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The Eleventh Frame

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THE ELEVENTH FRAME

“Didja clean my teeth?” Skeet shouts from the upstairs bathroom. He puts his comb down, strolls across the hall and lets his feet teeter on the top step. “SALLY?”

“Next to mine at the kitchen sink, Dear,” she yells up from the basement. She finishes a label for *pickled tomatoes*, slides three fresh jars into the slot next to *rhubarb* and reaches for the light cord. With dust as an excuse, she crosses the room to examine the trophies crowding the bookcase. The largest is engraved: *1st Place—Flint, Michigan Standard Service—Sally Morgan*. Sally smiles and dusts a bronze woman with a ball over her head: *Sally Morgan, Champion—Ladies Nite at the Eleventh Frame*.

“Ma?” Dixie yells down the basement stairs.

“Be right up, Sweetie.”

In the kitchen Sally slips her own teeth into place and rinses the glass with the DishMaster.

“That’s gross,” Dixie says, sitting at the bar. She takes a glittery hair barette out of her back pocket and examines it.

“You want a mother who ain’t got no teeth, Dear?” Sally chirps.

“Sick,” says Dixie, picking at her eggs and gravy. “Was that true what Aunt Jo said about her husband being swiped from her?”

“No need listening to poor Aunt Jo when she’s been drinking, Sweetie.”

“Why does she rat her hair like that?”

“Now, Dixie . . .”

“The mountain mamas,” Dixie says. She hums the theme song to the *Beverly Hillbillies* and puts the barette in her hair.

“Oh, now, shush,” Sally chuckles. “There’s not a hair the same on Aunt Jo and me.” She uses her apron to wipe fingerprints from the refrigerator and then hangs the apron in the handle. “And take that nail polish off and that glitery doo-da in your hair . . . you’re too young. I’m going to go get ready.”

“Don’t know why you spend so much time dressing for that stupid game,” Dixie grumbles.

“I’m only in three leagues this year.”

The night before, when the whole clan was over, Granny sat in the kitchen shaking her head. "Could see clear through to her crotch and the label from the Sears Roebuck Company . . . actin' drunker 'an a jilted bride," Granny said when Aunt Jo squatted to coo at someone's baby. It was when poor Aunt Jo fell over, right on top of the squealing baby, that Granny had moved into the kitchen. "In my day, we had a good time jes' talking . . . weren't no call for booze or four-letter words."

Aunt Jo ran a hand over her ratted hair when she stood up and then flirted with the male relatives, finally settling on Skeet's lap. "My sneaky little sister Sally hadn't gone off and married you, I would a done it myself," she cackled, her voice as scratchy as the jukebox in the Stagecoach Tavern.

Skeet, as used to women sitting on his lap as she was to sitting on them, clicked his teeth, beamed up at her and said, "Would that've made me your fourth or your fifth?" His face looked like a topical map with deep leathery cracks. "Be like Casey Johnson who's his wife's husband and her uncle." He slapped his knee and laughed out loud along with the rest of the uncles and sister-in-laws. In fact, he laughed so hard his teeth almost fell out.

Aunt Jo stood. She patted down the most ratted part of her hair. Her skin, already filled with broken blood vessels from alcohol, deepened to the color of her smudged lipstick. "None of 'em mattered. Only one and he was stole from me." Her knees buckled and Skeet stood to catch her.

"Ain't goin' back out there," Granny said. "She ain't no daughter of mine. If I'd known she was drinkin' again, I'd have gone to my bingo game instead." She took a drink of her Ginger Ale and sighed.

When Sally wandered back out into the living room and wasn't looking, Dixie spiked her 7-Up with gin. She'd already had three.

"Let me show you something," Granny said. Her teeth were stained and the fingers she dug through her billfold with had liver-spots. "There's my babies," she said. "In Mississippi where a family was a family."

Dixie glanced at the black and white picture of her mother and Aunt Jo . . . two girls in dirty dresses, barefeet and spindley legs, standing in front of a Ford.

"That's when work kept us clean," Granny sighed again, staring at Dixie's nailpolish for the first time. "Before all this General Motors

business.”

