

FROM

The Lives of Edie Pritchard

BY LARRY WATSON

1967–68

Sunlight glints off the slope of the hood like a snowdrift, and Roy Linderman puts on his sunglasses. Like a man born to drive, he lets one arm hang out the window of his Chevy Impala while the other rests on top of the steering wheel to keep the big car in line.

The air flowing through the car is as hot as the August wind blowing across the prairie, and to make himself heard above the rush and the steady rumble of the Chevy, Roy raises his voice. “How do you know it isn’t the flu?” he asks. “Maybe we’ll all get it.”

“My aunt in Bozeman is a nurse,” Edie says, “and she says it’s almost always something people ate.”

“And what makes you so sure it was the hot dog?”

“Please. Sitting all day in that greasy water? It was the hot dog.”

“And you didn’t eat one? So you’re safe.”

“That’s right,” Edie says. “I’m safe.”

“When we were kids, whatever was going around, he got. Measles. Mumps. Chicken pox. Like maybe with twins, only one of us had to get it. And Dean would be the one and it’d pass me by. Strep throat. Tonsillitis. He had his tonsils out and I still got mine.”

“I remember when he had strep.” She gives her head a rueful little shake. “I remember that very well.”

“I wondered if maybe you did,” Roy says.

On every side of them, nothing rises more than knee-high, and the wheatgrass, needlegrass, blue grama, and fescue—all the color of a sweat-stained straw hat—bend down lower in the direction they’re always bent, west to east.

“What are we going after again?” Edie asks.

“It’s a 1951 GMC half ton. Low miles.”

“How did you find out about it?”

“It’s Les Moore’s uncle’s. The uncle had to sell his ranch, so he doesn’t need the truck.”

“Doesn’t anyone else want it?”

“Hell yes. But we’ll get there first.”

Ahead a dust cloud, high and thick enough to tint a corner of the sky a darker blue, swirls, and well before they draw close, they can taste its dirt. “The hell,” Roy says. “Someone’s plowing something. Close the windows.”

They both crank up their windows, then Edie crawls over the seat to get to the rear windows. She has to swing one bare leg, then the other past Roy’s head, and he takes his eyes off the road to watch her make this climb.

“Stay back there,” he says. “You can roll them down again in a minute.”

As the windows close, the air changes pitch from a steady whoosh to a fast-paced thump, as if a propeller powered their vehicle. Then the interior suddenly quiets, and their voices lower as though they’ve entered a church.

“My God,” Edie says and draws a deep breath. “It’s like the inside of an oven.”

“I’m never getting a car again without air-conditioning,” Roy says. “I swear it.”

Edie keeps one hand on the window crank.

“Your place gets plenty warm, doesn’t it?” says Roy. “I told Dean anytime you two need a good night’s sleep, come on over and you can have my bedroom. Air-conditioned comfort. You can’t beat it for sleeping.”

“And turn you out of your bed? Where would you sleep?”

“I can always find someplace to bunk down.”

“I bet you can.”

“Or maybe you want your own unit? If the store has any left at the end of the season, they always put them on big sale. I could use my discount and get you an even better price.”

“We’ll let you know.”

“Talk it over with Dean,” Roy says, then twists his head as though he needs to know exactly where she is in the back seat.

“We’ll let you know.”

In another minute the sky clears back to its undifferentiated blue. Roy says, "You can roll them back down. And get back up here. I'm not your chauffeur."

The truth is, Edie would rather remain in the back seat, out of Roy's reach. These brothers . . . For some time now, Dean has acted as though he's been warned to keep his hands off her. Even in bed, he sleeps on a narrow space away from her. Meanwhile, Roy has been . . . well, Roy. Could it be that desire is something like mumps or measles, one brother coming down with it while it passes the other by?

Edie points a finger straight ahead. "Take me to the thee-a-tah, my good man."

"And I'm sure as hell not your good man."

As Edie climbs over the seat again, Roy reaches out a hand, but whatever he was going to do, he must think better of it because he puts his hand back on the steering wheel. Once she settles back into her seat, however, he takes his hat from where it's been resting in the space between them and tosses it into the back.

Roy asks, "You ever been up to Bentrock?"

"When I was a little girl," Edie says, "my dad took us up to Canada. Just drove across the border and turned around and came back again. So we could say we'd been there. Would we have gone through Bentrock then?"

"You might have."

"Then I might have been there."

"Well, whatever you remember, it hasn't changed since."

Edie slips off her flimsy rubber sandals and hooks her toes up on the lip of the dashboard.

"You'll probably get your feet dirty today," Roy says. "I don't think Bentrock's got but the one paved street."

"I thought I'd wait in the car."

"Hell no. I need you to keep him distracted during the negotiations."

"Really? What was Dean's job going to be?"

"Drive. That's all. Just drive."

Roy takes a pack of Camels from the pocket of his white shirt and shakes a cigarette up to his lips. He offers the pack to Edie, then pulls it back. "I forgot. You don't smoke."

He pushes in the lighter. A moment later it pops out, and he presses its

glowing coils to his cigarette. He inhales deeply and when he exhales, the wind whips the stream of smoke out the window. “Don’t you have any vices, Edie?”

“You know better than to ask me that.”

Roy turns his head toward her and with his finger slowly traces in the air the length of Edie’s bare leg. “Tell me something,” he says. “How do you get so tan working in the bank all day?”

Edie quickly lowers both feet to the floor. She says, “We’ve got a folding chair we set up behind the building. During breaks and lunch hour, I sit back there. And I’m out on weekends of course.”

“I wouldn’t think you’d get much sun in that alley.” Roy pinches his cigarette between his lips and extends both arms. “Me? I’m like a steak cooked on just one side.”

The car floats over the centerline, and Edie starts to reach for the steering wheel, but then Roy takes hold of it once again.

“About the only time I get out of the store,” he says, “it’s in the car, and then one arm hangs out the window and the other doesn’t get any sun at all.”

The only other car visible on this stretch of highway is at least a couple miles ahead, and then it vanishes, curving its way into the first of a series of low hills, each stitched to the next with a narrow dark strip of cottonwood or bur oak.

“Now you,” Roy says, “you probably have to hike your skirt up plenty high to get so much sun.” He leans forward to look at her. “And maybe undo a button or two.”

She doesn’t say anything.

“Of course with those miniskirts you’ve taken to wearing . . .”

“For God’s sake, Roy. Can’t we have a normal conversation?”

Roy smiles the smile of a man confident of its power to heal or beguile. “Why sure, Edie. What did you want to talk about?”

But she says nothing and turns her head away from her brother-in-law. She knows women whose husbands would never let their wives get into a car with Roy Linderman. But not Dean. No, not Dean.

THE LIVES OF EDIE PRITCHARD

by Larry Watson

978-1-61620-902-5

On Sale July 2020