**Vera**

**A NOVEL EXCERPT**

[**BY CAROL EDGARIAN**](https://www.narrativemagazine.com/authors/carol-edgarian)

**I ALWAYS THOUGHT** of my city as a woman. But the house, it turned out, was a woman too. When the quake hit, she groaned. Her timbers strained to hold on to their pins, the pins snapping. And the rocks beneath the house? They had voices too. And if I ever wondered how long it would take for the world to end, I know: forty-five seconds.

An unearthly stillness preceded and followed the shaking. It’s what we did and didn’t do in the stillness that determined the rest of our days.

I lost two mothers that year. The first was Rose. I can’t say where she was born or where her kin came from. The fact is, I don’t know what mix of blood flows through me. I suspect there’s some Persian, possibly Armenian. I understand there may be some Northern African and Spanish in the mix too, and a good pour of French. Spanish by way of Mexico. None of this Rose would confirm or deny. “We’re mutts,” she said, and left it at that.

One of the harlots claimed that Rose had been found as a waif in the slums of Mexico City. For a fee, she was brought north. I believe that; I believe most anything when it comes to Rose. She spoke five languages; her hair was blue-black, her skin copper, her eyes green. In San Francisco she became a much-favored prostitute, catering to the gold rush miners. Her next clients were the fellows who came after the miners, the suit-wearing bankers and merchants, who thought they could gentle a murderous, gambling, whoring town; they thought they could gentle Rose. Instead she became the grande dame of the Barbary Coast, the Rose of The Rose. She did not raise me. That duty fell to a Swedish widow employed to bring me up to be, I suppose, anything but a hooker. In that, Morie Johnson was successful. I am not a hooker. I am only a thief.

**Being a bastard** and almost orphan, I never took for granted the trappings of home. My fifteenth birthday fell on a Monday that year, 1906. In nine days, the world I knew would be gone. The house, the neighborhood, our city, gone.

I am the only one left to tell it.

It was springtime. First thing before breakfast, my sister, Pie, and I made our lady loops—to Fort Mason and back. We were two girls exercising one unruly dog.

Pie walked slowly, having just the one speed, her hat and parasol canted at a fetching angle. She was eighteen and this was her moment. All of Morie’s friends said so. “Your daughter Pie is grace in her bones,” they said. And it was true: Pie carried that silk net high above her head, a queen holding aloft her fluttery crown.

Now, *grace* was a word Morie’s friends never hung on me. I walked fast, talked fast, scowled. I carried the stick of my parasol hard on my shoulder, with all the delicacy of a miner carting a shovel. The morning sun blasted my cheeks, and anyone fool enough to come up behind me risked getting his eye poked. We were sisters by arrangement, not blood, and though Pie was superior in most ways, I was the boss and that’s how we’d go.

As we turned from the house, our dog Rogue, a noble-hearted Rottweiler mix, ran into the alley after a bird. Rogue had been acting queerly all morning, flashing me the whites of his eyes, even when I called to him with a knob of cheese in my hand. It was as if he knew what was coming, as if he could feel the rumbling beneath his paws.

“Slow down!” Pie begged, knowing I wouldn’t heel either. I had what Morie—Pie’s mother, the widow who raised me—called *willful unhearing.* The welts on my legs from Morie’s most recent whacking with the boar-bristle brush proved it. With every step my skirt hit where I hurt, and with every step I went faster. I would have flown like that bird if I could.

The day was unusually mild, fogless. You’d have to be a grim widow not to feel the lark in it. We lived on bustling Francisco Street, close to the canneries and piers, where the air was always cool and briny. Ours wasn’t a fancy block, working-class. As we headed west, to our right sat the glorious bay—and beyond the bay, the Marin Headlands, green this time of year.

We were on Easter break, and free to walk the long way. Pie had arranged to meet up with her best friend, Eugenie Schmitz, at the corner of Van Ness Avenue. Pie was eager to tell Eugenie her big news. I was just glad to be out of the house.

“Make a wish,” Pie called, pumping her arms to keep up, “for your birthday.”

I glanced over my shoulder and rolled my eyes, pretending I didn’t care. “Why,” I said, “when it never comes true?”

My wish was urgent, the same every year. It made me cross to have to think it again. Instead I looked to my left, to where San Francisco rose on tiptoe. Seeing her in her morning whites always made me feel better. My city was young, bold, having burned to the ground five times and five times come back richer and more brazen. To know her was to hold in your heart the up-downness of things. Her curves and hollows, her extremes. Her windy peaks and mini-climates. Her beauty, her trembling. Her greed.

