

AMERICAN GOTHIC

EDITED BY NOAH LEDESMA

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A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND

BY FLANNERY O'CONNOR

THE GRANDMOTHER DIDN'T WANT TO go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind. Bailey was the son she lived with, her only boy. He was sitting on the edge of his chair at the table, bent over the orange sports section of the Journal. "Now look here, Bailey," she said, "see here, read this," and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head. "Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did."

Bailey didn't look up from his reading so she wheeled

around then and faced the children's mother, a young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like rabbit's ears. She was sitting on the sofa, feeding the baby his apricots out of a jar. "The children have been to Florida before," the old lady said. "You all ought to take them somewhere else for a change so they would see different parts of the world and be broad. They never have been to east Tennessee."

The children's mother didn't seem to hear her but the eight-year-old boy, John Wesley, a stocky child with glasses, said, "If you don't want to go to Florida, why dontcha stay at home?" He and the little girl, June Star, were reading the funny papers on the floor.

"She wouldn't stay at home to be queen for a day," June Star said without raising her yellow head.

"Yes and what would you do if this fellow, The Misfit, caught you?" the grandmother asked.

"I'd smack his face," John Wesley said.

"She wouldn't stay at home for a million bucks," June Star said. "Afraid she'd miss something. She has to go everywhere we go."

"All right, Miss," the grandmother said. "Just remember that the next time you want me to curl your hair."

June Star said her hair was naturally curly.

The next morning the grandmother was the first one in the car, ready to go. She had her big black valise that looked like the head of a hippopotamus in one corner, and underneath it she was hiding a basket with Pitty Sing, the cat, in it. She

didn't intend for the cat to be left alone in the house for three days because he would miss her too much and she was afraid he might brush against one of the gas burners and

accidentally asphyxiate himself. Her son, Bailey, didn't like to arrive at a motel with a cat.

She sat in the middle of the back seat with John Wesley and June Star on either side of her. Bailey and the children's mother and the baby sat in front and they left Atlanta at eight forty-five with the mileage on the car at 55890. The grandmother wrote this down because she thought it would be interesting to say how many miles they had been when they got back. It took them twenty minutes to reach the outskirts of the city.

The old lady settled herself comfortably, removing her white cotton gloves and putting them up with her purse on the shelf in front of the back window. The children's mother still had on slacks and still had her head tied up in a green kerchief, but the grandmother had on a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print. Her collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady.

She said she thought it was going to be a good day for driving, neither too hot nor too cold, and she cautioned Bailey that the speed limit was fifty-five miles an hour and that the patrolmen hid themselves behind billboards and small clumps of trees and sped out after you before you had

a chance to slow down. She pointed out interesting details of the scenery: Stone Mountain; the blue granite that in some places came up to both sides of the highway; the brilliant red clay banks slightly streaked with purple; and the various crops that made rows of green lace-work on the ground. The trees were full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled. The children were reading comic magazines and their mother had gone back to sleep.

“Let’s go through Georgia fast so we won’t have to look at it much,” John Wesley said.

“If I were a little boy,” said the grandmother, “I wouldn’t talk about my native state that way. Tennessee has the mountains and Georgia has the hills.”

“Tennessee is just a hillbilly dumping ground,” John Wesley said, “and Georgia is a lousy state too.”

“You said it,” June Star said.

“In my time,” said the grandmother, folding her thin veined fingers, “children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then. Oh look at the cute little pickaninny!” she said and pointed to a Negro child standing in the door of a shack. “Wouldn’t that make a picture, now?” she asked and they all turned and looked at the little Negro out of the back window. He waved.

“He didn’t have any britches on,” June Star said.

“He probably didn’t have any,” the grandmother explained. “Little niggers in the country don’t have things like we do. If I could paint, I’d paint that picture,” she said.

The children exchanged comic books.

The grandmother offered to hold the baby and the children's mother passed him over the front seat to her. She set him on her knee and bounced him and told him about the things they were passing. She rolled her eyes and screwed up her mouth and stuck her leathery thin face into his smooth bland one. Occasionally he gave her a faraway smile. They passed a large cotton field with five or six graves fenced in the middle of it, like a small island. "Look at the graveyard!" the grandmother said, pointing it out. "That was the old family burying ground. That belonged to the plantation."

"Where's the plantation?" John Wesley asked.

"Gone with the Wind," said the grandmother. "Ha. Ha."

When the children finished all the comic books they had brought, they opened

the lunch and ate it. The grandmother ate a peanut butter sandwich and an olive and would not let the children throw the box and the paper napkins out the window. When there was nothing else to do they played a game by choosing a cloud and making the other two guess what shape it suggested. John Wesley took one the shape of a cow and June Star guessed a cow and John Wesley said, no, an automobile, and June Star said he didn't play fair, and they began to slap each other over the grandmother.

The grandmother said she would tell them a story if they would keep quiet. When she told a story, she rolled her eyes and waved her head and was very dramatic. She said once when she was a maiden lady she had been courted by a Mr. Edgar Atkins Teagarden from Jasper, Georgia. She said he was a very good-looking man and a gentleman and that he

brought her a watermelon every Saturday afternoon with his initials cut in it, E. A. T. Well, one Saturday, she said, Mr. Teagarden brought the watermelon and there was nobody at home and he left it on the front porch and returned in his buggy to Jasper, but she never got the watermelon, she said, because a nigger boy ate it when he saw the initials, E. A. T.! This story tickled John Wesley's funny bone and he giggled and giggled but June Star didn't think it was any good. She said she wouldn't marry a man that just brought her a watermelon on Saturday. The grandmother said she would have done well to marry Mr. Teagarden because he was a gentleman and had bought Coca-Cola stock when it first came out and that he had died only a few years ago, a very wealthy man.

They stopped at The Tower for barbecued sandwiches. The Tower was a part stucco and part wood filling station and dance hall set in a clearing outside of Timothy. A fat man named Red Sammy Butts ran it and there were signs stuck here and there on the building and for miles up and down the highway saying, TRY RED SAMMY'S FAMOUS BARBECUE. NONE LIKE FAMOUS RED SAMMY'S! RED SAM! THE FAT BOY WITH THE HAPPY LAUGH. A VETERAN! RED SAMMY'S YOUR MAN!

Red Sammy was lying on the bare ground outside The Tower with his head under a truck while a gray monkey about a foot high, chained to a small chinaberry tree, chattered nearby. The monkey sprang back into the tree and got on the highest limb as soon as he saw the children jump out of the car and run toward him.

Inside, The Tower was a long dark room with a counter

at one end and tables at the other and dancing space in the middle. They all sat down at a board table next to the nickelodeon and Red Sam's wife, a tall burnt-brown woman with hair and eyes lighter than her skin, came and took their order. The children's mother put a dime in the machine and played "The Tennessee Waltz," and the grandmother said that tune always made her want to dance. She asked Bailey if he would like to dance but he only glared at her. He didn't have a naturally sunny disposition like she did and trips made him nervous. The grandmother's brown eyes were very bright. She swayed her head from side to side and pretended she was dancing in her chair. June Star said play something she could tap to so the children's mother put in another dime and played a fast number and June Star stepped out onto the dance floor and did her tap routine.

"Ain't she cute?" Red Sam's wife said, leaning over the counter. "Would you like to come be my little girl?"

"No I certainly wouldn't," June Star said. "I wouldn't live in a broken-down place like this for a minion bucks!" and she ran back to the table.

"Ain't she cute?" the woman repeated, stretching her mouth politely.

