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Inside the administration building, employees like Patrice kept meticulous inventory of the comings and goings of every particle of matter related to the process at the Fernald plant run by National Lead of Ohio. What the process was exactly, Patrice didn't know. She couldn't wrap her mind around the idea of salt turning to liquid, then metal, with all the steps of heating, firing, pouring, lathing and cutting. The plant was processing uranium for the government --that's as much as she'd keep in her head about it. Just as well, because you couldn't talk about it on the outside. Security gave a speech outlining the company's expectations that you hush about work once you stepped beyond Fernald gates. Each night papers were locked in a safe, so what was in the office you left at the office, what was in the plant you left at the plant. Patrice had no one to talk to but her mother, so for her secrecy was not a problem.

In spring, when all the buildings at Fernald became operational two years after they'd broken ground, the Employee Activities Association planned a celebratory dance. Patrice had no intention of going until her boss, Mr. Wilton, recruited her help. At her reluctance, her mother said, "Don't show your sour face, Patrice. Get along in whatever way they ask."

Who said she had a sour face, Patrice wondered?

She could have stayed at home with the Reader's Digest but her mother would have been trying to peer at it over her shoulder. Or from where she sat in her chair with doilies on both armrests, the woman would spout her exasperating question: "Now what are you reading about?"

Patrice twisted to watch herself in the mirror as she strained to button her pink Orlon sweater up the back.

"I could have helped you with that." Her mother rested her thin hand against the doorjamb of the bedroom. Her sense of balance wasn't the best.

Patrice talked to the mirror, straightening the sweater hem over her waist. "I thought you were napping."

"I'm not."

Patrice dressed up the sweater's plain round neck with a grey silk scarf of pale roses, a scarf she'd borrowed without asking. When it lay how she liked, she turned, modeling in her high heels, and said, "Well?"

"You're welcome," said her mother.

Out in the darkness a car horn honked. Patrice hurried into her coat and stumbled as her mother clawed at her arm. "Let them believe you love Fernald."

How Patrice desired to shake free, but instead she seemed to whisk her mother bodily along the hallway with her. They couldn't be more attached, she realized, and in that instant she rejoiced for this silly Spring Frolic taking her away, thankful for the imperious Mr. Wilton.

On the threshold she'd have the last word because she planned to let the door slap closed, cutting off her mother. The woman would have to stay there and watch Patrice go.

"You don't have to put up with these men," Patrice said, dramatizing her exit. There, let her mother stew about that!

An exaggeration, since the men at Fernald, even Mr. Wilton, lightened Patrice's days. They came through her office, displaying good manners, calling her "ma'am" or cutseying her name into "Patsy" after glancing at her nameplate. She gave them a polite "hello," a business-like smile, a "thank you" nod. She noted wedding rings on the hands of men who flirted with her. Sometimes her fingertips brushed theirs when they passed her their paperwork. She looked forward to these accidents. She blushed thinking about them.

To her mother she waved, ta-ta, without looking back, stepping quickly to Mr. Wilton's Plymouth idling in the drive. Her ankles wobbled in the high heels she normally had no use for. Into the workplace she'd managed to drag her schoolgirl look, wearing saddle oxfords and pleated wool skirts or jumpers, with five white blouses she washed and pressed weekly. They hung in her closet, left over from her school days, and still fit fine. Only nineteen, and saving her money, Patrice dared to daydream of having her own place. Where her mother figured in that vision, she couldn't say.

There were the aromas of cigar, too much perfume, and the cracked leather seats in the car where Mr. Wilton's wife sat close to her husband like they were teenagers on a date.

"Hi, Patsy." Mr. Wilton had the defrosters and heat going, bringing in another smell—rusty, dry, and automotive. "This is my wife, Sherry."

Patrice reached from the back seat to shake a hand. She got a glove, a hi, Sherry's profile.

Mr. Wilton started pulling out of the driveway, and Patrice shrank into her seat. When her mother turned off the lamp post, the house lit from within made her look haloed there behind the storm door. Condensation would fog the windowpane, clouds of an old woman's rapid breath. Her mother would catch her death if she didn't shut the heavy inside door.

Patrice rolled down her window. "Close and lock up." Her shout was snatched away by the night.

"The wind is messing my hair," Sherry said.

"Sorry." Patrice cranked the window up fast.