At Saint Dominic’s, the nuns taught us that we were lucky to live in San Francisco, our city being an elusive place, easy to love, hard to keep—especially for those who don’t deserve her. They taught us about the Spanish conquistadors, who sailed for years, fighting tides and hurricanes, scurvy and venereal disease in search of her; they starved themselves on hardtack, their ships battered, their tongues blistered from wind and a scarcity of water, yet still they managed to rape and pillage, and therefore, as God’s punishment, they were standing on the wrong side of the boat when they passed the fogbound Golden Gate. All that trouble, all those years, and they missed the pearl—not once but twice. “Careful of handsome fools,” warned the sisters.

“If I were a conquistador,” I said to Pie, “I wouldn’t miss what was right in front of my long Spanish nose.”

“Not everyone is as vigilant as you,” my sister observed.

The truth about Pie, and I loved her no less for this, was that she didn’t question things, and I questioned too much. “Then pox on the Spaniards too,” I said, just to hear her laugh. And because she was laughing, I considered it fair to ask, “Pie?”

“Yah?”

“I know you want to tell Eugenie, but tell me first: What happened last night with James?”

She stopped in her tracks and groaned. “You mean you heard.”

I heard. After supper, when James O’Neill knocked on the back door and asked Pie to step outside, I put my ear to the glass. When I couldn’t make out their whispers, I cracked the window. In the light of no moon, James O’Neill took Pie in his arms and promised this: in a year, if—he said *if* twice—if his store turned a profit, then he would ask her to marry him. The noodle went on to explain that as the sole support for his mother and sisters, he had to put them first; he’d gone into debt to open his notions shop, selling thread, tobacco, and buttons on Market Street; and, oh, he loved her. He loved Pie. He said it in that order, three things she already knew. As I knew, from the look on Pie’s face when she came inside, that James O’Neill had given her a fraction of what she’d wished for; then, to add insult, he put love at the rump. How many folks take the meagerness offered and decide it’s their due? How many girls accept a whacking with the boar-bristle brush and do nothing to stop it from ever happening again?

“I don’t understand,” I pressed. “He proposed to propose?”

“Don’t put it that way,” Pie begged. “Please, V. James may not be bold but he’s good.”

“Deadly earnest,” I agreed. “But what does it mean?”

“It means I have to wait—” Pie faltered, tears in her eyes. “Some more . . .”

“Oh, Pie.”

“And it means now we have no chance of paying off Morie’s debt to the Haj.”

We both sank at the thought.

Arthur Volosky was his real name, but Morie called him the Haj—Swedish for shark. The Haj ran the numbers racket in our part of town—among the cannery workers and fishermen and regular folks like Morie. The Haj took bets; he charged exorbitant sums on the money he loaned. Our Morie was a devout churchgoer, but when she drank she gambled. Doesn’t everyone have at least two opposing natures warring inside them? I think so. One way or another, God or the Haj, Morie hedged her bets that she might one day live among the rich angels.

“You shouldn’t have been snooping,” Pie scolded. “James wouldn’t like it. Not one bit.” She lifted her chin, gathering herself. “Oh, drats. We’re late. We’ll miss Eugenie.” Pie started to walk on. “Aren’t you coming?” She squinted, shifting her focus to how she might fix me. “Sun’s out. Put up your umbrella.”

“Pie, Morie didn’t hit me because of my umbrella.”

“No.” Pie hung her head. “Not only that.”

Not only that.

Morie had tried to stop drinking, since the doctor warned her of her heart. But when James O’Neill offered Pie half a cup of nothing, Morie filled her own cup with aquavit. And another and another.

I suppose I gave Morie a hundred reasons to hit me: my skirt was soiled, my tongue was loose. I reminded her of her lost pride. And this: my skin turned copper when I was too stubborn to shield it from the sun. If my skin was dark, while Morie and Pie were fair and pink, the world would know that I wasn’t Morie’s daughter and that our family was a sham.

A “dark affinity” lived inside me that Morie’s boar-bristle brush couldn’t beat out. So Morie’s friends suggested, often to my face, as if there is only one black and one white ink with which to draw the world—one nasty, one good—and that is the dull thing society would make of a girl. Early on, the nuns at school granted Pie beauty and gave me the booby prize of wits. I was fine with wits.

“Same birthday wish?” Pie asked, taking hold of my hand.

