

SUSANN COKAL

HOW WE GOT SILVIA

YOU GOT TO KNOW WHERE THEY SHOP, Mom says, and what is it they buy.

We're sitting outside Safeway in the wagon. Dirty newspapers rattling against one of the tires, and I'm so worked up that everything's clear as rainwater to me. Me and Ron and Chrissy's all in the back squirming around. It's Ron's turn to choose and we can't get going till he does.

"Fingers outta your face, Ron," says Mom. When headlights go by I see, in the rearview, her eyes squinting back at us.

Ron he takes his hands away and puts em right back, five years old and fidgety as a squirrel.

"No reason to go round looking like trash when you got a lovely home to go back to," says Mom. "Now pay attention."

"How long we gonna sit here?" says Chrissy. She's the littlest, four years old.

"I like that one." On a sudden Ron takes his fingers out of his face to point. "Just went in. Long hair. Black pants. Red hat with a bow."

"I'll know her, Mom," I volunteer though I didn't see. I'm eleven years old and proud with it. "I'll go in there with you."

"Well let's do it then," says Mom, and her and me get out.

Inside the Safeway is all yellow lights and red signs with the specials on em. Mom and I get a cart and we roll up and down the aisles. Mom puts some stuff in, coffee and rope and a pack of headcheese, so we're just like anybody shopping there. Mom's pushing the cart faster and pretty soon I'm jogging to keep up with her.

"That her?" Mom points down the soda aisle.

"No ma'am. That one's plug-ugly and she's wearing a skirt besides. We like the pretty ones." I grab hold of the cart and pull myself up so I can see better. Mom has to push me.

"Clyde you keep looking now," she says.

We go up and down them aisles some more and I'm starting to think she's gone. I'm a little sorry but not much, on account of I never seen her and she wasn't my pick anyway.

Presently we hear a scream over in produce. We recognize it's Chrissy. Mom gallops down them aisles with me holding on for dear life. We find Chrissy over with the green bananas.

"Hey there, little girl," some man is saying that's got a red vest on. "Here, suck on this lolly and stop crying."

Mom gives him a dirty look and picks Chrissy up. "Honey, I told you to wait in the car."

Chrissy's fanny is hanging out for the world to see but the grownups start drifting away like this is nothing, though one old lady's whispering what a crime it is to leave your kid in a parking lot. Mom looks at her mean and she shuts up.

That man's got a nametag and he must be part of the Safeway, he's still around and he's still trying to make Chrissy take his sucker. "Come on darling just have one lick," he says. I wanna smack him but I don't cause we're here on business too.

Chrissy hiccups and starts smiling at the guy. She reaches out for the sucker. "Thanks mister." Grownups are always saying what a cute thing she can be.

"Hush, Chrissy," says Mom, and she puts Chrissy in the cart and we roll away.

We're just in time to catch the tail end of Ron's pick. I see the hat and the long hair which is brown and the black pants, going out the sliding door with a plastic sack of stuff.

Mom knows who this is too, and she picks up Chrissy and hightails it after the girl. I fish the headcheese outta the cart and stuff it inside my shirt and I follow Mom.

TURNS OUT that girl walked to the Safeway, so we all pile in the wagon and follow after her. We got to keep quiet, like if we play any music it's gonna spoil the whole business.

When we get a good ways out the parking lot Mom pulls up and rolls down the window.

"Scuse me Miss." She smiles real nice and kinda distracted, like what lady wouldn't be that's got three kids in the car with her.

Ron's finger goes in his face but Mom don't see. I give him the elbow but my hands is full with the equipment.

"Yes?" says this girl in a nice voice low like a song.

So Mom pulls out the map we bought that afternoon and she says, "We are the Worlds, out-of-towners what lost our way. Can you show how we can get back to Springfield?"

The girl leans over. "I'll try. I'm new here myself, just came down for college."

"Well isn't that nice." Mom offers the girl a ride.

"No thanks, it is not far to my home," she says. She pushes back the hairs what's fallen on her neck and smiles with her big soft eyes like a dog we had one time. I can tell Ron picked okay.

Silvia, I think.

"Well then, thank you for the directions," says Mom. So that means I jump outta the car and run away down the road.

"Clyde, you get yourself back here!" hollers Mom.

"Oh please let me help you," says this nice girl, so she chases after me and I clap the chloroform over her face and her hat falls off and Mom and me walk her to the back of the wagon and tie her up, and Ron and Chrissy got something new to play with all the way home. Chrissy braids her hair up all fancy and Ron plays at smacking her on the bottom.

