

Somethin' Kinda Odd About Essie

Alice Aldrich

Why sure, I knew Essie Radford. Her dad's some kin to my Uncle Ezry. Dad, you knew them Radfords didn't you? John Radford—used to run the big general store over in Russelridge. Why Essie and I went to school together. She was in the Home Economics club the year we went to Washington. Dad, you remember Essie. She was a plain girl, kinda tall and skinnyish. Always felt kinda sorry for the poor thing. My brother Everett used to say, "That Essie Radford's the homeliest female on two legs." And now you say poor Essie's gone and killed herself? Well, it don't surprise me none; folks always did say there was somethin' kinda odd about Essie. She never did mix much with the rest of us, always goin' off by herself somewhere. She set quite a store by them books her dad'd bought before he passed away, and used to spend a lot of time just settin' and readin'. Essie was a smart one though; too smart some folks said. She looked like she knew some things that just wasn't meant for people to know.

It used to worry Essie's ma an awful lot, her bein' so funny like. I remember hearin' her tell Mom one time we was over there, "Just cain't figure out what's wrong with my Essie. She's bright enough—got all A's this time—but there's just somethin' kinda odd about her. I keep a sayin' 'Essie, perk up a bit or you ain't never gonna catch a man'."

But Essie never did take much of a shine to the boys. Dad, remember that time I had a play-party at my house, and for a joke, young Zeke Tilford tried to kiss Essie? My, that girl got mad; she up and slapped him good and then took out for home without sayin' another word to nobody. Sure was a good laugh on Zeke.

You know though, the time I'll never forget was the night our class had a program at the school house. It was stormin' outside to beat the band. There was thunder and lightenin' and the wind was a howlin' when Essie got up to give her piece, and folks kinda strained forward in their seats fearin' they wouldn't be able to hear. But, you know, she went through that Raven thing that was in our readin' book, from beginnin' to end in a low, eerie voice—like a whisper almost, and yet you could hear every word from the very back of the room. Folks just sat there without movin' a muscle like as if she'd hypnotized 'em. When she was done, I realized I'd been holdin' my breath for a long time and I had a funny, shaky kind a feelin'

inside. I think everybody else felt the same thing; they just sat there; they didn't even clap for a few minutes.

That night, I thought about Essie for a long time. What was there about her? I knew that the rest of us were not like Essie. I couldn't figure out what it was that made Essie so—so different. Yes, I reckon there's always been somethin' kinda odd about Essie.

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The Flame

Flint to sulphur struck by unknown hand,—
Flame let loose to tremble for an hour
In a room where smoke and shadow twist,
Stalking light they know they must devour.

Always fearing careless winds that whirl
Ever near to fan or snuff the spark,
In a world of doubt we long to cut
Truth from grim distortion, light from dark.

Delicate, yet so deliberate,
Burns the flame which wonders whence it rose:
Seeing dimly what its rays reveal,
It can only question and suppose.

—Martha Burbank