“More or less.”

Her face clouded when she heard that. “Why not something new, now that you’re fifteen and a young lady.”

“Oh, hell, Pie, I will never be a young lady.”

I loved Pie; I loved her hard. But I would never believe that a man or a wish could save us. Having come from desire, I knew too much about desire. I knew San Francisco was a whore’s daughter, same as me. If Pie and I were to rise, it would be up to me.

“Pie?”

“Yah?”

“How much is Morie in for to the Haj?”

She was about to tell me when a hired hack charged down the street and captured our attention. Our neighbor Mr. de Bretteville, who spent all day idling in front of his house while his wife gave massages to men inside, leaped from his chair.

“Bet it’s her,” Pie whispered, as the cab halted in the road in front of us.

Mr. de Bretteville’s daughter, Alma, stepped from the hack in the same sparkle gown she’d worn when she left home on the previous night. When I took Rogue out for his evening walk, I saw her.

“Look at her,” Pie hissed, in a rare show of envy. And I did. I looked at Alma de Bretteville, who was famous not just on our street but all over town.

There was a kind of woman bred in San Francisco then—bold, vulgar, and unapologetic—that was Alma. California was a young state, San Francisco was even newer, and Alma was the freshest thing going: twenty-five, buxom, ambitious, a fair Dane with soulful blue eyes. The men of the city were so taken with her, they’d used her face as the model for Victoria, goddess of victory, on the bronze statue that stood atop Union Square.

But that wasn’t what got Alma known. It was the trial. Alma sued a miner who’d promised to marry her. His name was Charlie Anderson and she sued him in court for “personal defloweration.” Alma demanded that Anderson pay her the whopping sum of fifty thousand dollars for what he’d taken, which could not be given back. “Pets, it’s called screwing,” she declared when she took her turn on the witness stand. All of which was covered in the morning and afternoon editions of the papers—and all I eagerly read.

Alma de Bretteville was six feet tall in her stockings, and if that was what shame looked like, I’d have it too.

“Hi, Pa,” she said, sidestepping a pad of horse shit in her too-fancy shoes.

Here any normal father—and what did I know of normal fathers?—might have had qualms to see his daughter return home from an all-night tryst. Not Mr. de Bretteville, who everyone knew was a fallen aristocrat.

“What news?” he asked, trembling with anticipation. He reminded me of Rogue, wagging at the prospect of a fresh bone.

“Talk *inside,*” Alma insisted as she dispatched her father to wait for her inside the house.

Only then did Alma show us her dazzling smile. It was the grin of someone who knew you’d been talking behind her back and would give a damn only if you stopped.

“Hello, ducks.”

“Oh, hi,” Pie said weakly, the sight of Alma making her doubly fearful that she’d end up an old maid who’d waited too long for James O’Neill.

Pie and Alma were the acknowledged beauties of our neighborhood. Though Alma was ahead of Pie by any measure of age, height, scandal.

I didn’t speak to Alma, that was my thing. I hid in plain sight. Alma fixed her gaze on Pie, that way pretty girls have of enjoying the sight of each other, as if standing in front of a mirror.

“Your hat,” Alma said. “It’s dashing. Care to sell it?”

Pie touched the wide brim with two hands, as if a malevolent wind were about to snatch it. The hat was navy silk with bold feathers and at the center a diamond pin. “My hat? No!”

“I’d pay something ridiculous,” Alma assured her. “Even if it is used.”

“You know perfectly well it’s new.” Pie gave Alma the stink eye. In fact, the hat was two years old. Even so, it was Pie’s pride.

“How much?” I asked.

Alma’s laugh was all bells and winks. “You’re not too proud, are you?” She squinted at me. “I forget your name.”

“Vera,” I said.

“Oh, right, Vera.” Alma sounded vague, as if she were trying to recall something she’d heard about me. Shrugging, she fondled her mesh evening bag—a bag no one on our street had any business owning, any more than Pie had any business owning that hat. Alma de Bretteville was bought and paid for, and so were we.

“Five dollars should put you right.”

“We’ll think on it,” I said.

“Will not,” Pie mouthed, so only I could see.

“Well, ducks, think on it while I visit my ma,” Alma said. “I’ll stay until one of us gets cross. That should give you all of six minutes.” Laughing, she disappeared inside her parents’ shabby house.

Pie waited for the door to shut, then wheeled in my direction. “What kind of girl buys a hat off a person’s head?”

“Someone who’s going places,” I said.