SO THAT'S HOW WE GET THIS particular maid. We got one at a Kmart once, her name was Brenda and Mom picked her out in the pantyhose department. "You gotta watch what they shop for," says Mom, and that is my advice to you. "You don't want nobody that's already got kids at home or a big family or nothing." All our maids is single ladies. Wasn't hardly nobody missed em when they came to us.

Silvia is our first maid that has gone to college. You can't tell stuff like that from what a gal shops for. We check her bag when we put her in the car and all she's got is some tampons and a *Cosmopolitan* magazine and something called hummus which we throw out the window on account of it stinks. On the interstate we snack with the headcheese and Chrissy colors in the faces in the *Cosmopolitan*.

Presently we get home and Mom and me put the little kids in their beds and drag Silvia down to the basement. While we're still out in the Drive, which is what Mom calls the dirt road that ends up to our house, we set Silvia down for a moment and just look at all them stars alighting up the sky like it's Christmas Eve. There aint a neighbor for half a mile, and it's like we have the world to ourselves.

"Glory Hallielooyeh," says Mom, and "Makes you just feel good to have a living body."

"I aint never been so happy," I say.

"Well," and Mom scratches my hair up fond, "ask and ye shall receive. Now let's take care of this here girl."

So we pull Silvia the rest of the way in, bumping her heels on the stairs.

WHEN SHE WAKES UP first thing Silvia wants to know is where's the bathroom cause she's gonna throw up. I hold the bucket for her. I'm in charge of her cause Mom's at work and Ron's feeling shy even though she's his pick.

When Silvia's done with the bucket I tell her what her name is and I say I will untie her legs so she can get to the toilet.

"You got your own toilet," I point out to her. Lots of our maids never expected nothing like that. "Your own shower too, only Mom says Lord help you if you ever leave the tap running, you gotta know there's a drought on."

Silvia tells me yes, do untie her feet. I do that but I leave on the chain that hooks her ankle to the bedpost. It's a good iron bed with clean sheets.

"You never can tell," I says to her, "who you can trust and who you can't. Mom says we best be careful."

Where is this place, Silvia wants to know. She's got some sick in her hair and I take up a Kleenex and wipe it out. I'm real careful.

"The basement," I tell her.

Well yes but what town are we in precisely, she says. Where am I? Is it Springfield?

"Can't tell you that. Go on, toilet's thataway."

She fall-walks over to the toilet that's there in the corner with the shower. On the way she sees the stove we got along one wall and the fridge and some little outfits Mom fixed for the maids out of fabric from the TG&Y. Silvia don't say anything, just swipes at her face with her hands that are still tied up.

Can you help me with my pants, she says. I can't get em off.

So I do that, unzip em and then pull the rest down too.

"You got your curse," I notice.

Silvia's sagging heavy over to one side like she's awful tired, like she did something more this last night than sleep and then throw up. She asks me to please fetch her a tampon.

I back away. "I'll fetch it but I aint doin nothing more with it. And if you think you can make me, you can just sit there till it's over."

She starts to cry, thinking that "it's over" mean we brung her here to die.

"No way," says I. "We going take real good care of you."

And we do. That first day we let her rest up and tend to her cramps and whatnot, and when Mom gets home from working at Kentucky Fried, we lay Silvia out a nice plate of chicken and Mom and me bring it down to her.

"You know, Silvia," says Mom when she puts the plate down on Silvia's bed, "it's gonna be real nice having another lady in our lovely home."

Silvia she just turns green and says she's got to go to the toilet again.

"Why sure thing," says Mom. She gives Silvia a hand up. "Now Clyde! For shame! Don't tell me you aint untied this girl's hands yet!" So she unties Silvia and they go off to the toilet together.

THERE AINT HARDLY NOTHING in the papers about Silvia. Mostly they say her landlord's mad that she skipped out on her rent. They call her "Betsy," a "math major," and they say she come from a broken home but lived with a nice stepdaddy who died, and she went to her high school prom with a neighbor, but that boy died too. She aint had much luck with men in her life. Also last year her mother went the way of the stepdaddy and didn't leave anything behind.

Silvia sure is a big help to Mom. She looks after Chrissy and Ron in the daytime, then when I get home from baseball practice she fixes some dinner on the stove we got set up down there. If we ever cry, Silvia's there to put her arms around us. She's the maid that's got the biggest, softest chest.

And she's real clever with her hands. Mom teaches her macramay and damned if she don't make a new pot sling for every plant in the place. Real elegant they look too, Mom says, like in a rich man's house. Mom's so happy she gives Silvia one of those silk ferns that don't need no water or light and lets Silvia fix herself a nice pot sling for it. And Silvia gives good backrubs and footrubs, which Mom appreciates after a day at work. She says it's a real joy to go down to the basement after work and eat a nice meal that isn't chicken and have somebody to rub her feet and bring her a beer. She couldn't be more pleased.