"Aren't you ashamed?" hissed the grandmother.

Red Sam came in and told his wife to quit lounging on the counter and hurry up

with these people's order. His khaki trousers reached just to his hip bones and his stomach hung over them like a sack of meal swaying under his shirt. He came over and sat down at a table nearby and let out a combination sigh and yodel.

“You can’t win,” he said. “You can’t win,” and he wiped his sweating red face off with a gray handkerchief. “These days you don’t know who to trust,” he said. “Ain’t that the truth?”

“People are certainly not nice like they used to be,” said the grandmother.

“Two fellers come in here last week,” Red Sammy said, “driving a Chrysler. It was an old beat-up car but it was a good one and these boys looked all right to me. Said they worked at the mill and you know I let them fellers charge the gas they bought? Now why did I do that?”

“Because you’re a good man!” the grandmother said at once.

“Yes’m, I suppose so,” Red Sam said as if he were struck with this answer.

His wife brought the orders, carrying the five plates all at once without a tray, two

in each hand and one balanced on her arm. “It isn’t a soul in this green world of God’s that you can trust,” she said. “And I don’t count nobody out of that, not nobody,” she repeated, looking at Red Sammy.

“Did you read about that criminal, The Misfit, that’s escaped?” asked the grandmother.

“I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if he didn’t attacked this place right here,” said the woman. “If he hears about it being here, I wouldn’t be none surprised to see him. If he hears it’s two cent in the cash register, I wouldn’t be a tall surprised if he . . .”

“That’ll do,” Red Sam said. “Go bring these people their Co’-Colas,” and the woman went off to get the rest of the

order.

“A good man is hard to find,” Red Sammy said. “Everything is getting terrible. I remember the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more.”

He and the grandmother discussed better times. The old lady said that in her opinion Europe was entirely to blame for the way things were now. She said the way Europe acted you would think we were made of money and Red Sam said it was no use talking about it, she was exactly right. The children ran outside into the white sunlight and looked at the monkey in the lacy chinaberry tree. He was busy catching fleas on himself and biting each one carefully between his teeth as if it were a delicacy.

They drove off again into the hot afternoon. The grandmother took cat naps and woke up every few minutes with her own snoring. Outside of Toombsboro she woke up and recalled an old plantation that she had visited in this neighborhood once when she was a young lady. She said the house had six white columns across the front and that there was an avenue of oaks leading up to it and two little wooden trellis arbors on either side in front where you sat down with your suitor after a stroll in the garden. She recalled exactly which road to turn off to get to it. She knew that Bailey would not be willing to lose any time looking at an old house, but the more she talked about it, the more she wanted to see it once again and find out if the little twin arbors were still standing. “There was a secret panel in this house,” she said craftily, not telling the truth but wishing that she were, “and the story went that all the family silver was hidden in it when

Sherman came through but it was never found . . .”

“Hey!” John Wesley said. “Let’s go see it! We’ll find it! We’ll poke all the woodwork and find it! Who lives there? Where do you turn off at? Hey Pop, can’t we turn off there?”

“We never have seen a house with a secret panel!” June Star shrieked. “Let’s go to the house with the secret panel! Hey Pop, can’t we go see the house with the secret panel!”

“It’s not far from here, I know,” the grandmother said. “It wouldn’t take over twenty minutes.”

Bailey was looking straight ahead. His jaw was as rigid as a horseshoe. “No,” he said.

The children began to yell and scream that they wanted to see the house with the secret panel. John Wesley kicked the back of the front seat and June Star hung over her mother’s shoulder and whined desperately into her ear that they never had any fun even on their vacation, that they could never do what THEY wanted to do. The baby began to scream and John Wesley kicked the back of the seat so hard that his father could feel the blows in his kidney.

“All right!” he shouted and drew the car to a stop at the side of the road. “Will you all shut up? Will you all just shut up for one second? If you don’t shut up, we won’t go anywhere.

“It would be very educational for them,” the grandmother murmured.

“All right,” Bailey said, “but get this: this is the only time we’re going to stop for anything like this. This is the one and only time.”

“The dirt road that you have to turn down is about a mile back,” the grandmother directed. “I marked it when we

passed.”

“A dirt road,” Bailey groaned.

After they had turned around and were headed toward the dirt road, the grandmother recalled other points about the house, the beautiful glass over the front doorway and the candle-lamp in the hall. John Wesley said that the secret panel was probably in the fireplace.

“You can’t go inside this house,” Bailey said. “You don’t know who lives there.”

“While you all talk to the people in front, I’ll run around behind and get in a window,” John Wesley suggested.

“We’ll all stay in the car,” his mother said. They turned onto the dirt road and the car raced roughly along in a swirl of pink dust. The grandmother recalled the times when there were no paved roads and thirty miles was a day’s journey. The dirt road was hilly and there were sudden washes in it and sharp curves on dangerous embankments. All at once they would be on a hill, looking down over the blue tops of trees for miles around, then the next minute, they would be in a red depression with the dust-coated trees looking down on them.

“This place had better turn up in a minute,” Bailey said, “or I’m going to turn around.”

The road looked as if no one had traveled on it in months.

“It’s not much farther,” the grandmother said and just as she said it, a horrible thought came to her. The thought was so embarrassing that she turned red in the face and her eyes dilated and her feet jumped up, upsetting her valise in the corner. The instant the valise moved, the newspaper top

she had over the basket under it rose with a snarl and Pitty Sing, the cat, sprang onto Bailey's shoulder.

The children were thrown to the floor and their mother, clutching the baby, was thrown out the door onto the ground; the old lady was thrown into the front seat. The car turned over once and landed right-side-up in a gulch off the side of the road. Bailey remained in the driver's seat with the cat-gray-striped with a broad white face and an orange nose-clinging to his neck like a caterpillar.

As soon as the children saw they could move their arms and legs, they scrambled out of the car, shouting, "We've had an ACCIDENT!" The grandmother was curled up under the dashboard, hoping she was injured so that Bailey's wrath would not come down on her all at once. The horrible thought she had had before the accident was that the house she had remembered so vividly was not in Georgia but in Tennessee.

Bailey removed the cat from his neck with both hands and flung it out the window against the side of a pine tree. Then he got out of the car and started looking for the children's mother. She was sitting against the side of the red gutted ditch, holding the screaming baby, but she only had a cut down her face and a broken shoulder. "We've had an ACCIDENT!" the children screamed in a frenzy of delight.

"But nobody's killed," June Star said with disappointment as the grandmother limped out of the car, her hat still pinned to her head but the broken front brim standing up at a jaunty angle and the violet spray hanging off the side. They all sat down in the ditch, except the children, to recover from the shock. They were all shaking.

“Maybe a car will come along,” said the children’s mother hoarsely.

“I believe I have injured an organ,” said the grandmother, pressing her side, but no one answered her. Bailey’s teeth were clattering. He had on a yellow sport shirt with bright blue parrots designed in it and his face was as yellow as the shirt. The grandmother decided that she would not mention that the house was in Tennessee.

The road was about ten feet above and they could see only the tops of the trees on the other side of it. Behind the ditch they were sitting in there were more woods, tall and dark and deep. In a few minutes they saw a car some distance away on top of a hill, coming slowly as if the occupants were watching them. The grandmother stood up and waved both arms dramatically to attract their attention. The car continued to come on slowly, disappeared around a bend and appeared again, moving even slower, on top of the hill they had gone over. It was a big black battered hearse-like automobile. There were three men in it.