“I know, Grandma. I know,” Dixie said. “And Mama shot a mountain lion out the back window when she was thirteen.”

Dixie took her spiked 7-Up into the living room where Aunt Jo was shouting at Sally.

“Ain’t goin’ in there! Ain’t going to apologize and listen to her call me a whore! That blasted bingo is more important than me!”

Later that night, when Sally had given up, Skeet finally lured Granny into the living room with the rest of the family. She even clapped and sang when Skeet flipped on the amplifier to his electric guitar, clicked his teeth into place and began the chorus of: “How could you leave me, Lucille? Four lonely children, crops in the field . . .” Granny looked down at her feet when Aunt Jo carried on and made howling noises.

Sally dabs a generous portion of Tigress After-Bath powder on her damp chest and arms. The room is still humid from her long bath. She smears a peephole into the mirror, plucks a hair from her chin and gives her perm a friendly pat.

“Hurry up in there,” says Dixie, knocking for the second time.

“Out in a minute, Sweetie,” Sally repeats with no intention of hurrying. She bites the insides of her cheeks, studies her profile and then rouges and mascaras. Her black bra and panties have a minimum of overflow considering all the weight she lost last spring. She finally lifts the brick-orange smock from the stool, with *Steel's Plbg. & Htg.* printed across the back in bold black letters, and smacks her lips with the same brick-orange color.

“You can come in now,” she calls down the hall.

“It’s about time,” says Dixie, putting her own toiletries on the counter.

Sally continues straightening. Without looking up she says, “Long as you’re in the shower, you can wash that glitter off your eyes, Dear.”

“Ain’t glitter!”

“Whatever it is,” Sally looks at her squarely, “you ain’t leavin’ the house with it. And what’s this?” She picks up a t-shirt with *Expensive* written across the chest.

“Nothin’.”

"You think you're meetin' boys down at that rink, young lady, you'd best think again," Sally says as Skeet comes up the stairs.

"Things aren't the same as when you were young. And this isn't Mississippi," Dixie pouts.

"Has nothin' to do with it."

"Aw, Sally," Skeet says. "She's near sixteen."

"You're a fine one to talk."

"That ain't nice, Sally." Skeet walks toward the bedroom making noises with his teeth.

"Aw, I didn't mean it, Sweetie. It's just she's too young."

Dixie sits on the edge of the old pedestal bathtub and screws the shower attachment on. "Can't wash nothin' off with this thing," she shouts after them. "I don't see why we can't get a shower like normal people."

It was last spring that Aunt Jo's husband left her. She stayed with Sally and Skeet at first, then with Granny, and then she started drinking at the Stagecoach again, like she had when her last husband left her.

"Wouldn't care so much," Aunt Jo confided to Sally, teasing her hair unconsciously during one of her crying spells, "if he hadn't took up with a damn teenager."

And sure enough, Sally ran into Aunt Jo's ex and his girl soon after at the five and dime. His girl wasn't really so bad, certainly no teenager. But it was a shock to them all when he started shacking up with her, especially so soon.

"And don't you be so smug in your ways, little Sally," Aunt Jo chided one day. "You know Skeet's been steppin' out for years." Which made Sally's insides curdle, like a pail of sour milk.

Because she'd always known. At least in the back of her head, where she wanted it to stay, she'd always known. She met Skeet in Mississippi when she wasn't much more than a girl, when she wore her brother's blue jeans for the most part, when she looked forward to fishing and Sunday dinners. It was when Skeet was still working for the coal mines, like he had since he was twelve, before he joined up with General Motors.

Maybe Granny was right about money being the ruination. Maybe Sally's years with Skeet hadn't all been happy . . . first the two older ones and then years later, by accident, Dixie. But he'd certainly done

his share of going out drinking, especially lately. And then there was the time she thought she'd seen him with a woman at Smitty's. And she'd be goddamned if some thirty year old hussy was going to steal *her* husband.

