

Kara Lark

Scene from Girlhood

Ordinarily the first month of summer in Southern California arrived sullen and moody, and you had to wear a sweater sometimes straight up to noon. But on the last day of school my cousin Melanie and I wore tank tops, shorts, and sandals. [...] When the final bell rang, we pushed our way through the heavy double doors and fell out with the rest of eighth grade into the hot afternoon. We'll be ninth-graders next time we walk to school, I thought, our brown summer skin stretched over longer limbs and our feet confined in bigger shoes.

"Race you!" Melanie took off for the river. Ours was a desert river, the kind that held rain only long enough for it to get someplace else. Right now it was empty and would be until the rains fell next winter. [...] "Look," Melanie said, suddenly stopping. She pointed to a clump of mustard weeds¹ that stood up all over town like whiskers². I gasped and stepped back. A rattlesnake lay coiled in the shadows. Melanie looked at me, horrified. I opened my mouth to speak but remained mute. In the back of my mind the sound of some adult voice said, "Stand still if you ever see a rattlesnake."

Melanie stared at me. Then she rolled her eyes. "It's dead, dummy." She laughed and said, "You were scared."

"How do you know it's dead?"

"Uh – mainly because it hasn't moved from that spot since yesterday." She pushed a strand of cornsilk³ hair out of her eyes. "Look, I'll touch it." She moved toward the snake.

"No!"

"What? Scaredy-cat⁴ Samantha – that's you. Afraid of dead snakes."

"Okay, fine. But leave it alone anyway."

She had to touch it, though. While I cringed, she poked it with her finger and laughed her maniacal B-movie laugh. I hated her sometimes. The snake remained motionless, its mouth curved into a kind of smile, as if it were dreaming whatever a snake dreams. Rattle limp⁵. It was indeed dead.

"You thought it was alive," Melanie kept saying as we walked through the riverbed toward home. She leaned in close to my face and hissed.

"You're an idiot," I said.

"No, you are. I know a dead snake when I see one."

I refused to look at her, feigning⁶ profound interest in a jet plane moving across the sky, leaving a bright white cloud trail. Ignoring her was the worst thing you could do. She hated it. [...] When we stopped to take off our sandals and shake out the sand, I caught her looking soft and almost spoke to her. But I held back. I was still mad. [...]

Streets were quiet now, a few cars veering off left and right into parking lots, the people in them disappearing into air-conditioned buildings. My mother worked in one of them with other ladies in nylons and high-heels, sitting at telephones calling up rich people to get their money. She said the

¹ *mustard weeds*: vilde sennepsplanter

² (her) skægtotter

³ (her) majsgult

⁴ bangebuks

⁵ *Rattle limp*: (her) Haleranglen blevet slap

⁶ (her) mens jeg foregav

35 money was for a good cause, something to do with preservation or reservations⁷, I could never
remember which. My father, too, worked in town at the old Lloyd Building that had a clock tower. He
was a lawyer. Melanie seemed to take this personally, even though he was her uncle. She acted as if
I'd committed some kind of crime having a normal father with a reputable⁸ job. This chip on her
40 shoulder⁹ was a natural competitive streak¹⁰ that I did not possess, nor understand. Honestly, it was
annoying to constantly be made to feel bad either about the fact that I didn't have something she had,
or that I had something she didn't have. She wasn't satisfied even with equality; she had to be better. I
didn't care, and honestly, if not for her pointing such things out, I would never have noticed our
differences at all. Comparing myself to others didn't come as naturally to me as it did to her.

I guess she had her reasons. Once, when they didn't know I was outside on the porch listening
45 through the screen door, I heard my mother and my Aunt Sosie talking over coffee and Little Debbie
cakes at the kitchen table. My mother said that Melanie was insecure and lonely. This was my first
lesson that things existed I'd never thought of. Insecure. Lonely. I started to wonder if I felt them too. I
also began to understand not everyone was happy. [...]

I walked along the sidewalk, Melanie skittering¹¹ behind me under the orange trees, their white
50 petals falling like confetti at a summer dance or an old-fashioned bon voyage party¹². In shop windows,
wedding dresses, sewing machines, and eyeglasses sat arranged in familiar, dusty displays, and I saw
my own image superimposed over them, brown hair flying free from pig tails, scarecrow arms and
legs. Crows sat up high on the telephone wire [...]. At that moment, they scattered. A deep,
reverberating bang¹³ sent them into flight. Melanie jumped.

55 "Sonic boom¹⁴," I said. There was an Air Force base not far from town, and sometimes a jet broke
the sound barrier, rattling windows and nerves.

"I know," Melanie said.

"I thought you might have been scared, the way you jumped."

60 She ignored me. "That's probably my daddy up there, flying that jet," she said, shielding her eyes
with a dirty hand as she gazed up at the sky.

I rolled my eyes. "Right." He wasn't up there. He wasn't in the sky or anywhere amazing folks
congregated¹⁵. But Melanie liked to pretend about her father. Liked to say he was a spy who couldn't
blow his cover by visiting her. She didn't mind, she said, because he came around secretly to check on
her, never showing who he really was. Still, she knew. She'd point to a man in the barber shop, or a
65 man getting out of his car, and whisper in my ear, "That's him." Sometimes he was disguised as a bus
driver, sometimes an optometrist¹⁶. The truth was, she didn't know her father. Didn't even know his
name. Her mother never talked about him and neither did anyone else. Some suspected he was a long-

⁷ (her) indianerreservater i USA

⁸ anstændigt

⁹ *This chip on her shoulder*: (her) Hendes mindreværdskompleks

¹⁰ *competitive streak*: konkurrence-gen

¹¹ vimsende

¹² *bon voyage party*: afskedsfest

¹³ *reverberating bang*: brag, der gav genlyd

¹⁴ *Sonic boom*: Lydmursbrag

¹⁵ var forsamlet

¹⁶ optiker

haired rogue¹⁷ who came through town with a rock 'n' roll band that played the Golden Spur¹⁸ downtown in the late '60s. They said Melanie had his jaw. No one had ever confirmed anything, though – least of all her mother, Margot. Margot lived at our house, or as my mother called it, the family home, and had never married.

