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Short Story

*rough draft  
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Rural Route 2, Box 225

I turned the postcard over, face down, seeing the writing,  
black as sin in the morning sun:

Sun. 1986

Hey, Sugar,

Five A.M. in New York, the Big Apple, and I  
just got off from work. Boy, am I tired but having  
a great time! Wish you was here. Write when you  
get the chance and let me know how things is going  
in good old Fargo. Ha!Ha!

Love your sister,  
Judy Lyn

P.S. I guess you noticed I changed the "e" <sup>to a</sup> ~~to a~~ "y"  
on my middle name. Kiss Daddy for me. Hope you like  
the picture. It's a real bronze sculpture. Don't  
let anybody see it. Ha!Ha!

I turned it back over to see if it was - was a sculpture -  
and sure enough that's what it said. In my estimation, it  
still wadn't nothing but a naked woman with a see-through  
curtain draped over her privates. Smelled like Evening in  
Paris perfume.

Mr. Hoke's got his hands full with that one!

All them Fargo girls is pretty, but they'll wear you  
clean out. Ain't none of them can hold a candle to Mr. Hoke's  
girls. Can't hardly wait to get out of school and take off.  
I reckon by that time they done had a bait of Okefenokee gators  
bellering at their back doors and cotton-mouth moccasins sun-  
ning on their doorsteps. Looks like they think they got to

make up for coming from the flatwoods: got gold bracelets up to their elbows, and all kinds of fancy frocks and doings.

I wought to know, being the mail carrier in these parts for close to twenty years. I'm the one brings them their Sears & Roebuck catalogues and stuff for them to order out of when they can't get a ride into Valdosta, forty miles away. I've had a little first hand experience, too.

Yessir, it's a plum sight what comes through the mail! I told Ima Jean, I'm glad I got me a wife from Homerville where at least they settle down. Could've ended up with Mr. Hoke's Carmen Sue and had to chase her down in Valdosta for my supper.

Ima Jean's plain as home-made sin, but she can sure cook. Good as they come. I've seen her set and nuss our boy a many a hour out in the night. She'd play the devil trying to nuss him now, big ole fat youngun. I've got to find him something to do to get him out from under her dress tail.

"He ain't big enough, yet," Ima Jean says. "Besides, his eyes ain't good."

My eyes would be bad, too, if I set up in front of that television set eating pecans much as he does. But he'll grow out've it, I expect.

"Living halfway betwixt and between, ain't that easy on a growing boy," she always says, like they's something wrong with living between Fargo and Homerville.

I was born and raised here, and it ain't never hurt me. Course I had to work from can to can't, farming for Mr. Hoke,

just to stay on his place. Our shack was down the dirt road apiece from Mr. Hoke's old farmhouse with the big rooms where the girl younguns kept doubling up on the beds fast as they come along. Last count I had, they was eight or ten of'em. And they wadn't hurting none for money. Mr. Hoke sold enough timber ever year to keep'em in high heels and brassieres.

My own Pa was laid up, half the time, drunk on Billy's Island in the swamp if our old mule couldn't figger out the way home. I heared that old buggy a many a time come rattling across the Swannee River bridge long about midnight in the Fifty's.

Got a new bridge, now, stark white over that black water; ain't so much wear and tear on a automobile. Course, we didn't never own one growing up.

Mr. Hoke bought a brand new red Thunderbird, first'un come out, for that drove of girl younguns to show off in. Wouldn't never let'em out of Fargo by theirselves, though, till they got out've school.

The biggest one, Carmen Sue, would drive them back and to, to old man Squire's store for a cold drink and some peanuts to pour in it, hanging around to wait for boys that might happen up out've the flatwoods from hunting. Wadn't all that many come by. Could've counted on my two hands how many of us boys lived there: me and Joe Sapp, Caulie Herndon, Buckshot Herring, Saul Sarter. And that was about it!

You think they had ary bit of use for a one of us?  
Nosir! A pulpwood nigger would've stood a better chance!  
Not to say they'd have had things to do with a nigger. They  
wadn't that kind've gals.

They was well thought of. Went to church reglar, ever  
time the doors was open. They'd sing to the top of their lungs,  
showing off their pearly teeth and red lips. Got saved ever  
summer at the traveling tent revival. (I got my own idears about  
that)! Ever last one of them had bright blue eyes and ponytails,  
the color of syrup candy.