Silvia's real polite and don't even holler the time Chrissy wets on Silvia's bed and she has to sleep with it.

After a time she don't even cry at night anymore. We get good food again and sometimes I bring my radio downstairs and Silvia and me dance around. Sometimes she laughs, but then if Mom's in the house she'll come down to slap us for making noise and tell me I'm too old to be hanging on the maid's apron strings. Those are the times Silvia cries again.

Yes, everything's fine with us. Dad's pension checks is coming in from the military, so we know he aint dead yet, and Kentucky Fried raises Mom twenty-five cents an hour, and I have my birthday.

"This your last one before you're a man," says Mom. She reaches acrost the table and fondos up my hair and grins big. "You gonna be a teenager with your next."

There's colored paper on the walls and a nice plastic spread on the table. We're all sitting round the table with this cake Silvia made, chocolate it is and tasty too. Mom's been letting Silvia up from the basement some these days, to bake in the big oven and all. Mom says since all's you can see from the house is nothing it don't make no difference if Silvia go upstairs or not. Anyways Silvia's always got on one of them ball and chains what she can carry round for little distances only. She don't even look out the windows much, just cleans up around our lovely home. She's been keeping the upstairs real nice. For my birthday she crosayed me a new blanket which Mom wrapped up all nice and gave to me with a card that said "Beloved Son" on the front.

"I been thinking, Clyde," Mom says real casual, "it's bout time you could be getting yourself a paper route and bringing in a sawbuck or two."

I duck my head down and spoon in a mouthful of cake.

"Don't you want to do your share around here?"

I wouldn't mind it, but I aint forgot what happened last time I tried to earn us a little extra, picking strawberries at a dollar a bucket. So I don't say nothing but I kick Silvia under the table so's to tell her she got to act now, and she lays down her fork.

Clyde is an enormous help to me, says Silvia.

"That ole Clyde," Ron simpers. He's jealous on account of Silvia was his pick.

"You such a big help, maybe we don't need Silvia no more," says Mom.

She's only teasing, but Silvia goes pale. Are you thinking you might get rid of me? she says, then I know Chrissy and Ron's been talking to her bout our maids, leastways the last one which made such a big impression on all of us.

Mom's adrumming her fingers on the table. "What you say that for?"

Silvia knows enough not to talk now.

Mom she leans acrosst the table and belts Chrissy. "You been talking, girl?"

Chrissy naturly starts crying and you just know what's in Mom's head.

"Well don't you worry none, Silvia," says Mom nice enough. "You aint got a thing to worry bout. I reckon we'll need you till this young one grow up and learn her manners."

What happent with our last was a damn shame and that's for sure. We all felt real bad. And worst is it woulda been okay if I been home like usual, then Mom wouldn't go flying off the handle, producing a real sad accident when the maid got in the way of the Sawz-All. Chrissy cried for hours and Mom made me promise to stay home until we got somebody in the house. Mom and me buried that maid under the porch with the others, we aint had much good luck with our maids.

So Silvia smiles and says okay, she aint gonna be scared, and she serves us up some more cake and adds ice cream on top.

BUT YOU KNOW Silvia's worrying. Leastways I know it.

She's dropping things. She aint thinking straight. She breaks stuff and gets her ironing in a wad and near pokes Ron's eye out when her croshtay hook goes amok. She can't concentrate on the least matter and her hands is shaking.

"Silvia," I say one night in her room, "I been noticing all these things going on and I gotta say again, don't you worry. We all like you and

want this thing to work out and it will, long as you do a good job and keep on Mom's good side. You know if you have any problems at all, you can tell em to me."

Silvia she just keeps her eyes down on this piecrust she's rolling out. I see she's trembling and since she's got the biggest rolling pin in her hand I back off, but then she looks at me with those brown eyes and I feel sorry.

"You'd never hurt us would you, Silvia?" I come close again and lay my hand on her cheek, right where there's a teensy tear starting to roll down.

She shakes her head.

"You're happy with us aren't you?"

She nods. She's really crying now, tears and snot all over the place, but she don't wipe any of it away. I like it here, she says. I like my fern and it's nice to have girl talk with your mother. You have a lovely home, I don't even remember my other life much and I don't want this to end.

Maybe she knows how it ended with our other maids, but it's okay by me if she does. I don't want to see her go, she and me have been getting along just fine for a while.