Mr. Wilton backed into the road. Her mother was like the dashboard statue stuck to this car, tiny and white, with the world moving away from her. She didn't do as Patrice had instructed. She was bound to listen.

The association offered Fernald employees sports leagues, social events, clubs, and other activities. Happy workers made a happy workplace.

As men and women entered the Twin Lanterns ballroom, Patrice hardly recognized process side employees decked out in ties and sport coats instead of their usual company whites. Some of them escorted girls from Patrice's own office, secretaries transformed into beauties by means of chiffon, crinoline with petticoats, and tasteful wool. Patrice had arrived early with the Wiltons, date-less, to distribute name tags at the greeting table. Keeping her hands busy would help forestall the wallflower feeling that swallowed her at these kinds of things. Already, her boss stood among the men at the bar calling for pitchers of beer. He'd gotten Patrice to the station he'd volunteered her for, and promptly claimed a table close to the orchestra for himself and Sherry.

Patrice shepherded the newcomers, adept caretaker that she was, pointing out the rest rooms and the bar, locating the correct tags faster than people could alight on their own names. Over half the expected crowd had arrived when a man stepped up, rapped his knuckles on the table, rat-a-tat!, and awarded Patrice a win-over smile. His companion was a stunning woman who clutched her hands to her neck to keep the cool night air from invading beneath the fox pieces she wore along the collar of her lavender suit.

"I'm Evan Wunder." He shook Patrice's hand while he glanced over the name tags she'd spent the last ten minutes alphabetizing. "And you are?" He leaned toward her, peering right at her bosom, but he was only trying to read her name. "Patrice Merriback. Pleased to meet you." She shook his warm, dry hand. It was one that she'd not yet had the pleasure to touch during her hours behind the records desk.

"This is my wife, Beth."

Patrice let him go, and shook Beth's hand. "Hello."

"Hi." Beth was already turning her attention around the four walls, skimming the orchestra where the spots had just been lit, while the clarinetist licked his mouthpiece and sent scales shivering through the crowd. She scanned the ceiling where the decorating committee had strung dozens of white lights.

Patrice pointed. "They've overextended their season, with Christmas lights still winking in March." She coughed out a lame laugh, but felt Beth had already evaluated her and couldn't possibly be bothered.

Evan spun a half circle on his heel, tilted his head. "It's pretty."

All three looked up to appreciate the lights, then they looked down.

"Mazie'd find it so. Our little girl," he added.

Beth stroked one of her foxes. "Don't bore her with talk of Mazie."

Patrice said, "Do you want to check that?" It wasn't her job, but she'd run it over to the cloak room if Beth wished her to.

"No, I'll keep them."

Inside her head Patrice heard her mother's scold: You're too damned accommodating.

Patrice's mean inside voice smarted off: Just keeping that sour face at bay, Mother.

The foxes and Evan's arm cuddled Beth's shoulders as they entered the ballroom.

Evan looked back over Beth's shoulder and winked, causing Patrice to lean, thankful for the table where she could steady her trembling legs.

Activity among the name tags spiked with the latecomers as the orchestra began playing slow tunes from the war years. From her post, Patrice saw couples dancing and drinking and lifting their voices, putting mouths to ears to be heard. She watched others glide across the floor, giddy women falling back against men's shoulders, and pressing their faces on sports coats she imagined sweet-smelling with aftershave. Beth was a little dramatic on the dance floor, but Evan, always with an arm on her, reined her in. At song's end the two of them turned with drinks in their hands and began walking toward Patrice. At the lit hallway Beth parted from Evan and passed through the red door marked "Ladies."

As the door whooshed closed, Evan approached Patrice's table. She thought of it as her table.

His dark hair, which had not a bit of curl, lay plastered across his forehead, damp from dancing. She imagined he might want to take off his jacket, but no other men had shed theirs and they all were acting like such gentlemen, like they didn't know how to relax or loosen their ties without having to answer for it on Monday morning. Evan brought his beer to his lips. Patrice thought it was silly to drink it from a paper cup; she envisioned the steins her papa had collected, that they'd had to sell to help pay the property taxes once he'd gone.

Evan sighed, smiled and tilted the cup. "Want a drink?"

She put up five fingers, a whole hand to ward him off. "Oh, no." She shook her head, though she was thirsty and she liked the taste of beer.

"So you're in...?"

What was he asking? Then it dawned on her – shop talk. "Records." She instinctively scanned the room for Clyde Bingham, head of Fernald Security.