Something was happening—something I couldn’t yet see. The horn at the Ferry Building downtown was blasting and the seagulls overhead screeched in reply; on the corner boys in breeches were hawking the morning editions of the *Examiner*and the *Call.* Between here and there, the city was rising in its estimation, and we were rising too. I decided that one day Alma and I would be great friends.

“Think on it, Pie. Five dollars would buy you two hats.” Pie wouldn’t hear of it. Her hat wasn’t a hat but a dream.

Years later, when we were both quite ancient, I asked Pie what she remembered about the time of the quake. She didn’t pause to consider. “All that we lost. Isn’t it the same for you?” She peered at me from behind thick glasses.

I smiled, for of course I remembered the opposite: those I found. Alma being one.

“You sure were determined to keep her hands off your hat,” I said.

“My hat?” Pie replied. “What hat?”

We walked on, faster now, so deep in our private worries that when Pie’s best friend, Eugenie, called to us, we didn’t hear her. It took Eugenie’s whistle—diminutive Eugenie Schmitz had quite a set of pipes—to cut through.

Pie waved eagerly. “Smile, Vera. For cripes’ sakes, smile.”

Eugenie was with her father, the mayor. The papers called him Handsome Gene. They also called him a crook.

“I thought he was hiding out before he got indicted?”

“Shh,” Pie whispered. “He’ll hear you.”

“Pie, I can’t hear me.”

Mayor Eugene Schmitz, German-born, with a thick head of hair, a handlebar moustache, and a beard, plowed toward us, all bells and smiles.

I supposed every era has a politician like him: good-looking and loose-natured, an ordinary person capable of extraordinary indulgences. He’d risen on questionable merits from playing the violin and conducting the two-bit Columbia Theatre to serving as San Francisco’s mayor. The fact that Schmitz and the sheriff and every member of the city’s Board of Supervisors were corrupt grafters wasn’t news—the news was that anyone cared.

“V, not a word,” warned Pie, “about James, and certainly nothing about the Haj.”

I looked at my sister with wonder. “Why would I?”

“Why? Why do you say any of the things you do?” she replied. “Because you love to *stir.*”

I should have been insulted, but the fact is, it was true.

Half a block away, Eugenie, with her head bowed, clutched a small parcel to her ribs.

“What’s that she’s holding?” I asked.

“Your birthday present, silly.”

“Quick, tell me it isn’t a rosary.”

Pie lowered her gaze. “I told her not to—”

“Why does she insist on converting pagans?”

Pie laughed. “That’s what I said you’d say.”

Even at a distance you could see that the Schmitzes’ troubles rode heavy on their shoulders. They walked bent, as if facing a stiff wind. The mayor had his arm wrapped tight around Eugenie. She had barely survived the most recent flu epidemic. She was thin and drawn, a handkerchief at the ready, half tucked in the sleeve of her coat. In contrast, her father radiated health; his thick, wavy hair required a Board of Supervisors all its own. He was accused of corruption on any number of fronts.

We’d known the family forever. Pie and Eugenie chose each other as best friends in the first grade—back when the mayor wasn’t anything but a violinist. Somehow, even then, the Schmitzes lived in a better house than they should. But as we lived in a better house than we should, the friendship didn’t seem so odd.

“Happy birthday, Vera!” boomed Schmitz as we collided with them at the side of the road.

Eugenie’s eyes were red from weeping. She thrust her present at me. “I hope you like it.”

I knew I wouldn’t. Worse, I feared my real opinion would show on my face, as if my face were a page everyone should read.

Pie elbowed me. “Go on, open it.”

It wasn’t a rosary after all, but a pair of handkerchiefs Eugenie had embroidered with a thin, curly *V*. I was so relieved, I hugged her hard.

“Bravo,” exclaimed the mayor, his smile fading as he scanned the road to see if anyone was watching. I’d heard reporters had staked out their house.

My gaze fell to the mayor’s feet. There was a coin in the dirt beside his boot. The mayor and I reached for it at the same time, but I was quicker.

“Here,” I said, offering him the coin. “It must have dropped from your pocket.”

“Don’t touch it!” cried Eugenie.

“Why not?” I insisted. “It isn’t a bribe or anything.”

“Oh, Vera.” Pie shook her head.

But the mayor understood. I’d said the thing you must not say to a man accused of living on bribes.

“No, no,” he protested, laughing. “Finders keepers.”