I usually went along with Melanie's make-believe¹⁹, but that day I had resentment over the snake. How was anyone supposed to know that thing wasn't alive? It was smiling. She'd intended to trick me all along – that's what really rankled²⁰. My resentment waited inside me, coiled and ready to strike²¹. [...]

"Did you see him?"

"No, Melanie. I didn't see him. Why don't you admit your father is just some nobody who never wanted you?" My resentment dissolved as the vile²² words spilled from my mouth. I tried to glare but could only manage a weak toss of the head. Melanie's face hardened. She looked at me, dead-eyed. So I ran. What else could I do? I was a coward. The hair on the back of my neck rose as I sprinted away from there. I longed for her revenge. That way we'd be even. Or at least, I wouldn't be the mean one. After all, I was not the mean one in this outfit²³. Although she could have easily caught me if she'd wanted – she was a faster runner than I – she never ran me down, never tried to shove me into the mustard weeds, or throw a rock at the back of my head. She just let me run.

It was Friday and we had piano lessons at Mr. Finnegan's house. Breathless, I looked behind me as I knocked on his door. Melanie came around the corner a minute later, sashaying²⁴ down the road, smiling like a fairy was talking to her. Acting like she didn't care. It was just like her to act that way. "Hello, Miss Miller," Mr. Finnegan said as he opened the door smiling, six feet tall and vibrantly red-haired. He wasn't old, but at an age when he seemed interesting because he wasn't young, either. I was vaguely aware he'd lived a life apart from myself. [...] He was not married.

"How are you today, Samantha?" He looked beyond me at Melanie. "What's keeping her?" [...]

"Melanie! Get a move on!" Mr. Finnegan called.

She came across the street, mincing²⁵ into his yard with her dirty face hidden in the flower's clean white petals. "Stalling for time," he said under his breath as I walked past him into the front room. [...] I sat down on the worn settee²⁶ and waited; it was Melanie's turn to go first at the piano. The upright player²⁷ stood against a wall painted the same color as Mr. Finnegan's eyes. [...] I had a crush on Mr. Finnegan – he let us call him Finn – but I never said so to anyone. He was not entirely of this world. I often pictured him in more romantic settings; today I saw him reclining on a patch of green grass, shaded by weeping willows on the banks of a silver lake. He held a book of poetry, a sword glinting at his side. Ridiculous. I especially never said anything to Melanie about my preoccupation. She'd put

¹⁷ (her) vagabondtype

¹⁸ *the Golden Spur*: restaurant på Route 66 i Californien

¹⁹ fantasier

²⁰ nagede mig

²¹ slå til

²² ondskabsfulde

²³ (her) venskab

²⁴ smådansende

²⁵ trippende

²⁶ sofa

²⁷ upright player: klaver

information like that on parade, string great big lights around it and charge admission to anyone who wanted to see it. She would promise not to, but then she would.

105 Finn followed Melanie into the room. [...] She sat down at the piano and began to play “The Wild Horseman”²⁸ with studied concentration, as if to show her indifference to me and anything I might have to say about fathers. Sunlight coming through the curtains reflected off the oak piano, the hardwood floor, and, as he walked back and forth, nodding in time to Melanie’s playing, Finn’s red hair. He went all quiet like he usually did when she played, a faraway look in his eyes. Melanie was serious for once, sitting there, concentrating as if this song really mattered. She got lost in it. She was at the mercy of her talent²⁹; she couldn’t make fun of it or laugh at it, and she couldn’t scare it with a snake. She also knew she had me beat, for real – I was a perpetual³⁰ beginner. I never practiced enough to become more than adequate. My talents lay elsewhere, as my mother liked to say. I didn’t mind. When Melanie finished playing, she sat as if mesmerized [...]. Finn’s eyes were closed and it seemed to me the notes hung in the air all around us, easily in reach of any gently grasping hand.

115 After a moment of silence, Melanie swiveled around on the wooden stool, gazing up at Finn. She did not look at me. Finn snapped out of his reverie³¹ and opened new sheet music for her, setting it up on the music desk. Melanie swiveled back, placing her fingers on the keys. But before she began, she looked over her shoulder at me. With a cool stare, and her voice in the same key as the music still lingering in our ears, she said, “I have a father, Samantha. And he isn’t a nobody. Unlike you.” Then she turned back, head high, and began to play the notes of a melody I didn’t recognize. [...]

120 I sat on the settee like a rag doll³² someone tossed down before running outside to play. Surrounded by the barely blue walls and the rays of sunlight falling through the open window, I listened while Melanie played herself into another person, played the afternoon out of its knot, and made me feel how small a thing a rattlesnake is in comparison to a father.

(2022)

²⁸ *The Wild Horseman*: klassisk klaverstykke af Schumann fra 1848

²⁹ *She was at the mercy of her talent*: Hun overgav sig fuldt til sit talent

³⁰ evig

³¹ dagdrømme

³² *rag doll*: kludedukke