It came to a stop just over them and for some minutes, the driver looked down with a steady expressionless gaze to where they were sitting, and didn’t speak. Then he turned his head and muttered something to the other two and they got out. One was a fat boy in black trousers and a red sweat shirt with a silver stallion embossed on the front of it. He moved around on the right side of them and stood staring, his mouth partly open in a kind of loose grin. The other had on khaki pants and a blue striped coat and a gray hat pulled down very low, hiding most of his face. He came around

slowly on the left side. Neither spoke.

The driver got out of the car and stood by the side of it, looking down at them. He was an older man than the other two. His hair was just beginning to gray and he wore silver-rimmed spectacles that gave him a scholarly look. He had a long creased face and didn't have on any shirt or undershirt. He had on blue jeans that were too tight for him and was holding a black hat and a gun. The two boys also had guns.

"We've had an ACCIDENT!" the children screamed.

The grandmother had the peculiar feeling that the bespectacled man was someone she knew. His face was as familiar to her as if she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was. He moved away from the car and began to come down the embankment, placing his feet carefully so that he wouldn't slip. He had on tan and white shoes and no socks, and his ankles were red and thin. "Good afternoon," he said. "I see you all had you a little spill."

"We turned over twice!" said the grandmother.

"Once," he corrected. "We seen it happen. Try their car and see will it run, Hiram," he said quietly to the boy with the gray hat.

"What you got that gun for?" John Wesley asked. "Whatcha gonna do with that gun?"

"Lady," the man said to the children's mother, "would you mind calling them children to sit down by you? Children make me nervous. I want all you all to sit down right together there where you're at."

"What are you telling US what to do for?" June Star asked.

Behind them the line of woods gaped like a dark open

mouth. "Come here," said their mother.

"Look here now," Bailey began suddenly, "we're in a predicament! We're in . . ."

The grandmother shrieked. She scrambled to her feet and stood staring. "You're The Misfit!" she said. "I recognized you at once!"

"Yes'm," the man said, smiling slightly as if he were pleased in spite of himself to be known, "but it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn't of reckernized me."

Bailey turned his head sharply and said something to his mother that shocked even the children. The old lady began to cry and The Misfit reddened.

"Lady," he said, "don't you get upset. Sometimes a man says things he don't mean. I don't reckon he meant to talk to you thataway."

"You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?" the grandmother said and removed a clean handkerchief from her cuff and began to slap at her eyes with it.

The Misfit pointed the toe of his shoe into the ground and made a little hole and then covered it up again. "I would hate to have to," he said.

"Listen," the grandmother almost screamed, "I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!"

"Yes mam," he said, "finest people in the world." When he smiled he showed a row of strong white teeth. "God never made a finer woman than my mother and my daddy's heart was pure gold," he said. The boy with the red sweat shirt had come around behind them and was standing with his gun

at his hip. The Misfit squatted down on the ground. "Watch them children, Bobby Lee," he said. "You know they make me nervous." He looked at the six of them huddled together in front of him and he seemed to be embarrassed as if he couldn't think of anything to say. "Ain't a cloud in the sky," he remarked, looking up at it. "Don't see no sun but don't see no cloud neither."

"Yes, it's a beautiful day," said the grandmother. "Listen," she said, "you shouldn't call yourself The Misfit because I know you're a good man at heart. I can just look at you and tell "

"Hush!" Bailey yelled. "Hush! Everybody shut up and let me handle this!" He was squatting in the position of a runner about to sprint forward but he didn't move.

"I prechate that, lady," The Misfit said and drew a little circle in the ground with the butt of his gun.

"It'll take a half a hour to fix this here car," Hiram called, looking over the raised hood of it.

"Well, first you and Bobby Lee get him and that little boy to step over yonder with you," The Misfit said, pointing to Bailey and John Wesley. "The boys want to ast you something," he said to Bailey. "Would you mind stepping back in them woods there with them?"

"Listen," Bailey began, "we're in a terrible predicament! Nobody realizes what this is," and his voice cracked. His eyes were as blue and intense as the parrots in his shirt and he remained perfectly still.

The grandmother reached up to adjust her hat brim as if she were going to the woods with him but it came off in

her hand. She stood staring at it and after a second she let it fall on the ground. Hiram pulled Bailey up by the arm as if he were assisting an old man. John Wesley caught hold of his father's hand and Bobby Lee followed. They went off toward the woods and just as they reached the dark edge, Bailey turned and supporting himself against a gray naked pine trunk, he shouted, "I'll be back in a minute, Mamma, wait on me!"

"Come back this instant!" his mother shrilled but they all disappeared into the woods.

"Bailey Boy!" the grandmother called in a tragic voice but she found she was looking at The Misfit squatting on the ground in front of her. "I just know you're a good man," she said desperately. "You're not a bit common!"

"Nome, I ain't a good man," The Misfit said after a second as if he had considered her statement carefully, "but I ain't the worst in the world neither. My daddy said I was a different breed of dog from my brothers and sisters. 'You know,' Daddy said, 'it's some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it's others has to know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters. He's going to be into everything!'" He put on his black hat and looked up suddenly and then away deep into the woods as if he were embarrassed again. "I'm sorry I don't have on a shirt before you ladies," he said, hunching his shoulders slightly. "We buried our clothes that we had on when we escaped and we're just making do until we can get better. We borrowed these from some folks we met," he explained.

"That's perfectly all right," the grandmother said. "Maybe

Bailey has an extra shirt in his suitcase.”

“I’ll look and see terrectly,” The Misfit said.

“Where are they taking him?” the children’s mother screamed.

“Daddy was a card himself,” The Misfit said. “You couldn’t put anything over on

him. He never got in trouble with the Authorities though. Just had the knack of handling them.”

“You could be honest too if you’d only try,” said the grandmother. “Think how wonderful it would be to settle down and live a comfortable life and not have to think about somebody chasing you all the time.”

The Misfit kept scratching in the ground with the butt of his gun as if he were thinking about it. “Yes’m, somebody is always after you,” he murmured.

The grandmother noticed how thin his shoulder blades were just behind his hat because she was standing up looking down on him. “Do you ever pray?” she asked.

He shook his head. All she saw was the black hat wiggle between his shoulder blades. “Nome,” he said.

There was a pistol shot from the woods, followed closely by another. Then silence. The old lady’s head jerked around. She could hear the wind move through the tree tops like a long satisfied in-suck of breath. “Bailey Boy!” she called.

“I was a gospel singer for a while,” The Misfit said. “I been most everything. Been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twict married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive oncet,” and he looked up at

the children's mother and the little girl who were sitting close together, their faces white and their eyes glassy; "I even seen a woman flogged," he said.

"Pray, pray," the grandmother began, "pray, pray . . ."

"I never was a bad boy that I remember of," The Misfit said in an almost dreamy voice, "but somewheres along the line I done something wrong and got sent to the penitentiary. I was buried alive," and he looked up and held her attention to him by a steady stare.

"That's when you should have started to pray," she said "What did you do to get sent to the penitentiary that first time?"

"Turn to the right, it was a wall," The Misfit said, looking up again at the cloudless sky. "Turn to the left, it was a wall. Look up it was a ceiling, look down it was a floor. I forget what I done, lady. I set there and set there, trying to remember what it was I done and I ain't recalled it to this day. Oncet in a while, I would think it was coming to me, but it never come."

"Maybe they put you in by mistake," the old lady said vaguely.

"Nome," he said. "It wasn't no mistake. They had the papers on me."

"You must have stolen something," she said.