Evan glanced at the Ladies Room door and then turned back to Patrice. "Transportation." He said it like he owned the whole department.

"Oh, are you one of those limo drivers who cart the bigwigs back and forth to the airport?"

Evan laughed. "No, more like drum barrels. Forklifts are my specialty. From one end of the plant to the other. Predictable and boring. Noisy machines." With his free hand, he lifted his lapel to fan air inside his jacket.

Patrice let herself imagine the heat trapped and dampening his shirt. "I started out by stamping everybody's fingers for the files."

Evan lifted his beer. With one finger released from the cup, he pointed at her. "I knew I recognized you from somewhere. You took my mine, way back."

"I don't remember. But I took hundreds of prints. I was new and overwhelmed and I probably never looked up from the desk, just took hands, inked them, and pressed fingers to paper."

He nodded, his voice enthused now. "You were dressed like the girls waiting at the bus stop to be picked up for Catholic school."

Her fingers smoothed down the side of her slim charcoal skirt.

Evan again checked the silent Ladies Room door. He shrugged. "I'm used to it."

The orchestra returned to the bandstand, refreshed from their break. A few name tags were scattered on the table, but no one had stopped by for half an hour. Patrice built a little pyramid with the leftovers.

She laughed at herself. "I can't help but rearrange things."

The orchestra leader cleared his throat into the microphone. "Well, ladies and gents, are you having a good time?"

Conversation kept skating across the dance floor.

"We're going to play a little game here, folks."

The crowd emitted a unified groan.

The leader held up his hand. "Now, now. This is going to be fun, I promise. Since this is the first dance sponsored by the employee association, and since you all work at Fernald over three different shifts, I bet you don't know half the people in this room. Now first I want you to turn to your neighbor, introduce yourself and shake that person's hand."

Patrice gave Evan his excuse to opt out. "We already did this."

"I don't mind doing it again." Evan placed his empty beer cup atop the name tags as a final decoration. His hand on hers was cold.

The orchestra leader's voice broke into the little world Patrice found herself inhabiting. "Now men, I want you to find a young lady who you don't really know yet. A complete stranger would be best."

Catcalls erupted, and the leader raised his hand like a man in a court room. "Now, let's not get wild here, gentlemen. You are gentlemen, right?"

"Hell yes!" somebody yelled from the bar.

The leader nodded his balding head. "Well, I'm glad to hear that."

Evan looked toward the hallway and then out to the crowd. She thought he'd depart to find that stranger he'd been commanded to locate, but he remained by her side. Everyone began pooling in the aisles between tables and mingling in front of the bandstand. People examined name tags on coats and dresses. Laughter erupted as friends parted and came together.

Evan squinted at her and said, "I don't know you all that well. In fact, I think you may just be a total stranger to me." His smile made Patrice feel like Mr. Wilton's dashboard statue, hurtling away from the rest of the world.

The microphone squealed, and one band member accented it with a drumbeat.

"Okay, okay," the leader said. "You guys got your girls? The strange ones?"

Crowd members hooted and laughed.

"Now I want you to give this strange woman your coat. Yes, you heard me, the coat off your back. The one damned good sports coat you own."

Evan and Patrice looked at each other and looked away.

Directions from the band stand continued. "That girl's going to wear your coat until the end of the night. And hopefully by that time, gentlemen, you will have been polite enough to approach her a second time, make some conversation and maybe get to know a fellow Fernald employee. See? It's Getting to Know You," he began singing, "Getting to know all about you." Then he adopted a tuneless, strong-arming voice. "Orders of the Atomic Energy Commission."

Big laughs then, as the crowd squirmed, men wriggling out of sleeves, women shrugging over-sized coats onto their shoulders.

Evan started withdrawing his arms. "I've been wanting to shuck off this thing since we got here. Now I got an excuse." He held the sports coat out to Patrice. "You're strange enough."

How much smiling could one night contain?

Evan's fingers clutched the neck of the coat as she backed into him, slipping her arms through the sleeves, and shrugging his presence all around her. The silky lining and its warmth teased her bare forearms, sent shivers all the way up into her scalp. His cuffs dripped down to her fingernails.

He patted her shoulders. "Some fit, huh?"

"Maybe I'll grow into it."

Then Beth punctured a hole in Patrice slowly rising balloon. She said, "What's she doing wearing your coat, Ev?"

