
hickenson street  
all the way to  
mather road,  
constable johnson,  
he'd get ten calls before i got halfway to the covered bridge,  
telling him how the colored girl  
stole some  
expensive machinery.

not worth the trouble.

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merlin van tornhout

mary said:

what about we get married, merle?  
you're almost done with school,  
you got that night job at the paper,  
we could live on that.  
come bust me out of this place, merle.

i like mary fine.  
maybe enough to marry her.

but i don't know.

she wrote a letter to johnny reeves  
asking if he'd do the ceremony and  
if we could get married in ku klux robes,  
with flowers embroidered over the fiery cross.  
and johnny reeves said, yes.

but i never yet have  
paid my 10 dollars to the klan.  
and mary,  
well, i don't know what the klan would make of her.  
when she was still down here,  
she bought all her shoes  
from the jew store.

his weaver

merlin van tornhout  
just can't keep himself out of trouble.  
with all the talk about  
leopold and loeb  
he goes driving off to  
rescue his 15-year-old girlfriend  
from an orphanage in burlington  
and gets hauled into jail for kidnapping.

boy's got spirit, i'll give him that.  
his girl told him she wanted out,  
and he drove up there to spring her.

they were caught in vergennes,  
mary placed in custody  
of a policewoman,  
merlin arrested and held in the lockup.

he should be back in a few days.  
reynard alexander went and pitched for him.  
it helps having reynard alexander for a friend.  
i should know.

merlin van tornhout

constable johnson told me it'd be better  
if i watched my step after the trouble  
i got in  
trying to help mary.

harvey and viola pettibone

did you have to buy so many, viola says,  
looking at the stack of phonograph records.

harvey closes his eyes and breathes deeply.  
when i go in the music store,  
i want everything, he says.

viola says:

if you would only sit in the booth and try out half a dozen records  
before you buy, you'd know exactly what  
you're getting, you'd  
get exactly  
what you want.

harvey says:

i did get what i wanted. why should i spend half my life  
squeezed inside a soundproof cubby,  
when i can come home  
and listen in peace in my own chair.

viola says:

we'll see how much peace you get, mr. pettibone.  
i was hoping to put  
new linoleum on the floor this month.  
now it looks like we might just have to  
nail your records down  
instead.

johnny reeves

we took a pine  
40 feet high and  
lashed a cross arm  
to it and set the  
cross in the ground,  
its arms stretching above the town. we soaked burlap bags  
in kerosene and wrapped the bags around the wood.  
at the foot of the  
cross i smashed  
a railroad torch.  
the fire took off  
so fast. a divine  
sight, neighbor,  
the flames spread  
from the base to the  
top. in a matter of  
minutes the cross arm  
pulsed with fire. the  
flames leaping,  
seeking heaven,  
neighbor, the white  
crucifix scoring  
the night  
blazed perfect.  
perfect.

edlin van tornhout

don't care what constable johnson says.  
before i left for work,  
went up with johnny reeves and them  
and we lit up prospect hill  
with a fiery cross.  
the kerosene took off so fast.  
burned so fierce. christ.  
can still see it when i close my eyes.

leanora sutter

i woke up saturday night  
because the light coming through  
my bedroom window changed.

on the hill across the valley  
i saw  
a flame  
rising.  
but it was  
no wild fire. it  
was a  
cross,  
burning.

silently,  
silently,  
i crept down the hall,  
into the closet  
where,  
at the back,  
mamma's cotton dress  
still dangled over her shoes,  
and the walls smelled of hair oil and oranges.

in that dark and narrow place,  
i opened a hole for myself  
but no matter how i turned,  
the light from the cross  
curled its bright claws under the door.

synard alexander

own in town,  
amilies listened to the independence day concert,  
hile up on the hill a fiery cross was set ablaze.  
started burning about the time the band finished  
*the star-spangled banner.*

only a lunatic  
would ignore the dry conditions,  
or the fact that a crackling fire  
could spread so easily out of control.

or perhaps it was the work of children  
stirred by griffith's *birth of a nation*,  
that racist rubbish,  
which will not fade away.

esther hirsh

sara chickering did take me for a walk  
on the other side of flat rock  
from where the cross did burn  
the other night.

sara chickering did grumble about men in their nightshirts  
with their filthy wet hems  
and i did laugh at her  
    so serious  
and ask her the names for all the flowers,  
all the growing plants like  
ebony spleenwort and  
rusty woodsia.

as we did walk through the meadow  
back to sara chickering's house  
we did see flowers with more good names  
like violet and saxifrage and cowslip,  
and we did see birds with the most happy namings like  
meadowlark  
and bobolink  
and savanna sparrow.  
they did make a music in the shimmery air  
and there were flickers and  
orioles and  
bluebirds turning circles.

and as i did look up to give thanks to sara chickering for all the namings,  
whippoorwill had singings  
and the music did come from sara chickering's mouth.

iris weaver

i was born protestant.  
but i'd join the catholic church  
before  
i'd throw my lot in with the klan.

sara chickering

i never thought much about it before.  
if esther hadn't needed a place the last minute  
with all those fresh air kids coming to town,  
i never would think of it still.  
i might have joined the ladies' klan.  
i might have become an officer, even.  
the klan can seem mighty right-minded, with their talk of family virtue,  
mighty decent, if you don't scratch the surface.  
there's a kind of power they wield,  
a deceptive authority.

i think a lot about it these days.  
the klan says they don't stand against anyone.  
but a catholic, a jew, a negro,  
if they got arrested,  
and the judge was klan,  
and the jury was klan,  
you can't convince me they'd get a fair trial.

it took having the hirshes here  
to see straight through  
to the end of it.

esther hirsh

someone did wrap a letter over a stone and they did send it  
through sara chickering's kitchen window.

i have not knowings what the letter said.

daddy would not give readings of the words to me.

he did say a hiss word like steams coming from the teakettle  
and make slow shakings of his head.

sara chickering,

when she did read the letter,

she made angry sayings.

when sara chickering does get angry she is

walking

so fast,

like a dog who has needs for squats.

she does go so fast sparks are coming on the braided rug.

daddy did say he would sit at the table and not have sleeps.

sara chickering let me have sleeps in her bed.

daddy did say nobody not anybody not even klan is hurting little girls

and

i can have sleeps with no fearing.

i like

having sleeps with sara chickering

except it does make me

hungry in the hot night

when sara chickering is all

smelling

of spicy green tomatoes.

sara chickering

ira hirsh

saw in the paper

an ad for a flat on main street.

five rooms,

completely furnished.

he asked if he should take it.

get the klan to leave me alone.

i can't imagine life without that child under my feet,

asking a thousand questions

with that odd way of hers,

talking to the animals

and the plants

and the furniture

as if everything

was talking back.

i can't imagine life without that child.

i told mr. hirsh so in so many words.

damn klan.

to think of what they could drive from my life

with their filthy

little

minds.