The Misfit sneered slightly. "Nobody had nothing I wanted," he said. "It was a

head-doctor at the penitentiary said what I had done was kill my daddy but I known that for a lie. My daddy died in nineteen ought nineteen of the epidemic flu and I never had a thing to do with it. He was buried in the Mount Hopewell

Baptist churchyard and you can go there and see for yourself.”

“If you would pray,” the old lady said, “Jesus would help you.”

“That’s right,” The Misfit said.

“Well then, why don’t you pray?” she asked trembling with delight suddenly.

“I don’t want no hep,” he said. “I’m doing all right by myself.”

Bobby Lee and Hiram came ambling back from the woods. Bobby Lee was

dragging a yellow shirt with bright blue parrots in it.

“Thow me that shirt, Bobby Lee,” The Misfit said. The shirt came flying at him and

landed on his shoulder and he put it on. The grandmother couldn’t name what the shirt reminded her of. “No, lady,” The Misfit said while he was buttoning it up, “I found out the crime don’t matter. You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car, because sooner or later you’re going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it.”

The children’s mother had begun to make heaving noises as if she couldn’t get her breath. “Lady,” he asked, “would you and that little girl like to step off yonder with Bobby Lee and Hiram and join your husband?”

“Yes, thank you,” the mother said faintly. Her left arm dangled helplessly and she was holding the baby, who had gone to sleep, in the other. “Hep that lady up, Hiram,” The Misfit said as she struggled to climb out of the ditch, “and Bobby Lee, you hold onto that little girl’s hand.”

“I don’t want to hold hands with him,” June Star said. “He reminds me of a pig.”

The fat boy blushed and laughed and caught her by the arm and pulled her off into the woods after Hiram and her mother.

Alone with The Misfit, the grandmother found that she had lost her voice. There was not a cloud in the sky nor any sun. There was nothing around her but woods. She wanted to tell him that he must pray. She opened and closed her mouth several times before anything came out. Finally she found herself saying, “Jesus. Jesus,” meaning, Jesus will help you, but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing.

“Yes’m,” The Misfit said as if he agreed. “Jesus shown everything off balance. It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn’t committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one because they had the papers on me. Of course,” he said, “they never shown me my papers. That’s why I sign myself now. I said long ago, you get you a signature and sign everything you do and keep a copy of it. Then you’ll know what you done and you can hold up the crime to the punishment and see do they match and in the end you’ll have something to prove you ain’t been treated right. I call myself The Misfit,” he said, “because I can’t make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment.”

There was a piercing scream from the woods, followed closely by a pistol report. “Does it seem right to you, lady, that one is punished a heap and another ain’t punished at all?”

“Jesus!” the old lady cried. “You’ve got good blood! I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady! I know you come from nice! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I’ll give you all the money I’ve got!”

“Lady,” The Misfit said, looking beyond her far into the woods, “there never was a body that give the undertaker a tip.”

There were two more pistol reports and the grandmother raised her head like a parched old turkey hen crying for water and called, “Bailey Boy, Bailey Boy!” as if her heart would break.

“Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead,” The Misfit continued, “and He shouldn’t have done it. He shown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but thow away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can-by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness,” he said and his voice had become almost a snarl.

“Maybe He didn’t raise the dead,” the old lady mumbled, not knowing what she was saying and feeling so dizzy that she sank down in the ditch with her legs twisted under her.

“I wasn’t there so I can’t say He didn’t,” The Misfit said. “I wisht I had of been there,” he said, hitting the ground with his fist. “It ain’t right I wasn’t there because if I had of been there I would of known. Listen lady,” he said in a high voice, “if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn’t be like I am now.” His voice seemed about to crack and the

grandmother's head cleared for an instant. She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them.

Hiram and Bobby Lee returned from the woods and stood over the ditch, looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.

Without his glasses, The Misfit's eyes were red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking. "Take her off and throw her where you shown the others," he said, picking up the cat that was rubbing itself against his leg.

"She was a talker, wasn't she?" Bobby Lee said, sliding down the ditch with a yodel.

"She would of been a good woman," The Misfit said, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

"Some fun!" Bobby Lee said.

"Shut up, Bobby Lee" The Misfit said. "It's no real pleasure in life." ❀



THE LOTTERY

BY SHIRLEY JACKSON

THE MORNING OF JUNE 27TH was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green. The people of the village began to gather in the square, between the post office and the bank, around ten o'clock; in some towns there were so many people that the lottery took two days and had to be started on June 26th, but in this village, where there were only about three hundred people, the whole lottery took only about two hours, so it could begin at ten o'clock in the morning and still be through in time to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner.

The children assembled first, of course. School was recently over for the summer, and the feeling of liberty sat uneasily on most of them; they tended to gather together quietly for a while before they broke into boisterous play, and their talk was still of the classroom and the teacher, of books and reprimands. Bobby Martin had already stuffed

his pockets full of stones, and the other boys soon followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones; Bobby and Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix—the villagers pronounced this name “Dellacroy”—eventually made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raids of the other boys. The girls stood aside, talking among themselves, looking over their shoulders at the boys, and the very small children rolled in the dust or clung to the hands of their older brothers or sisters.

Soon the men began to gather, surveying their own children, speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes. They stood together, away from the pile of stones in the corner, and their jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed. The women, wearing faded house dresses and sweaters, came shortly after their menfolk. They greeted one another and exchanged bits of gossip as they went to join their husbands. Soon the women, standing by their husbands, began to call to their children, and the children came reluctantly, having to be called four or five times. Bobby Martin ducked under his mother’s grasping hand and ran, laughing, back to the pile of stones. His father spoke up sharply, and Bobby came quickly and took his place between his father and his oldest brother.

The lottery was conducted—as were the square dances, the teen-age club, the Halloween program—by Mr. Summers, who had time and energy to devote to civic activities. He was a round-faced, jovial man and he ran the coal business, and people were sorry for him, because he had no children and his wife was a scold. When he arrived in the square, carrying

the black wooden box, there was a murmur of conversation among the villagers, and he waved and called, "Little late today, folks." The postmaster, Mr. Graves, followed him, carrying a three-legged stool, and the stool was put in the center of the square and Mr. Summers set the black box down on it. The villagers kept their distance, leaving a space between themselves and the stool, and when Mr. Summers said, "Some of you fellows want to give me a hand?" there was a hesitation before two men, Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, came forward to hold the box steady on the stool while Mr. Summers stirred up the papers inside it.

The original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago, and the black box now resting on the stool had been put into use even before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, was born. Mr. Summers spoke frequently to the villagers about making a new box, but no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box. There was a story that the present box had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, the one that had been constructed when the first people settled down to make a village here. Every year, after the lottery, Mr. Summers began talking again about a new box, but every year the subject was allowed to fade off without anything's being done. The black box grew shabbier each year; by now it was no longer completely black but splintered badly along one side to show the original wood color, and in some places faded or stained.

Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, held the black box securely on the stool until Mr. Summers had stirred the

papers thoroughly with his hand. Because so much of the ritual had been forgotten or discarded, Mr. Summers had been successful in having slips of paper substituted for the chips of wood that had been used for generations. Chips of wood, Mr. Summers had argued, had been all very well when the village was tiny, but now that the population was more than three hundred and likely to keep on growing, it was necessary to use something that would fit more easily into the black box. The night before the lottery, Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves made up the slips of paper and put them into the box, and it was then taken to the safe of Mr. Summers' coal company and locked up until Mr. Summers was ready to take it to the square next morning. The rest of the year, the box was put away, sometimes one place, sometimes another; it had spent one year in Mr. Graves' barn and another year underfoot in the post office, and sometimes it was set on a shelf in the Martin grocery and left there.