And I'm he<sup>re</sup> to tell you, they had a temper! When fair  
time rolled around in November, they'd pitch a hissy fit if  
Mr. Hoke didn't lay down what he was doing and take'em to  
Valdosta. He put up with it, too. I'd a wore the flinder  
rackets out of'em!

That's how me and Carmen Suz got to REALLY knowing  
one another. The fair. That's when I found out what they  
all was made out of. I called myself courting her; figgered  
she'd took a shine to me, too, and that was how come she had  
asked me to go. More than likely, old man Hoke had the fore-  
sight to see I'd make something out've myself, seeing as how  
I managed the farm in spite of Pa's sorryness. Could've been  
he just got tired of going year after year and was scared to  
let'em drive that long stretch of back roads from Fargo to  
Valdosta without a man along.

Anyhow, I was just pleased as punch to get to go along with them. I wadn't innerstid in no fair rides! Caulie Herndon couldn't hardly stand it! I got dressed up in my best khaki pants and cleaned up Pa's old leather jacket. Had me a brand new five dollar bill from selling sweet potatoes the week before.

When they come by the house to pick me up that night, I was warming by the fireplace. I ain't never been no colder in all my born days than I was that night, but I thought to my Lord I'd smother to death in that cloud of crinolines and Dentine chewing gum; offer them a piece, and they'd take the whole pack.

They even brung the baby, Judy Len, with'em, and I ended up toting her on my hip over the fair grounds while she smeared cotton candy in my hair. Carmen Sue brung her a big pink stick of it and then took off with some Valdosta boy she'd run up with. And that was the last I seen of her till we started back home.

I said to myself, right then, I wouldn't give no Fargo girl another chance to make a fool out've me, no matter how good looking they was.

Tell you how come me to get the idear Carmen Sue was stuck on me. I ought not to be telling it, but for two summers her and all her sisters had been practicing kissing on me down at the tobacco packhouse. Mr. Hoke had took a notion to learn them how to work, taking off tobacco at a cent a stick. They didn't

hit a lick at a snake! I ended up doing most of it, stopping in between to let 'em kiss on ~~me~~. Carmen Sue took on like she was plum in love with me.

Them girls was wild! They didn't get out of the car good that night at the fair before they got to hollering and showing out; run off in all directions. Even now and then I'd <sup>CATCH</sup> sight of one of 'em throwing darts and making eyes at the man running the games. Or two of 'em perched up on the ferris wheel, holding big candy apples, matching their lips and the lights, with a strange boy between them. A poodle skirt would come a flirting by to go back to the booth selling them inscribed broken hearts on a chain, and I'd know it was one of Hoke's crazy gals.

Me and that jumpy youngun just walked around and around and around the fair grounds, looking at the rides and listening to all that racket. You couldn't hear yourself think!

"Little Daddy, bring that baby over here and win her a teddy bear. Two throws for a quarter. The first one's free," that trashy fair man would holler.

I'd shake my head or play like I didn't hear him if he kept on. That was the aggravatinnest bunch I ever seen. Wouldn't take no for an answer. To keep 'em from hollering out at me, I finally took 'em up on it and used up just about ever bit of my money to get that youngun a weaved tube to get her finger stuck in.

I had to set her up on the counter to throw them rings on the bottles, and next thing I knowed she'd done bailed off

The other side and come up a squalling. Everbody there was looking at us, come up close to see what all the racket was about. And that was before the ~~fair man~~<sup>FAIR MAN</sup> give her that ~~thing~~<sup>THING -</sup> a-ma-jig to get her finger stuck in. Lord and she did set in to bawling, then!

I seen one of them girls come prissing by about that time; and do you think she payed ary bit of mind to her own baby sister? Nosir! She just bounces right off and ducks into the picture booth, pulling the curtain behind her.

I had to give two dollars to the fair man for busting up his game and cutting that thing off the baby's finger and helping me change her britches. I'd stuck the safepin clean through her hide and couldn't figger out why she was still screaming bloody murder. Seems like it was Sue Ellen brung me the diaper, flitting off like a butterfly.

To get to set down a spell and warm up, and try to get that youngun to hush, I spent my last quarter to get in a side show.

I'd got just about easy, setting there on one of them benches with the baby finally satisfied. It was trying to rain outside and her lil ole fuzzy head was ~~sopping~~<sup>SOPPING</sup> wet. Smelled like clabbered milk.

A dirty old man with excited green eyes come out on the stage just ahead of us and set in to blowing a mouthharp. The baby got to clapping her fat little hands and kicking my knees, couldn't set still for nothing. Kind of like being at home, I expect, cause Fargo folks loves a good hoedown.