"It's a game." He took Beth's elbow and pivoted her.

"Look around. Everybody's doing it. It's part of the night's routine. A company thing."

"Oh, and I'm not company enough for you?"

Evan set his hand over his heart. "Honey, it's a get to know you game." He hung his head so his mouth kissed her ear as he talked. "I already know you now, don't I?"

His jacket hung on Patrice like she was some kind of coat rack. Her throat had to wring the shrillness from her voice. "You want it back?" She started stripping a sleeve from one arm.

"No, no. It's yours for the night." Evan stood between her and Beth, looking divided. "It wouldn't have set right over your foxes anyway," he said to Beth. "It would have damned near crushed them."

"Hmm. You're probably right."

"Look," Evan said, "you can wear my tie. They're doing that, too."

The orchestra leader was instructing the men to give away their ties to some other strange women.

Evan loosened his tie, slipped the noose from his head, messing his hair, and he knotted it around the neck of one of the foxes.

Beth giggled at that, thanked him long on the mouth.

Patrice stood in Evan's coat, feeling more school-girlish than she'd ever thought possible. The words, "I need a drink," caught in her throat, but Evan and Beth were occupied with each other. She doubted they would have heard her had she spoken. Patrice escaped to the bar, and once there, she sipped steadily at a cup of beer while the orchestra led many of the newly matched couples into Moonlight Serenade.

Mr. Wilton stepped beside her for a pitcher refill. In his shirt sleeves he hardly looked like her boss. "Having a good time, Patsy?"

Mr. Wilton always followed rules, locking Fernald secrets in his safe each night. He would have gone along with the coat and tie game. She wondered if Sherry Wilton had pouted over him giving his coat to someone new and unknown.

"Fair," she mumbled.

He looked scandalized. "Affair?!"

Patrice saw he was kidding her. "Fine," she said more distinctly. "I'm having a fine time."

The one beer she'd sipped washed the room in softer sparkle.

Mr. Wilton toasted her with his full pitcher as he walked backwards to his table and to his wife, or maybe to find his coat on some strange woman. "Well, you keep having a good time now."

The bartender gave her a refill, which she accepted. She pretended she was snuggling into Evan Wunder; he'd have to return to her for his coat. Under the influence of that second beer, she tried to re-tie the knot in her mother's scarf over

her right shoulder within Evan's coat. In the clumsiness of it all, her elbow tipped her empty beer cup off the bar. Patrice scrambled after it to the floor as it spun away, coming to rest against Evan's gleaming black shoes.

She could easily imagine that before he'd left for this dance, Evan had sat in his kitchen, his legs spread so he could work comfortably, one hand wearing a shoe, and the other buffing the leather with a soft cloth, the kind her papa had once had, crushable as they were in his large hand.

But Evan's hand, as it reached down, as both he and she attempted to clasp the cup, his did not feel chapped and old as her papa's.

They stood from their crouched positions, both holding the cup like a silly prize.

"Drop something?" He smiled.

"It was empty." She let go.

"We can remedy that." Evan called the bartender for two beers, gave one to Patrice. He had to nudge the sleeve of his coat above her wrist to find her fingers.

She swallowed the cold beer.

Evan looked at her over his cup as he drank, sighing as if he'd completed the first leg of a long journey. He lifted his cup, indicating his coat on her. "Not such a bad fit."

"A little big, I'd say."

"Are you contradicting me?"

"Doesn't Beth contradict you?"

"All the time."

"Then you should be used to it."

"There's always a limit."

He was putting up with Beth, she saw, as she herself was enduring her mother. She thought baggage, but then the word was overshadowed by something more honorable -- responsibility.

He said, "In the interest of getting to know you..." He set his beer on the bar, and took what little remained of hers and put it next to his so the lips of the cups touched.

"...we're sharing a dance." He pulled her into the crowd. The song was just beginning, a drum and bass line that Patrice thought she recognized, with not much to dance to, beyond swaying. Evan held her. She felt he was taking back his coat and she happened to be inside it.

He was humming the song, and then sang a few words in his own definite key: "...stormy weather..."

Until now, she hadn't noticed the orchestra included a woman vocalist. Eyes shut, Patrice allowed him to wrap her in his embrace, where she could pretend. Her left hand was clasped in his right; his left spread wide open on her lower back, hidden inside the sports coat she wore. She had started out with her right hand resting on Evan's shoulder, but as they danced it slid until it curled along his shirt buttons, where his tie would have hung, had he still been wearing it.