There was a great deal of fussing to be done before Mr. Summers declared the lottery open. There were the lists to make up—of heads of families, heads of households in each family, members of each household in each family. There was the proper swearing-in of Mr. Summers by the postmaster, as the official of the lottery; at one time, some people remembered, there had been a recital of some sort, performed by the official of the lottery, a perfunctory, tuneless chant that had been rattled off duly each year; some people believed that the official of the lottery used to stand just so when he said or sang it, others believed that he was supposed to walk among the people, but years and years ago this part of the ritual had

been allowed to lapse. There had been, also, a ritual salute, which the official of the lottery had had to use in addressing each person who came up to draw from the box, but this also had changed with time, until now it was felt necessary only for the official to speak to each person approaching. Mr. Summers was very good at all this; in his clean white shirt and blue jeans, with one hand resting carelessly on the black box, he seemed very proper and important as he talked interminably to Mr. Graves and the Martins.

Just as Mr. Summers finally left off talking and turned to the assembled villagers, Mrs. Hutchinson came hurriedly along the path to the square, her sweater thrown over her shoulders, and slid into place in the back of the crowd. "Clean forgot what day it was," she said to Mrs. Delacroix, who stood next to her, and they both laughed softly. "Thought my old man was out back stacking wood," Mrs. Hutchinson went on, "and then I looked out the window and the kids was gone, and then I remembered it was the twenty-seventh and came a-running." She dried her hands on her apron, and Mrs. Delacroix said, "You're in time, though. They're still talking away up there."

Mrs. Hutchinson craned her neck to see through the crowd and found her husband and children standing near the front. She tapped Mrs. Delacroix on the arm as a farewell and began to make her way through the crowd. The people separated good-humoredly to let her through; two or three people said, in voices just loud enough to be heard across the crowd, "Here comes your Mrs., Hutchinson," and "Bill, she made it after all." Mrs. Hutchinson reached her husband,

and Mr. Summers, who had been waiting, said cheerfully, "Thought we were going to have to get on without you, Tessie." Mrs. Hutchinson said, grinning, "Wouldn't have had me leave m'dishes in the sink, now, would you, Joe?," and soft laughter ran through the crowd as the people stirred back into position after Mrs. Hutchinson's arrival.

"Well, now," Mr. Summers said soberly, "guess we better get started, get this over with, so's we can go back to work. Anybody ain't here?"

"Dunbar," several people said. "Dunbar, Dunbar."

Mr. Summers consulted his list. "Clyde Dunbar," he said. "That's right. He's broke his leg, hasn't he? Who's drawing for him?"

"Me, I guess," a woman said, and Mr. Summers turned to look at her. "Wife draws for her husband," Mr. Summers said. "Don't you have a grown boy to do it for you, Janey?" Although Mr. Summers and everyone else in the village knew the answer perfectly well, it was the business of the official of the lottery to ask such questions formally. Mr. Summers waited with an expression of polite interest while Mrs. Dunbar answered.

"Horace's not but sixteen yet," Mrs. Dunbar said regretfully. "Guess I gotta fill in for the old man this year."

"Right," Mr. Summers said. He made a note on the list he was holding. Then he asked, "Watson boy drawing this year?"

A tall boy in the crowd raised his hand. "Here," he said. "I'm drawing for m'mother and me." He blinked his eyes nervously and ducked his head as several voices in the crowd said things like "Good fellow, Jack," and "Glad to see you"

mother's got a man to do it."

"Well," Mr. Summers said, "guess that's everyone. Old Man Warner make it?"

"Here," a voice said, and Mr. Summers nodded.

A sudden hush fell on the crowd as Mr. Summers cleared his throat and looked at the list. "All ready?" he called. "Now, I'll read the names—heads of families first—and the men come up and take a paper out of the box. Keep the paper folded in your hand without looking at it until everyone has had a turn. Everything clear?"

The people had done it so many times that they only half listened to the directions; most of them were quiet, wetting their lips, not looking around. Then Mr. Summers raised one hand high and said, "Adams." A man disengaged himself from the crowd and came forward. "Hi, Steve," Mr. Summers said, and Mr. Adams said, "Hi, Joe." They grinned at one another humorlessly and nervously. Then Mr. Adams reached into the black box and took out a folded paper. He held it firmly by one corner as he turned and went hastily back to his place in the crowd, where he stood a little apart from his family, not looking down at his hand.

"Allen," Mr. Summers said. "Anderson. . . . Bentham."

"Seems like there's no time at all between lotteries anymore," Mrs. Delacroix said to Mrs. Graves in the back row. "Seems like we got through with the last one only last week."

"Time sure goes fast," Mrs. Graves said.

"Clark. . . . Delacroix"

"There goes my old man." Mrs. Delacroix said. She held

her breath while her husband went forward.

“Dunbar,” Mr. Summers said, and Mrs. Dunbar went steadily to the box while one of the women said, “Go on, Janey,” and another said, “There she goes.”

“We’re next,” Mrs. Graves said. She watched while Mr. Graves came around from the side of the box, greeted Mr. Summers gravely and selected a slip of paper from the box. By now, all through the crowd there were men holding the small folded papers in their large hands, turning them over and over nervously. Mrs. Dunbar and her two sons stood together, Mrs. Dunbar holding the slip of paper.

“Harburt. . . Hutchinson.”

“Get up there, Bill,” Mrs. Hutchinson said, and the people near her laughed.

“Jones.”

“They do say,” Mr. Adams said to Old Man Warner, who stood next to him, “that over in the north village they’re talking of giving up the lottery.”

Old Man Warner snorted. “Pack of crazy fools,” he said. “Listening to the young folks, nothing’s good enough for them. Next thing you know, they’ll be wanting to go back to living in caves, nobody work anymore, live that way for a while. Used to be a saying about ‘Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.’ First thing you know, we’d all be eating stewed chickweed and acorns. There’s always been a lottery,” he added petulantly. “Bad enough to see young Joe Summers up there joking with everybody.”

“Some places have already quit lotteries,” Mrs. Adams said.

“Nothing but trouble in that,” Old Man Warner said stoutly. “Pack of young fools.”

“Martin.” And Bobby Martin watched his father go forward. “Overdyke. . . . Percy.”

“I wish they’d hurry,” Mrs. Dunbar said to her older son. “I wish they’d hurry.”

“They’re almost through,” her son said.

“You get ready to run tell Dad,” Mrs. Dunbar said.

Mr. Summers called his own name and then stepped forward precisely and selected a slip from the box. Then he called, “Warner.”

“Seventy-seventh year I been in the lottery,” Old Man Warner said as he went through the crowd. “Seventy-seventh time.”

“Watson.” The tall boy came awkwardly through the crowd. Someone said, “Don’t be nervous, Jack,” and Mr. Summers said, “Take your time, son.”

“Zanini.”

After that, there was a long pause, a breathless pause, until Mr. Summers, holding his slip of paper in the air, said, “All right, fellows.” For a minute, no one moved, and then all the slips of paper were opened. Suddenly, all the women began to speak at once, saying. “Who is it?” “Who’s got it?” “Is it the Dunbars?” “Is it the Watsons?” Then the voices began to say, “It’s Hutchinson. It’s Bill,” “Bill Hutchinson’s got it.”

“Go tell your father,” Mrs. Dunbar said to her older son.

People began to look around to see the Hutchinsons. Bill Hutchinson was standing quiet, staring down at the paper in his hand. Suddenly, Tessie Hutchinson shouted to Mr.

