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From The Look Thief

Elizabeth Harris

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by Elizabeth Harris

Such a Nice Girl

1983

Five hundred miles to the north, a line of spring tornadoes exploded a regional supermarket, killing everybody in it, while Carinna Carrell, still new to the modest, hospitable city, glided around tables in a bar, exclaiming over people. It was like a party where everybody knew, or could think they knew, who everybody was, or anyhow the kind of person they were: the cowboy hippies in silver-and-turquoise hatbands who came in from the country, where they had moved to plant grapes or make organic goat cheese; the old and young politicians who had joined experience to passion on the picket lines; the man who sold architectural antiques from torn-down houses, who came in carrying a grooved newel post over his shoulder like a mace; the masseuse with the enormous blue crystal around her neck; the artists and artisans and musicians and people who lived off the music business; and the actors from the homegrown comedy club who made jokes about all of them. Remnants of a scene dead and embalmed on the Coasts but lasting longer in Austin, where, losing the afflatus of the zeitgeist, it caught the updraft of the sunbelt, went into business, saw high tech coming, kept playing, and made, or did not make, fortunes.

And there in the middle of it was Carinna, with her hard, reddened fingers, cutting hair for a living, though that was plainly not the half of her. She was trying to get her own salon started, the more reason to have five hundred best friends, so that, when Willie Ritter, a boomtown stranger at a table in the back corner, eyed her, and tapped the bright, faux-rustic oilcloth in front of him as if she might've been a waitress, Carinna veered over to speak to him. He had an aura like old nickel and looked faintly like some star she couldn't remember, with silvery hair that stuck out in a boyish triangle over his forehead; or, maybe like he was trying to look like some star and overdoing it a little, with a long, jeaned leg slung out sideways from behind the table. He gave an impression of minor lack.

At her approach, his aura flashed like a mirror. "You give a good imitation of owning the place," he said. "Or maybe you do?" Willie had calculated this line, as able to discover the most he could imagine her or, more likely, let her know she was not.

The effect was entirely wasted on her; she laughed and said—in a phrase that gave her away, it seemed to him—she just came here to visit with friends. "What brings you here?"

"Thirst?" Willie offered, though he had been wetting his tongue on a light beer for half an hour. He had heard in real estate circles that this was the happening place.

She told him her name without his asking, but she wouldn't sit down. "I'm afraid Ms. Carrell regrets," she said, like she'd never regretted anything in her life. "I'm already promised to another table, I just came back here to get my drink."

With another woman, Willie might've flirted, *Well, you can break your promise, can't you?* but this one, he could see, had to know everybody. "Then just while you wait for it. Meanwhile, tell me this. What's the most interesting thing you've accomplished in your life?"

It seemed to Carinna like a question he had gotten from a book about how to make conversation. The most interesting thing Carinna had accomplished was leaving the town where she had lived all her life and moving here, but she had a feeling he would make her explain how that could be an accomplishment. "Raise my son," she said. "What's the most interesting thing you've accomplished?"

"Gotta think about that. Go get your drink."

She suspected he had set her up, but it was all right, he was just another person. At the bar, Carinna ordered a non-alcoholic cocktail and waited for it without going back to talk to him, thinking of cleverer things she had said in her moments. *I got pregnant on purpose in high school. I used to make wreaths out of rusty barbed wire and decorate them with the stars cut from license plates.*

"No straw," she said. The drink was cloudy white and fizzed a mist into her face.

In her thrift store designer dress, she stood at Willie Ritter's table with a knee on the chair seat and asked obligingly, "What's the most interesting thing you've ever done?"

"Made my first million."

Then she knew he'd set her up, also that he was the kind of person who thought saying he had made a million dollars would impress a stranger.

"How wonderful," she exclaimed without irony, because she had a gift for accepting people in the terms they could offer, and he told her he was in real estate. That did interest her. He said he had just moved there from Los Angeles because the market was good, "almost virgin."

People were doing that "So you know everything about real estate."

"Everything I need to."