"Well you be sure to tell me if something's wrong."

I'm fine, she says. Maybe it's just hormones bothering me now. I don't want this to end.

So I go off and let her finish her piecrust, you gotta let a woman with hormones just be. I don't eat none of that pie, you can't tell what's dropped in it.

A couple weeks go by and Silvia looks okay and her and me make out some shopping lists. Now, I see what we buy and I see what we throw away, so I know what goes in and out of us. And I know that Silvia aint been cursed in two months.

You and I can calculate it aint Ron what's responsible. There's only one guy can have done it and that's me. Sure I only just turned twelve but that don't make no difference when you're talkin plain biology, I'm that girl's ole man.

Everything changes for me.

I can't have my wife worrying my Mom's gonna kill her. I can't have her taking no trouble from my little brother and sister neither. So once I got everything figured out I go down to see Silvia on my lonesome.

She allows I'm right about the baby.

"Hallielooyah!" I do a little dance, it makes you feel like something, being a daddy. I kiss Silvia smack on the lips. "Now I'll take care of everything." And I give her a little pinch on the behind.

She's got the back of her hand pressed up against her mouth, not hard, just like she's holding the kiss there. Clyde, I do not know what to do, she says real slow.

"You aint got to do anything, Silvia, you just leave all of everything to me."

Your whole life changes when you have a baby, she says.

"I know that, honey"—this's the first time I call her that, I like it—"but you aint got a thing to worry about."

I must provide a proper environment for a child, she says. The basement is so dark, and sometimes the ceiling drips.

"I got it covered. We're clearing outta here, Silvia," I say. "Just you and me, on the road, into our very own lives. Maybe we'll make it to Houston."

Silvia looks like she's concentrating hard. Aren't you worried about your mother? Think how much she will miss you. And she has been good to me. All I was thinking was that maybe I could move upstairs and get some air.

She reaches out and runs her fingers over that silk fern. I guess then that everything she's said about liking Mom is true, but I also know Mom's been friends with some of our other maids and look what happent there.

"I can't have my wife and little one livin' here, we been havin a run of bad luck with the maids," I explain. "And no telling what Mom'll think bout me getting married. It might not work out just now."

Silvia agrees maybe she shouldn't stay here. But she don't want to wreck my school career or baseball or nothin, maybe I should stay for the time bein.

I squeeze her hard. "That's real sweet of you, honey, but you take off without me an Mom'll come after you with the Sawz-All, and then what'll happen to that little baby? You know how Mom loves us kids." Then I tell her to get naked and come in her bed with me.

That night Silvia cries and holds on to me so hard I can't hardly breathe. So I slap her and she quiets down and goes to sleep, then I stay awake just watching her and swelling up with pride.

GETTING AWAY IS REAL SIMPLE. I know where Mom keeps the keys to everything so I unlock Silvia's ball and chain and take her upstairs. She's walking funny, like she aint used to being so light on her feet.

Where are Ron and Chrissy? she says.

"Locked em in the bathroom," I says. "So's they won't follow." Then I grab her hand and pull her through the door and out into the sun.

She's dragging her feet now and she puts her other hand on top of her eyes. The sun outside aint particular bright but there's no leaves on the trees and I guess it all seems like something to Silvia.

Think they'll be okay? she asks me.

"They're fine, sure," I say. "They'll just curl up in the bathtub and sleep till Mom come home."

She says Oh. But she still hangs back and so I ask what's wrong now.

I feel strange, she says. You know, what if we get separated? I wonder—would you mind—

"I'll take care of you, Silvia," I say. So we go back into the house and I take her in Mom's room and handcuff our wrists together.

Thank you, says Silvia and she holds my hand hard.

So like that we hike down the driveway and out to the road and we wait for the bus to come, which it does shortly, and then we get on and

ride into town and take the Greyhound going west for some hours and rent an apartment with money I found in Mom's underwear drawer. It's just a little place but has real plaid furniture and the landlady's nice, she gives us a reduction on account of I tell her we're brother and sister and our mom just died.

Next thing, I get a paper route and tell Silvia she's got to find a job too.

I do not know, Clyde, she says. She's rubbing on the chain with her fingers, still stuck to the S-pipe under the sink where I attached her when I went out. What sort of job do you think I could do?

I feature, "Mom says Kentucky Fried always need good people, and you can cook."

So Kentucky Fried it is. Silvia is real nervous at first and so I go in to sit with her every night while she's working. It's cute, she's pulled the chain off our drainplug and is wearing it round her ankle. She eats lots of chicken and okra, her belly's already big as a bushel basket. At night when I'm trying to sleep she makes me promise I'm never gonna leave her, makes me say I love her and the baby and I'm never gonna leave.