Summers, "You didn't give him time enough to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn't fair!"

"Be a good sport, Tessie." Mrs. Delacroix called, and Mrs. Graves said, "All of us took the same chance."

"Shut up, Tessie," Bill Hutchinson said.

"Well, everyone," Mr. Summers said, "that was done pretty fast, and now we've got to be hurrying a little more to get done in time." He consulted his next list. "Bill," he said, "you draw for the Hutchinson family. You got any other households in the Hutchinsons?"

"There's Don and Eva," Mrs. Hutchinson yelled. "Make them take their chance!"

"Daughters draw with their husbands' families, Tessie," Mr. Summers said gently. "You know that as well as anyone else."

"It wasn't fair," Tessie said.

"I guess not, Joe," Bill Hutchinson said regretfully. "My daughter draws with her husband's family; that's only fair. And I've got no other family except the kids."

"Then, as far as drawing for families is concerned, it's you," Mr. Summers said in explanation, "and as far as drawing for households is concerned, that's you, too. Right?"

"Right," Bill Hutchinson said.

"How many kids, Bill?" Mr. Summers asked formally.

"Three," Bill Hutchinson said. "There's Bill, Jr., and Nancy, and little Dave. And Tessie and me."

"All right, then," Mr. Summers said. "Harry, you got their tickets back?"

Mr. Graves nodded and held up the slips of paper. "Put

them in the box, then,” Mr. Summers directed. “Take Bill’s and put it in.”

“I think we ought to start over,” Mrs. Hutchinson said, as quietly as she could. “I tell you it wasn’t fair. You didn’t give him time enough to choose. Everybody saw that.”

Mr. Graves had selected the five slips and put them in the box, and he dropped all the papers but those onto the ground, where the breeze caught them and lifted them off.

“Listen, everybody,” Mrs. Hutchinson was saying to the people around her.

“Ready, Bill?” Mr. Summers asked, and Bill Hutchinson, with one quick glance around at his wife and children, nodded.

“Remember,” Mr. Summers said, “take the slips and keep them folded until each person has taken one. Harry, you help little Dave.” Mr. Graves took the hand of the little boy, who came willingly with him up to the box. “Take a paper out of the box, Davy,” Mr. Summers said. Davy put his hand into the box and laughed. “Take just one paper,” Mr. Summers said. “Harry, you hold it for him.” Mr. Graves took the child’s hand and removed the folded paper from the tight fist and held it while little Dave stood next to him and looked up at him wonderingly.

“Nancy next,” Mr. Summers said. Nancy was twelve, and her school friends breathed heavily as she went forward, switching her skirt, and took a slip daintily from the box. “Bill, Jr.,” Mr. Summers said, and Billy, his face red and his feet overlarge, nearly knocked the box over as he got a paper out. “Tessie,” Mr. Summers said. She hesitated for a minute,

looking around defiantly, and then set her lips and went up to the box. She snatched a paper out and held it behind her.

“Bill,” Mr. Summers said, and Bill Hutchinson reached into the box and felt around, bringing his hand out at last with the slip of paper in it.

The crowd was quiet. A girl whispered, “I hope it’s not Nancy,” and the sound of the whisper reached the edges of the crowd.

“It’s not the way it used to be,” Old Man Warner said clearly. “People ain’t the way they used to be.”

“All right,” Mr. Summers said. “Open the papers. Harry, you open little Dave’s.”

Mr. Graves opened the slip of paper and there was a general sigh through the crowd as he held it up and everyone could see that it was blank. Nancy and Bill, Jr., opened theirs at the same time, and both beamed and laughed, turning around to the crowd and holding their slips of paper above their heads.

“Tessie,” Mr. Summers said. There was a pause, and then Mr. Summers looked at Bill Hutchinson, and Bill unfolded his paper and showed it. It was blank.

“It’s Tessie,” Mr. Summers said, and his voice was hushed. “Show us her paper. Bill.”

Bill Hutchinson went over to his wife and forced the slip of paper out of her hand. It had a black spot on it, the black spot Mr. Summers had made the night before with the heavy pencil in the coal-company office. Bill Hutchinson held it up, and there was a stir in the crowd.

“All right, folks.” Mr. Summers said. “Let’s finish quickly.”

Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones. The pile of stones the boys had made earlier was ready; there were stones on the ground with the blowing scraps of paper that had come out of the box. Mrs. Delacroix selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands and turned to Mrs. Dunbar. "Come on," she said. "Hurry up."

Mrs. Dunbar had small stones in both hands, and she said, gasping for breath. "I can't run at all. You'll have to go ahead and I'll catch up with you."

The children had stones already. And someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles.

Tessie Hutchinson was in the center of a cleared space by now, and she held her hands out desperately as the villagers moved in on her. "It isn't fair," she said. A stone hit her on the side of the head.

Old Man Warner was saying, "Come on, come on, everyone." Steve Adams was in the front of the crowd of villagers, with Mrs. Graves beside him.

"It isn't fair, it isn't right," Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her. ❀



THE DEVIL IN AMERICA

BY KAI ASHANTE WILSON

1955

EMMETT TILL, SURE, I REMEMBER. Your great grandfather, sitting at the table with the paper spread out, looked up and said something to Grandma. She looked over my way and made me leave the room: Emmett Till. In high school I had a friend everybody called Underdog. One afternoon—1967?—Underdog was standing on some corner and the police came round and beat him with nightsticks. No reason. Underdog thought he might get some respect if he joined up for Vietnam, but a sergeant in basic training was calling him everything but his name—nigger this, nigger that—and Underdog went and complained. Got thrown in the brig, so he ended up going to Vietnam with just a couple weeks' training. Soon after he came home in a body bag. In

Miami a bunch of white cops beat to death a man named Arthur McDuffie with heavy flashlights. You were six or seven: so, 1979. The cops banged up his motorcycle trying to make killing him look like a crash. Acquitted, of course. Then Amadou Diallo, 1999; Sean Bell, 2006. You must know more about all the New York murders than I do. Trayvon, this year. Every year it's one we hear about and God knows how many just the family mourns.

—Dad

1877 AUGUST 23

“Tis all right if I take a candle, Ma’am?” Easter said. Her mother bent over at the black iron stove, and lifted another smoking hot pan of cornbread from the oven. Ma’am just hummed—meaning, Go ’head. Easter came wide around her mother, wide around the sizzling skillet, and with the ramrod of Brother’s old rifle hooked up the front left burner. She left the ramrod behind the stove, plucked the candle from the fumbling, strengthless grip of her ruind hand, and dipped it wick-first into flame. Through the good glass window in the wall behind the stove, the night was dark. It was soot and shadows. Even the many-colored chilis and bright little pumpkins in Ma’am’s back garden couldn’t be made out.

A full supper plate in her good hand, lit candle in the other, Easter had a time getting the front door open, then out on the porch, and shutting back the door without dropping any food. Then, anyhow, the swinging of the door made the

candle flame dance fearfully low, just as wind gusted up too, so her light flickered way down . . . and went out.

“Shoot!” Easter didn’t say the curse word aloud. She mouthed it. “Light it back for me, angels,” Easter whispered. “Please?” The wick flared bright again.

No moon, no stars—the night sky was clouded over. Easter hoped it wasn’t trying to storm, with the church picnic tomorrow.

She crossed the yard to the edge of the woods where Brother waited. A big old dog, he crouched down, leapt up, down and up again, barking excitedly, just as though he were some little puppy dog.