For months the *Bulletin* and the *Chronicle* had been building a case against the mayor. His many transgressions included greasing city contracts, payola he received from the city’s saloons, stockyards, and Frenchie restaurants. Schmitz held a partnership stake in the Standard Lodge, a truly wretched place, where a Mexican prostitute in the basement could be had for twenty-five cents, and a French whore on the top floor cost a dollar. He’d accepted bribes from the unions on one side and from the developers of the aboveground trolleys on the other. And that, for the moment, was his biggest problem. To be a crook in San Francisco was a thing so common it was almost a matter of pride, but to alienate your fellow crooks, that was a problem.

In our house, I ate the news for breakfast and dinner and had already formed a picture in my mind of the mayor rotting in jail, and poor, poor Eugenie.

Yet here he was laughing because a nickel wasn’t real money, was it?

“Are you sure?” I offered it again, hoping in my optimist’s heart he wouldn’t take it.

He took it. Claiming it was for luck, he turned the coin over in his palm and slid it into his pocket.

I felt it was only fair to ask, “Have you got a good lawyer?”

“Vera,” warned Pie, clucking and tsking. “You must stop talking *immediately.*”

Tears welled in Eugenie’s eyes. “Papa says it’ll all blow past. Won’t it?” She looked to her father.

The mayor winced, knowing it wouldn’t. “In fact, I have a team of lawyers. I’m not sure what good they do me, but they’ve been at the house all night. Eugenie and her mother are very upset, aren’t you, darling?” Again, he asserted his arm around her tiny waist. “We thought we’d take a break, get some fresh air . . . find you girls. And here you are. Please, don’t worry,” he told his daughter. “Soon it will all be behind us.”

At this Eugenie began to sob outright. Pie stepped forward and, being an old hand at comfort, took Eugenie’s arm and led her away. As they walked on, we heard Eugenie cry, “He’s going to jail and no one has the heart to tell him.”

The mayor winced. “Walk with me?” he said. It wasn’t a question. He took my hand, tucked it under his arm, and led me across the street, so that we were walking opposite them.

He got right down to it. “Vera, you’re a bright girl. I can see you have good sense.” He glanced across the road. “Those girls, they can’t still be fretting about—”

“No, not about you,” I assured him. I looked over, and seeing that Pie was the one talking, I explained, “They’re talking about Pie’s beau. When they’re done with him, they’ll move on to hats and dresses.” I sighed. “Your daughter and my sister can talk about the wonders of a dress until even the dress gets bored.”

The mayor smiled. “And you, Vera, you don’t bother with dresses?”

“Not if I can help it.”

His eyes raked over me. “How old are you today, dear?”

“Fifteen.”

“Fifteen!” He flexed his arm, pulling me closer—so close I noticed that he’d waxed the left side of his moustache but forgotten to do the right.

As I studied him, Schmitz observed me. He clenched his jaw. “I would have guessed older.”

Me too, I thought. I am as old as that bay and those hills—older, in some ways, than this man. I had made it my secret mission to find one adult—one single adult—who could show me how to behave. The mayor wasn’t it.

“You aren’t much like your sister, are you? Or your mother,” he said.

There, the wretched question that had always plagued me. The question that folks in the neighborhood and the nuns at school and, God help me, Morie’s church pals wondered whenever they saw me with Pie: How was it that Morie, the fair, blue-eyed Swede, had produced such a dark thing as me? And if they assumed my olive skin, brown hair, and dark eyes were the legacy of our dear father, they had only to glance at the portrait she kept by her bed: Lars Johnson was as blond and fair and dead as he could be.

“It’s that terrifically sober face of yours,” Schmitz declared, pointing to my nose. “I remember that look,” he said, “from when you were quite small. Even then you saw through the malarkey.”

I saw through *his* malarkey.

It was Eugenie’s eleventh birthday party; I was just eight, the big girls having invited me to tag along. We were upstairs in Eugenie’s room when Schmitz came home. He called to us from the bottom of the stairs, his eyes glassy with drink. All the girls ran down to greet him and he tapped each one on the head or shoulder, like a goose counting his goslings—all the girls but one.

“Vera!” cried Eugenie. “Come down and say hello to Papa!”

No matter how many times they called, smiling up at me like merry angels, I couldn’t budge from the top of the stairs.

The girls soon moved on to the dining room for cake, but Schmitz stayed behind. Our eyes locked. All the joy leeched from his face, and I saw, in that child’s way of seeing, a ghost. Then, in a flash, he was smiling again. He even winked at me. From then on I felt nervous when I was near him. For I had seen his real face.