So, she bleached her hair and had it permed with little curls around the face, just like Vanessa's in *Love of Life*. She lost eighteen pounds and bought three new pantsuits at the May Company in Detroit. And then one night she sent Dixie over to her girlfriend's. She took both of Skeet's 22's out of the hall closet and locked them in the basement. She took the handgun out of his sock drawer and hid it at the bottom of the clothes hamper. She found all the spare sets of keys to the Bronco and the Galaxy, put them in her sewing basket, sat in the living room and waited.

"Something smells good," Skeet said, coming in the front door. "And look at you . . . you're all fixed up." He pecked her on the cheek and made a bee-line to the kitchen. "What smells so good?"

"It's pot roast, Dear."

"Where's Dixie?"

"At her girlfriend's," Sally said, untying her apron.

"Let's eat! I'm starved."

After dinner, he poured himself a Scotch, put his teeth in a water glass and went into the other room to watch t.v. When Sally was through loading the dishwasher, she went into the other room too, and flipped off the television. And then she broke a cardinal rule.

"Hey . . . what's doing? I was watching that."

Seated on the couch, her fluffy blue slippers planted firmly in the ground, elbows resting on her knees, hands clasped in front of her, Sally said, "You been messin' around, Sweetheart."

"Whadya mean?" Skeet froze, his mouth hanging, his gums showing.

"You know what I mean." Sally looked at him directly, a lot more directly than usual.

"How'd you know?" His face was red, his fingers were extended around the arms of his recliner, like he was ready to spring.

"I know'd, Dear. And it ain't gonna happen any more . . . or I'm leavin'."

"No . . ." Skeet said. His fingers kneaded his thinning hair and then covered his face.

"Yep."

He stood. His shoulders were as curved and rigid as a coat hanger. "Don't . . . I can't . . ." And then he threw a lamp on the floor and left the room.

Because whatever else Skeet was, he was a God-fearing man. Reared baptist. Never meant any harm to Sally or the kids, always good to them, made sure they didn't want for anything. And like he promised that night, he never cheated on Sally again.

"You ready, Dear?" Sally shouts from the base of the stairs.

"Ready as I'll ever be," says Dixie. She hops down the stairs, three at a time, with her skates under her arm.

"Your braces match the glitter on your t-shirt," Sally teases.

Dixie groans.

"Dad's already warmin' up the car, Dear."

The Bronco speeds down the only road through Swartz Creek with George Jones blaring on the radio: "Your heart turned left and I was on the right . . ."

After a bit, Sally says, "I suppose Granny's at Bingo tonight."

"Suppose so," says Skeet. "She's been darn lucky lately."

After another silence, he clicks his teeth and says, "How in the world can you dance and roller skate at the same time any how?"

"Has a mind to do it every night, if she could," Sally shakes her head and smiles.

"I'm the best in Flint, if you wanna know," Dixie says, lacing her skates in the back seat. She has the glittery barette hidden in her back pocket.

Sally and Skeet drop Dixie off at the roller disco and then head on up the road.

"You look awful pretty tonight," Skeet says, glancing sideways at Sally.

"Thank you, Dear." Sally looks out the window.

"Who're you playing tonight?" he asks, pulling into the parking lot.

"Ace Realty."

With the engine still running, he turns to her and says, "Well, I'll be over at the Stagecoach. Pick you up at 11:30."

They stare at each other.

"Just goin' to play pool. Just goin' to play pool."

They kiss goodbye.

Sally pushes the metal bar on the glass door and then walks in to the echoey sound of battered pins smacking hardwood floors. She picks up a copy of *Alley Chatter* and glances over at the blackboard where *Women's Championships* is written across the top. Next to her name is: *Number 1, 275 Actual.*

At the other end of the carpeted foyer there are five women in a pit with brick-orange smocks, just like hers. A row of women with *Steele's Plbg. & Htg.* in bold black letters across their backs. All of their hair is blonde, with little curls around the face, just like Vanessa's in *Love of Life*. Toothy smiles bordered in brick-orange lipstick. All mothers and friends. But when Sally Morgan walks down the foyer of the Eleventh Frame, heads turn.