Carinna sat down on the edge of the chair and told him her real estate stories, in which she was the small-town girl come to the city, looking for a place to put in a salon and live upstairs or behind it, clueless Carinna's adventures with suitable houses in impossible neighborhoods, and unsuitable houses—"I never even knew foundations could crack"—in possible neighborhoods, and perfect houses in perfect neighborhoods that already had offers on them.

Willie listened with the air of having heard it all before.

She said, "I might not have enough money. And I'm just starting a credit history."

Willie, who guessed some poor bastard had been supporting her all her life, saw no advantage in reassuring her. "Everything's going up. The market's just about to take off."

"Give me the benefit of your superior knowledge," she said. "Do you think I can find the kind of place I'm looking for?"

As if Willie might give anything for free. "Many things are possible to those who know how."

She laughed and got up to join her friends—*that's it for you, sucker*—and Willie said, "Where are you from, *originally?*" but she did not seem to know a knock when she heard one.

"Small-town East Texas." She did not even seem to be ashamed of it.

Then he kept her there for that conversation, told her he was from southwest Arkansas, "before I went to *California*." In the way Willie said it, was the magic place it had been to him.

It was just another place to Carinna, unless maybe he had said *the Haight*. "Were your family farmers?"

He looked past her until Carinna realized it was still possible for a person in this country to be insulted by being taken for a farmer. "My mother's family were tenant farmers," she added.

"The uncle who raised me," Willie pronounced with dignity, "was a blacksmith."

"Uncle?"

"My mother gave me to her brother when I was born."

"Why?"

Willie shrugged. "Already had too many children, I guess."

"So you grew up calling your mother *aunt*, and your uncle *father*," Carinna mused, but she was thinking of how proud her own mother had been in her married life, of being a town woman, how contemptuous she had been of the people who still lived in the silvery unpainted shacks among the scattered rusty insects of plows and harrows. She could not hold Willie Ritter's harsh pride against him, any more than she could his being from that world in the first place.

Although usually Willie avoided the places where people wasted time and money, after that he began to go frequently to the one where he had met Carinna. He supposed she was no more than all right looking, stylish, as she had to be in her business, but he was determined to encounter her again, as he had been determined to make her speak to him in the first place. He often set himself challenges like that with people. He sat at the polished bar and drank a clear drink that, with a section of lime in it, looked like more than it was; he made himself welcome to the bartender without leaving a big tip by talking about film shoots coming into the area, which he seemed to know more about than he could say. He knew what he had heard answering calls for extras in L.A., after he had quit buying real estate there. With the faint glamour that clung to his square face, his expensive watch, and the studied work shirt and jeans, he might've been something in the movie business.

When, the next week, Carinna came in, Willie seemed to have become another of her many friends, and she greeted him in the solicitous, Southern manner that people who aren't Southern sometimes imagine is put on. But if it was, it had been so long before that it had become part of her. She was like her father, who had sold men's wear and high school football uniforms in a cousin's store all his working life on the strength of his charm and his history as water carrier for a famous college team. Carinna's manner had gotten her most of what she had wanted in her hometown: no matter the scandals of her high school pregnancy, her absence from church—while the drinking husband still went—her divorce, people still said, *But she's such a nice girl, she's such a nice woman*.

While the bartender made her drink, Carinna updated Willie on the tendency of her buyer's agent, a woman who had grown up rich, to speak as if a person could always come up with a few thousand more.

"You need a better agent," Willie said, but when Carinna said, "Have you got one for me?" he didn't.

Carinna was used to making the most of what she had, doing business with people she knew or, in the city, happened to meet. What was networking but making your own small, placeless town? Her real estate agent was a client of her own, so was the lawyer who was incorporating her, and she had met a plumber at the salon where she worked and a carpenter in that very bar. To weave their services into her own nest, as they wove hers into theirs, seemed only natural to her.

She sat with friends, but when she glimpsed Willie Ritter again on her way out, an intimation of rescue took hold of her, and she stopped by to speak to him again. "I wish *you* could help me."