“Vera, I’d like to trust you with a commission.”

“You want Pie and me to look after Eugenie while you’re in prison.”

He threw back his head and laughed a single blast. “Ha! How refreshing to hear what no one else will say.” Glancing across to where Eugenie was resting her chin on Pie’s shoulder, he added, “What’s the word on the street, eh? When do they plan on lowering the boom?”

“The papers predict next week.”

Schmitz nodded. “My lawyers tell me next Wednesday noon.” He wagged his head. “Looks like I need a miracle. Have you got one? Or maybe a prayer?” He smiled, the wily trickster.

“I’m not so good with prayers,” I admitted.

“Neither am I. I try, but I’m not sure God hears me. Say, next Wednesday, you girls will still be on break, yes?”

I nodded.

“Would you find an excuse to spend the day with Eugenie? Make up anything you like, just keep her occupied. Can you do that?”

How could I deny him, even as I suffered having been branded at fifteen with a sober face.

We crossed the road and rejoined Eugenie and Pie, as Schmitz asked, “And what does your mother have planned for your birthday?”

I paused, the question of “mother” being more complicated than the mayor understood.

“I expect we’ll have cake,” Pie said, elbowing me again.

“Ah,” he replied, for he wasn’t listening anymore.

We had come full circle, returning to our block just as Alma de Bretteville was leaving her house. She had changed into a day dress, with an exaggerated bustle, her hair topped by a hat even finer than Pie’s.

She called out, “Hello, Mister Mayor!”

“Alma!” he said, his voice shifting into another register.

If Alma was shocked or even interested to find the mayor in our humble part of town—indeed outside her door—she didn’t show it. They said their how do’s, but the look that passed between them was of a deeper knowing—a look of shared affinities reserved for rascally chums.

“What have you all been chatting about?” Alma asked, prepared to be amused.

“Vera’s birthday,” Eugenie said earnestly.

“I’m just the delivery man,” the mayor explained. “I’ve delivered Eugenie to see her old friends. You know, we used to live not far from here.”

“Oh, well, happy birthday,” Alma said, showing me her best smile.

“Are you on your way?” The mayor offered his arm.

“I am.” Alma hooked her gloved hand to his elbow. Eugenie mutely took the mayor’s other arm. As they walked on, Alma looked back over her shoulder. “Keep the hat, pet. It looks right on you.”

She said it without malice. She wasn’t competing with Pie, after all; her sights were set on much grander things.

“I hate her,” groused Pie as she tried walking faster to keep up with me. “What were you and the mayor laughing about?”

“His future.”

“His future! Do you really think they’ll put him in jail? I mean, has a mayor ever gone to jail?”

I paused. “Don’t you wonder if he’s guilty?”

“Is he?”

“Yes.”

Even so, I wasn’t quite ready to condemn Schmitz. Fathers were the rarest of creatures to me. I didn’t understand the first thing about them. But I liked the fatherly wing he wrapped around Eugenie.

In front of our house, I whistled for Rogue. He appeared from a split in the neighbor’s fence, running as if being chased, his ears flat to his head, tongue lolling. He dashed headfirst into my knees. I assured him he was the baddest boy in all of San Francisco, and he knew by my voice he was adored.

As we ran up our front stairs, I glanced over my shoulder. I was fifteen. Then, as now, I was impatient. Then, as now, I was in full possession of my adult mind. I had no power, no experience. My worldview was as flat as my girlish chest and as hollow as my longings. I was neither winning nor sweet. I was alone in every room I entered. But I could see things.

I could see where I was and where I needed to go. So, I made my birthday wish. I flung my heart high over the dairy farms of Cow Hollow, to Lafayette Square, which sat like a fat queen on the throne of Pacific Heights. There at the top of the hill was a great house of many rooms, where my real mother lived. I saw her just a few times a year: on Christmas Eve, and on a random night when the flesh trade downtown was running slow, and on this, my birthday.

I was always wishing to be with Rose.

At midnight, hours from now, she’d send for me. Her driver would arrive in a fancy Buick Model F with glossy red-brown paint and black leather curved seats. He’d approach in the dark, headlamps dimmed, just the chick-chick of the motor, then that too he’d cut, the car gliding noiselessly to a stop in front of our house. And with all our neighbors asleep, no one would be the wiser that the most successful madam of the Barbary Coast, the very Rose of The Rose, was coming to fetch me, no one would know she was mine