“Well, hold your horses,” Easter said. “I’m coming!” She met him at the yard’s end and dumped the full plate over, all her supper falling to the ground. Brother’s head went right down, tail just a-wagging. “Careful, Brother,” Easter said. “You watch them chicken bones.” Then, hearing the crack of bones, she knelt and snatched ragged shards right out of the huge dog’s mouth. Brother whined and licked her hand—and dropped his head right back to buttered mashed yams.

Easter visited with him a while, telling her new secrets, her latest sins, and when he’d sniffed out the last morsels of supper Brother listened to her with what anybody would have agreed was deep love, full attention. “Well, let me get on,” she said at last, and sighed. “Got to check on the Devil now.” She’d left it til late, inside all evening with Ma’am, fixing their share of the big supper at church tomorrow. Brother whined when she stood up to leave.

Up the yard to the henhouse. Easter unlatched the heavy

door and looked them over—chickens, on floor and shelf, huddling quietly in thick straw, and all asleep except for Sadie. Eldest and biggest, that one turned just her head and looked over Easter's way. Only reflected candlelight, of course, but Sadie's beady eyes looked so ancient and so crafty, blazing like embers. Easter backed on out, latched the coop up securely again, and made the trip around the henhouse, stooping and stooping and stooping, to check for gaps in the boards. Weasel holes, fox doors.

There weren't any. And the world would go on exactly as long as Easter kept up this nightly vigil.

Ma'am stood on the porch when Easter came back up to the house. "I don't appreciate my good suppers thrown in the dirt. You hear me, girl?" Ma'am put a hand on Easter's back, guiding her indoors. "That ole cotton-picking dog could just as well take hisself out to the deep woods and hunt." Ma'am took another tone altogether when she meant every word, and then she didn't stroke Easter's head, or gently brush her cheek with a knuckle. This was only complaining out of habit. Easter took only one tone with her mother. Meek.

"Yes, Ma'am," she said, and ducked her head in respect. Easter didn't think herself too womanish or grown to be slapped silly.

"Help me get this up on the table," Ma'am said—the deepest bucket, and brimful of water and greens. Ma'am was big and strong enough to have lifted ten such buckets. It was friendly, though, sharing the little jobs. At one side of the bucket, Easter bent over and worked her good hand under the bottom, the other just mostly ached now, and the cut

thickly scabbed over. She just sort of pressed it to the bucket's side, in support.

Easter and her mother set the bucket on the table.

Past time to see about the morning milk. Easter went back to the cellar and found the cream risen, though the tin felt a tad cool to her. The butter would come slow. "Pretty please, angels?" she whispered. "Could you help me out a little bit?" They could. They did. The milk tin warmed ever so slightly. Just right. Easter dipped the cream out and carried the churn back to the kitchen.

Ma'am had no wrinkles except at the corners of the eyes. Her back was unbowed, her arms and legs still mighty. But she was old now, wasn't she? Well nigh sixty, and maybe past it. But still with that upright back, such quick hands. Pretty was best said of the young—Soubrette Toussaint was very pretty, for instance—so what was the right word for Ma'am's severe cheekbones, sharp almond-shaped eyes, and pinched fullness of mouth? Working the churn, Easter felt the cream foam and then thicken, pudding-like. Any other such marriage, and you'd surely hear folks gossiping over the dead wrongness of it—the wife twenty-some years older than a mighty good-looking husband. What in the world, I ask you, is that old lady doing with a handsome young man like that? But any two eyes could see the answer here. Not pretty as she must once have been, with that first husband, whoever he'd been, dead and buried back east. And not pretty as when she'd had those first babies, all gone now too. But age hadn't only taken from Ma'am, it had given too. Some rare gift, and so much of it that Pa had to be pick of the litter—kindest,

most handsome man in the world—just to stack up. Easter poured off the buttermilk into a jar for Pa, who liked that especially. Ma'am might be a challenge to love sometimes, but respect came easy.

"I told him, Easter." Ma'am wiped forefinger and thumb down each dandelion leaf, cleaning off grit and bugs, and then lay it aside in a basket. "Same as I told you. Don't mess with it. Didn't I say, girl?"

"Yes, Ma'am." Easter scooped the clumps of butter into the bowl.

Ma'am spun shouting from her work. "That's right I did! And I pray to God you listen, too. That fool out there didn't, but Good Lord knows I get on my knees and pray every night you got some little bit of sense in your head. Because, Easter, I ain't got no more children—you my last one!" Ma'am turned back and gripped the edge of the table.

Ma'am wanted no comfort, no acknowledgement of her pain at such moments—just let her be. Easter huddled in her chair, paddling the salt evenly through the butter, working all the water out. She worked with far more focus than the job truly needed.

Then, above the night's frog croak and bug chatter, they heard Brother bark in front of the house, and heard Pa speak, his very voice. Wife and daughter both gave a happy little jump, looking together at the door in anticipation. Pa'd been three days over in Greenville selling the cigars. Ma'am snapped her fingers.

"Get the jug out the cellar," she said. "You know just getting in your Pa wants him a little tot of cider. Them white folks."

As if Ma'am wouldn't have a whole big mug her ownself.

"Yes, Ma'am." Easter fetched out the jug.

Pa opened the door, crossed the kitchen—touching Easter's head in passing, he smelt of wood smoke—and came to stand behind Ma'am. His hands cupped her breasts through her apron, her dress, and he kissed the back of her neck. She gasped aloud. "Wilbur! The baby . . . !" That's what they still called Easter, "the baby." Nobody had noticed she'd gotten tall, twelve years old now.

Pa whispered secrets in Ma'am's ear. He was a father who loved his daughter, but he was a husband first and foremost. I'm a terrible thirsty man, Pa had said once, and your mama is my only cool glass of water in this world. Ma'am turned and embraced him. "I know it, sweetheart," she said. "I know." Easter covered up the butter. She took over washing the greens while her parents whispered, intent only on each other. Matched for height, and Ma'am a little on the stout side, Pa on the slim, so they were about the same thickness too. The perfect fit of them made Easter feel a sharp pang, mostly happiness. Just where you could hear, Pa said, "And you know it ain't no coloreds round here but us living in Rosetree . . ."

Wrapped in blankets up in the loft, right over their bed, of course she heard things at night, on Sundays usually, when nobody was so tired.

An effortful noise from Pa, as if he were laboring some big rock heave-by-heave over to the edge of the tobacco field, and then before the quiet, sounding sort of worried, as if Pa were afraid Ma'am might accidentally touch the blazing hot

iron of the fired-up stove, Pa would say, "Hazel!"

". . . so then Miss Anne claimed she seen some nigger run off from there, and next thing she knew—fire! Just everywhere. About the whole west side of Greenville, looked to me, burnt down. Oh yeah, and in the morning here come Miss Anne's husband talkmbout, 'Know what else, y'all? That nigger my wife seen last night—matterfact, he violated her.' Well, darling, here's what I wanna know . . ."

Ma'am would kind of sigh throughout, and from one point on keep saying—not loud—"Like that . . ." However much their bed creaked, Ma'am and Pa were pretty quiet when Easter was home. Probably they weren't, though, these nights when Pa came back from Greenville. That was why they sent her over the Toussaints'.

". . . Where this 'violated' come from all of a sudden? So last night Miss Anne said she maybe might of seen some nigger run off, and this morning that nigger jumped her show 'nough? And then it wasn't just the one nigger no more. No. It was two or three of 'em, maybe about five. Ten niggers—at least. Now Lord knows I ain't no lawyer, baby, I ain't, but it seem to me a fishy story done changed up even fishier . . ."