The vocalist belted the last lyrics with a lusty, know-it-all attitude.

Amid the applause, Patrice opened her eyes and lifted her head from where she'd been resting against Evan. On stage, next to the bass player, Beth stroked her fox stole with one hand and held the microphone to her lips with the other. She might as well have been kissing it and the men in the crowd loved it.

Patrice felt herself growing smaller in Evan's arms.

"You didn't say she could sing."

"To every man in the room."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

Evan shrugged. "She's going home with me."

Patrice withdrew from him then, looked around, wide-eyed and fearful that Mr. Wilton, whom she hadn't thought of since his last pitcher of beer, might have left without her. She imagined her mother shivering at the front storm door, squinting through the condensation for sight of her return.

People congratulated Beth as she stepped down from the stage. Their arms and offers she received like a beauty queen accepting her roses. She didn't seem to be looking for Evan. How foolish Patrice had been in letting him hold her. Too much beer, she thought. She slid Evan's coat from her shoulders, pulled the cuffs straight, a habit she'd acquired from her mother, and handed it to him.

He said, "Well, do you think it did the trick?" He shrugged back into his clothes.

She didn't know what he was talking about, could barely look him in the eye.

"Lending the coat. The band leader was right. Didn't we get to know each other a little better?"

She looked up from the parquet of the dance floor, which she'd been studying. The smile she encountered weakened her knees, and she felt she'd been played the whole night long. Patrice wanted to slap him.

What greater agony than Beth approaching then, trailed by loyal fans.

"Honey, did you see? They love me."

Evan grinned, but it was not the smile he'd just shared with Patrice. It had lost its sweet coaxing.

"So maybe they'll hire you," he said.

Beth cuffed him on the chin with a fox tail. "You know I'm a mom and a housewife."

"Oh, easy for me to forget, I guess."

Then she backtracked. "Do you think they might?"

"What?"

"Want a girl. You know, the band?" Already she'd begun drifting from him and gravitating to those who had been showing her adoration.

"They might want a girl?" Evan's speech mocked her.

Beth wandered further.

"I bet they do," he called to her back.

Patrice fled to find Mr. Wilton, maybe at the coat check.

"I bet that band needs a girl," he shouted. "Every band member, every guy here needs a girl, wants a girl."

Halfway to the bar, Patrice could still hear him. She kept stealing glances while she walked as quickly and steadily away as high heels and too many beers would allow. He stopped, wavered in place, as if the night had made him dizzy, too, then caught his breath. Some people were looking, but many more, who'd been guzzling all night, were fading into their own funks.

Evan fired his finger like a boy playing gunslinger, spinning crazy around. "That guy and that guy and him, and him, too. They all want girls." He caught his breath. "Hell, I want a girl."

If Evan had even half the stubborn hope of her mother, maybe the world would turn his way, but Patrice swore she wouldn't be a part of it. At the greeting table, she pivoted so he could see her unpin her name and leave it on the stack of tags never retrieved. The near hallway, where the rest rooms were, probably backlit her form very much like the inner room's lamp had illuminated her mother at the front storm door of their house. Both of us ladies in waiting, she thought. It was as if an aisle existed in the Twin Lanterns ballroom -- her mother would have said a beeline -- between her and Evan, but that was merely Patrice's penchant for romance laying its veil over the scene. Dancers rose from surrounding tables and filled the gap as the orchestra launched into *It Don't Mean a Thing*. There Mr. Wilton stood then, waving to her as he and Sherry approached, already wearing their coats, source of rescue, her ride home. She could escape the dance but Monday morning work would set this night's movie clicking again through her mind.

As large as Fernald loomed in the landscape, Patrice also felt pinned by it, while somewhere across the miles of plant Evan drove a forklift. She considered the metal contraption on her desk outside her boss's office, and felt flimsy as a piece of paper punctured with three-holes along her spine: one punch for Evan, one for the stomped paper cups their dancing kicked around, and one for Beth's hateful, beady-eyed foxes.

Donna D. Vitucci's fiction has appeared in *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Mid-American Review*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *Faultline*, *Natural Bridge*, *Hawaii Review*, *The Mochila Review*, *Zone 3*, *The Kennesaw Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Meridian*, and others.

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