I never did expect she'd come to care for us all so much but that is good. And she already loves that baby, she's croschaying little things for it and rubbing on her belly with some kinda oil to make it grow.

Think we should write to your mom to let her know you're all right? she says just about every night.

"We'll call when the baby comes," I promise. I figure then there'll be three of us, like there are three of Mom and Ron and Chrissy.

In the end we don't need to call anybody, Mom didn't get where she is for being dumb. One night all on a sudden the door at the KFC busts open and it's Mom together with a passel of sheriff's deputies. The deputies slam Silvia against the counter with her legs spread and they feel her up, lookin for weapons which she hasn't got any of, though they rip the chain off her ankle.

Mom's crying and screaming and she throws her arms round me and near throttles me with love. "My baby, my baby," she's howling. She spits at Silvia. "Jezebel!"

"Mom, it aint like that," I say, but maybe I say it too quiet, cause the police handcuff Silvia and take her away to jail.

Next day, all the papers is full of the story. How my Silvia ("Betsy") moved in on Mom and ate her food and took her money and hid that she was pregnant and then stole the oldest boy too. At the trial the evidence I give is just taken like Silvia brainwashed me, which after a time I begin to think might be true. So I stop arguing and they put Silvia up there in that box and give her some questions to answer.

"How did you meet the World family," this one feller says.

"They asked me directions at the Safeway and then chloroformed me and put me in their basement."

The feller gives her this look.

"But I didn't mind," says Silvia. "Not after the first bit."

"How would you describe their treatment of you?"

"They were good to me." She smiles when she says this, though her big old eyes aint really looking at anything.

"But you claim they imprisoned you and forced you into slave labor."

Now Mom, she's wringing away at a paper hankie to beat the band. I pat her arm and say "Don't you worry." She's my Mom.

"To think," she whispers, "we had that baggage in our lovely home."

Silvia is saying, "I was their maid, yes." Then she says, "They have a lovely home."

The feller raises his eyebrows. "What kind of work did you do?"

"Macramay. Croshay."

The jury's looking at her like What's going on here.

"And all the cooking, and I used to take care of Clyde's manly needs."

I feel curious then, cause I seem to remember that's what I called em—my manly needs. I look at Silvia and see she's swelling with a baby, then Mom pulls my head down to her shoulder. I'm starting to feel tired.

"What would you do if you were released from custody?"

"I don't know. I could go back to the Worlds' house. I think we could make it work. I'm willing to try."

"Well." This feller scratches his nose. Then he proceeds to give an account of Silvia's life that's some different from what she's just said, but not in the big particulars, and he finishes up with "And so far are you, Miss Howell, from feeling any kind of remorse that you would go back to this poor family and exploit them again. Miss Howell lying is not one of your gifts. You can't do it. You can't imagine how a moral person would feel if she'd been through everything you say you have."

Silvia guesses he has a point and says she used to have a nice daddy, where is he today? She waves at me. And then she says she is a child of the universe, everything that rises must spin all around.

The judge asks the jury what do they think and they say Guilty and some words I do not remember.

So the police lead Silvia off again, but I figure it's okay cause she's still smiling. She waves at Mom and me again and I look away. Will you come visit, she hollers out.

Mom drives me home. I feel sleepy and sick to my gut, and Mom has to pull over so's I can puke a few times. When we get back to the house she sets me in my bed and I sleep for about three days. When I wake up I stink from all the perspiring I been doing. At first I ask where's Silvia, and Mom says Silvia who. Ron and Chrissy remember her though, so I know it weren't a dream.

Mom's real glad to have me back. She can't stop hugging on me.

When she's out at work Ron and Chrissy come sit in my lap and want to hear stories about how I was stole. So I tell em. They's good stories, feature our little apartment and what it's like getting to stay up all night if you want to. I tell em all about what Silvia looked like with her hair down and how her belly was getting hard.

I got a lot of homework to catch up on and may get left behind a year of school.

Presently we hear Silvia's died in prison on account of the guards wouldn't take her to the hospital when the miscarriage begun. The newspaper quotes one of the prisoners, "Nobody likes a woman what steals another lady's boy."

Mom says, Silvia who?

So here we are. We sit in our wagon in the parking lot of the Revco watching ladies go in and ladies come out. Some are buying tampons or stuff to fix up their faces with. Some got babies with em and they're in to buy little things for their feet and to cover their diapers.

"Look Mom," I say, "look at that teensy one in the yellow jammies."

We got all the kids we need, says Mom. What we need now is a maid.