"You mean serve as your buyer's agent? Is that what you want me to do?"

She had not meant anything so businesslike: she wanted him to brandish a stick at real estate and subdue it for her. Yet, there he was, ready to do that in his own way, to impress her with what he claimed to know best, and he seemed like the kind of person who did not tolerate failure in himself. Carinna considered that she really needed a different agent, she could cut loose the one she had, *You know I love you, darling, but I'm too poor for you. You're the agent I'll send my clients with the big bucks to;* and if Willie Ritter didn't work out, there were always other agents.

"Would you?" she said.

But then it seemed like he might not be able to—he no longer did that sort of thing, did not have a real estate license *in Texas*, he emphasized, so of course she wanted him even more. "Though maybe I could use Ansel's lock-box key and listing," he said. Ansel was Willie's man in Austin.

"Please?" It was easy for her to say, she said it all the time, without a thought for what an utterly satisfying word it might be for a person very different from herself to hear from her.

"As buyer's agent, I would, of course, collect the usual percentage."

"Of course," Carinna said, though she had entertained a hope that he would work for free. She knew he was attracted to her in a way she would never be to him, but this seemed like an ordinary asymmetry of life: she was sometimes attracted to men who were not to her. It all evened out somewhere, and she could introduce him around among the many attractive single women she knew, where, between his looks and his money, if he really did have money, some of them might find his geekiness worthy of more than sympathy. You only had to look around, as Carinna often said without malice, to see there was somebody for everybody, they just had to recognize them.

All of the women in that crowd had lovers if they wanted them, including the three-hundred-pound psychic who read the Tarot, for "whatever you feel moved to honor the

goddess with." Husbands, some; boyfriends, maybe; but lovers, for sure: it was just a question of not expecting a thing to be what it was not. Carinna had two lovers. Her favorite was Garland, an out-of-work leftist who lived with his brother in a neighborhood of small, decayed houses, and was available on Mondays, which suited her work schedule in another woman's salon, though Garland never had the money to do even the things Carinna had the money to do.

She went over to the brother's house and they walked around in the neighborhood looking at oak galls and buckeyes. Garland had lived in San Francisco and Washington, D.C., where he had been a lobbyist for a national organization, but he had grown up on a small cattle ranch and was a countryman at heart. With the toe of his worn cowboy boot he prodded a fossil seashell out of the ground. "From the great inland sea," he said.

When Carinna first knew him, Garland would roll a joint one-handed in her honor and they would smoke it. After she became a vegetarian and stopped putting anything impure into her body, he rolled the joint in her honor and smoked it by himself.

He knew how to work with wire, and, at his brother's, had built the enclosure for a compost heap. One time, he told Carinna it was well known you could bake a potato in a compost heap, and they buried one there. A couple of times they stood and looked at the compost heap and thought about the potato, baking slowly. But instead, it sprouted and flourished into a vine.

"When you get a house with a back yard," he said, "I'll bring over some hog-wire and build you a compost enclosure." He stroked his small gray-brown beard and gave her a canny look. "On condition you name it the Garland Chandler Memorial Compost Heap." He often talked as if he was dying or dead.

Sometimes he and Carinna lay on his bed and he smoked another joint, and they had sex, or tried to. He was depressed, though he refused the word. He was still in love with a woman who had left him in Albuquerque.

For other times, Carinna had Scooter, who owned enough Texaco stock not to work and was fun to run around with, when she could find him. He did not communicate with anybody except in person and was grateful to the friends who accepted this. On a Monday morning, Carinna looked for him first in the dog park, where he might be walking a brace of Afghan hounds; she caught up with him in a cafe where tobacco was smoked from table-sized hookahs.

"I've missed you," he said, "I'm so glad you found me, did you go out that night?"

"I was too tired. All right for you young people." She was thirty-four; Scooter was a year and a half younger.

"I was going to run into you there, but I was under the bed." This was Scooter-speak for depressed; Scooter thought lithium made him boring.

He effervesced all the way to his condo: "Have you found a house? There's one down the street for sale, maybe you could get that." She could not have afforded it, and it was not zoned commercial.

Scooter collected religious kitsch and racist pop culture. In the bathroom, he had the brown-faced iron footman, proffering the toilet roll on his held-up hand. In the living room, where Scooter and Carinna had sex, a life-size Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus looked down on them compassionately with plaster eyes.

Afterwards, Scooter confessed, "You know, I can do it, but it's like I don't feel anything." They discussed the possibility that he was less a bisexual than a homosexual coming to terms with his sexuality.

Willie scoured the market for houses and storefronts to show Carinna, stopping by realty offices daily for properties just coming onto the market. It was nostalgic for him, like dropping back to a stage of life he had mastered, and any time he phoned Carinna, she had to see him. He phoned her at work, "Well, get her," if they said she had a client, or he asked when her next free appointment was. Then he swung by black-corseted Valerie Dominique's: "Bring your lunch, it'll just take half an hour." She wasn't used to any of this; he could see why she hadn't gotten anywhere.

"I'll pretend to be your boyfriend," he told her when she did not want Valerie to guess what she was doing.

In the funky little yellowish car that Willie drove for his own reasons, he made Carinna laugh, mimicking automotive sounds, *mrn mrn, bdp, bdp, bdp*. He supposed the old car would make her doubt his wealth, so he supplied himself with a folder full of spreadsheets or a bag of electrical switches to drop off to managers of the three apartment buildings he had recently bought. "I just need to run by this place on the way," he said, and, as he turned into the parking lot, "This is one of mine."

Of course she wanted to know more about him than he would tell her, and he doled out the usual scraps, how he had left Arkansas when the war would be over while he was still too young to go to it—"The Korean war, of course"—and paid his fare to the driver of a California-bound pick-up with a guarantee to keep it running.

"Did you?"

"We got there."

"Did you pick oranges?"

The question brought back finding himself in golden California an Arkie, a straw hat, a hick. "We all did," he bit out. "At first."

"My mother picked cotton, when she was young," she said, as if you could say a thing and take it back.

"A white person?" He knew she was. "Now, this neighborhood you could afford." They were driving through one Carinna had scratched as beneath her. "At the age your son is now, I was an auto mechanic in Southern California, working as many hours as the man who owned the tools would let me."

How thin-skinned he was, she thought, but inspiring, as he told her about saving to buy his own tools by bunking on a floor in the neighborhood they called Little Arkansas, "with some people who later gave up and went back to Arkansas. As many did."

"So your first business was in automotive repair." It seemed not unlike hair-cutting.

"And after that, I owned a body shop, and after that I sold cars," he bragged. "Then I bought my first rent house."

Hometown men she recalled who had gotten rich off dealerships—like the one where her husband had sold tractors and combines—had over the years fleshed out into merely

larger versions of themselves, as if staying at home had kept them recognizable. Whereas Willie Ritter, who had left his own home place and gone to Southern California, seemed to have ballooned like one of the giant advertising figures that glittered and floated over those dealerships. He seemed slightly fantastic, ridiculous in his self-satisfaction, a type, but original in it, with his aggressively old car and ordinary clothes, his lack of interest in rich men's toys.

The richest people Carinna had known growing up had been a wildcatter's heirs who seemed confined in a pre-fab idea of the Texas rich and spent their money with tired flamboyance on cars, trucks, ranches, planes; vast, unhappy mansions decorated with the heads of dead animals. In Willie Ritter Carinna saw the possibility of being rich the way you chose, and of getting there—or as near as she cared to—from where she was.

Carinna was tired at the end of the week, her arms and shoulders aching, and on the first Sunday morning that Willie Ritter telephoned her in her efficiency apartment, she said, "What about tomorrow?"

"There'll be an offer on it," he warned, so she waited at the curb for him. She did not want him to come up for her.

"So this is where you live." His buoyancy in the glassy spring sun floated her hopes.

"Have you found me something good?"

He slid deliberately into enthusiasm. "A store front in a happening little business strip, with a studio in the back. You'd have fun doing the remodel, and you could do everything exactly like you want it."

"Where is it?"

"Ought be up there on a piece of yellow paper."

Cards and paper cluttered the dusty peeling dash of the car. Carinna collected them and sorted through twice without finding a piece of yellow paper.

"Oops, I must've left it by the phone. The place is over on . . . , what's the name of that . . . ? Well, I know where it is, and there'll be a sign out."

On a run-down commercial block that Carinna had already rejected with her former agent, the property was a flaking butternut-colored storefront. "I saw this one in the winter. I crossed it off that list you gave me."

"Did you?"—Willie slapped his forehead—"My bad."

She did not believe this bit of self-dramatization. "Willie."

"No, no, let me see what I've got here." He fumbled at length with his shirt pocket, "I think . . . I think . . .," and turned over a realtor's business card, with an address scrawled on it.

Although it did prove to be of a property new on the market—not one she liked—she thought he had been trying to see what he could get away with. There was often a slightly meretricious air about him, as, for instance, when he claimed to be forty-two. Though many people lied about their ages.

She did not suppose it was any worse than that until a day in the car when he talked about setting up your books in a small business, a subject she was glad to learn about. She said, "I need to get right for the IRS."

"Not really."

"What do you mean?"

"..."

"You mean not pay them? How can you do that?"

"There are ways. I can show you."

"You can't get away with that." Carinna heard herself and knew people did.

"I haven't paid for years. They don't even know where I am."

Carinna, who was sometimes interested in matters of what was right and what was wrong, would not have claimed to be strictly honest about anything but money. She said she did not approve of tax evasion.

At other times, he said other things that marked off his difference from her. She asked him why he had gotten married, in his teens, as she had in hers, and he said, "I wanted sex, and I didn't know any other way of getting it."

He wasn't the only man who had ever done that, but then she asked him why he had gotten divorced—after twenty years and five daughters—and he spoke as if recently insulted. "Come a time, seemed like what I provided wasn't good enough. Like nobody could grow up barefoot anymore, like she and I both did."

Carinna saw girls running barefoot down the streets of L.A. in 1960 or thereabouts. She said, "Most people want to give their children a little better than they had."

"I gave them food. I gave them a place to live." It sounded to Carinna like something that might've been said by her mother's father, a harsh little man people had been half-afraid of.

"Girls need things."

"What *she* said. Went to work assembling TVs to buy 'em. Fine, I thought, let her carry the household if she wants to. Next thing I knew, she'd locked me out of my own house. I thought I was building wealth for *us*, come to find out, *It's all for you*, she said."

So he could do nothing with the money he had worked so hard for, except use it to make more. He reminded Carinna of the immigrant father of a friend from New York, who had labored desperately from childhood, picking up coal along the railroad tracks, learning to be a cutter, manufacturing clothes on Seventh Avenue, and, after he was retired, could only put on a suit every day and go down to his broker's and watch the board.

As if Carinna might've been wondering whether the wife had gotten everything in a divorce, Willie said, "Well, if that's the way she wanted it." So if, as seemed likely, he'd never paid child support, he could believe it was the wife's fault.

Still, he found Carinna a house before it was listed, a small, reasonably level, two-story Queen Anne, on a street where vehicles lined the curbs, defecated on by grackles from a false ceiling of trees. There were sidewalks, foot traffic, and other old houses offering arty shops. It had a fresh gray-blue-and-cream paint job, with carpenter's lace overhanging the front porch, a fan-light over the door, and nearly floor-length ground floor windows. There was a pecan tree in front and one in back, and the roof had been repaired. When the fall rains started, it would prove to leak, but if Willie, who climbed up on it and walked around, suspected there might be anything wrong with it, he did not say so. Hers was the first of nine offers. When it was accepted, Carinna thanked Willie Ritter effusively and anticipated becoming much remoter friends with him.