Ma'am and Pa took so much comfort in each other, and just plain liked each other. Easter was glad to see it. But she was old enough to wonder, a little worried and a little sad, who was ever going to love her in the way Ma'am and Pa loved each other.

"What you still doing here!" Ma'am looked up suddenly from her embrace. "Girl, you should of been gone to Soubrette's. Go. And take your best dress and good Sunday

shoes too. Tell Mrs. Toussaint I'll see her early out front of the church tomorrow. You hear me, Easter?"

"Yes, Ma'am," she said. And with shoes and neatly folded clothes, Easter hurried out into the dark wide-open night, the racket of crickets.

On the shadowed track through the woods, she called to Brother but he wouldn't come out of the trees, though Easter could hear him pacing her through the underbrush. Always out there in the dark. Brother wanted to keep watch whenever Easter went out at night, but he got shy sometimes too. Lonesome and blue.

And this whole thing started over there, in old Africa land, where in olden days a certain kind of big yellow dog (you know the kind I'm talking about) used to run around. Now those dogs ain't nowhere in the world, except for . . . Anyway, the prince of the dogs was a sorcerer—about the biggest and best there was in the world. One day he says to himself, Let me get up off four feet for a while, and walk around on just two, so I can see what all these folk called 'people' are doing over in that town. So the prince quit being his doggy self and got right up walking like anybody. While the prince was coming over to the peoples' town, he saw a pretty young girl washing clothes at the river. Now if he'd still been his doggy self, the prince probably would of just ate that girl up, but since he was a man now, the prince seen right off what a pretty young thing she was. So he walks over and says, Hey, gal. You want to lay down right here by the river in the soft grass with me? Well—and anybody would—the girl felt some kind of way, a strange man come talking to her so fresh all of a sudden. The

girl says, Man, don't you see my hair braided up all nice like a married lady? (Because that's how they did over in Africa land. The married ladies, the girls still at home, plaited their hair up different.) So the dog prince said, Oh, I'm sorry. I come from a long way off, so I didn't know what your hair meant. And he didn't, either, cause dogs don't braid their hair like people do. Hmph, says the gal, all the while sort of taking a real good look over him. As a matter of fact, the dog prince made a mighty fine-looking young man, and the girl's mama and papa had married her off to just about the oldest, most dried-up, and granddaddy-looking fellow you ever saw. That old man was rich, sure, but he really couldn't do nothing in the married way for a young gal like that, who wasn't twenty years old yet. So, the gal says, Hmph, where you come from anyways? What you got to say for yourself? And it must of been pretty good too, whatever the prince had to say for hisself, because, come nine months later, that gal was mama to your great great—twenty greats—grandmama, first one of us with the old Africa magic.

It wasn't but a hop, skip, and jump through the woods into Rosetree proper. Surrounding the town green were the church, Mrs. Toussaint's general store, and the dozen best houses, all two stories, with overgrown rosebushes in front. At the other side of the town green, Easter could see Soubrette sitting out on her front porch with a lamp, looking fretfully out into night.

It felt nice knowing somebody in this world would sit up for her, wondering where she was, was everything all right.

In her wretched accent, Easter called, "J'arrive!" from the

middle of the green.

Soubrette leapt up. “Easter?” She peered into the blind dark. “I can’t see a thing! Where are you, Easter?”

Curious that she could see so well, cutting across the grass toward the general store. Easter had told the angels not to without her asking, told them many times, but still she often found herself seeing with cat’s eyes, hearing with dog’s ears, when the angels took a notion. The problem being, folks noticed if you were all the time seeing and hearing what you shouldn’t. But maybe there was no need to go blaming the angels. With no lamp or candle, your eyes naturally opened up something amazing, while lights could leave you stone-blind out past your bright spot.

They screamed, embraced, laughed. Anybody would have said three years, not days, since they’d last seen each other. “Ah, viens ici, toi!” said Soubrette, gently taking Easter’s ruined hand to lead her indoors.

Knees drawn up on the bed, Easter hugged her legs tightly. She set her face and bit her lip, but tears came anyway. They always did. Soubrette sighed and closed the book in her lap. Very softly Easter murmured, “I like Rebecca most.”

“Yes!” Soubrette abruptly leaned forward and tapped Easter’s shin. “Rowena is nice too—she is!—but I don’t even care about old Ivanhoe. It just isn’t fair about poor Rebecca . . .”

“He really don’t deserve either one of ’em,” Easter said, forgetting her tears in the pleasure of agreement. “That part when Ivanhoe up and changed his mind all of a sudden about Rebecca—do you remember that part? ‘. . . an inferior race . .

’ No, I didn’t care for him after that.”

“Oh yes, Easter, I remember!” Soubrette flipped the book open and paged back through it. “At first he sees Rebecca’s so beautiful, and he likes her, but then all his niceness is . . . exchanged at once for a manner cold, composed, and collected, and fraught with no deeper feeling than that which expressed a grateful sense of courtesy received from an unexpected quarter, and from one of an inferior race . . . ? Ivanhoe’s just hateful!” Soubrette lay a hand on Easter’s foot. “Rowena and Rebecca would have been better off without him!”

Soubrette touched you when she made her points, and she made them in the most hot-blooded way. Easter enjoyed such certainty and fire, but it made her feel bashful too. “You ain’t taking it too far, Soubrette?” she asked softly. “Who would they love without Ivanhoe? It wouldn’t be nobody to, well, kiss.”

It made something happen in the room, that word kiss. Did the warm night heat up hotter, and the air buzz almost like yellow jackets in a log? One and one made two, so right there you’d seem to have a sufficiency for a kiss, with no lack of anything, anyone. From head to toe Easter knew right where she was, lightly sweating in a thin summer shift on this August night, and she knew right where Soubrette was too, so close that—

“Girls!” Mrs. Toussaint bumped the door open with her hip. “The iron’s good and hot on the stove now, so . . .”

Easter and Soubrette gave an awful start. Ivanhoe fell to the floor.

“ . . . Why don't you come downstairs with your dresses . . . ?” Mrs. Toussaint's words trailed away. She glanced back and forth between the girls while the hot thing still sizzled in the air, delicious and wrong. Whatever it was seemed entirely perceptible to Mrs. Toussaint. She said to her daughter, “Chérie, j'espère que tu te comportes bien. Tu es une femme de quatorze ans maintenant. Ton amie n'a que dix ans; elle est une toute jeune fille!”

She spoke these musical words softly and with mildness—nevertheless they struck Soubrette like a slap. The girl cast her gaze down, eyes shining with abrupt tears. High yellow, Soubrette's cheeks and neck darkened with rosy duskiness.

“Je me comporte toujours bien, Maman,” she whispered, her lips trembling as if about to weep.

Mrs. Toussaint paused a moment longer, and said, “Well, fetch down your dresses, girls. Bedtime soon.” She went out, closing the door behind her.

The tears did spill over now. Easter leaned forward suddenly, kissed Soubrette's cheek, and said, “J'ai douze ans.”

Soubrette giggled. She wiped her eyes.

Much later, Easter sat up, looking around. Brother had barked, growling savagely, and woken her up. But seeing Soubrette asleep beside her, Easter knew that couldn't be so. And no strange sounds came to her ears from the night outside, only wind in the leaves, a whippoorwill. Brother never came into the middle of town anyway, not ever. The lamp Mrs. Toussaint had left burning in the hallway lit the gap under the bedroom door with orange glow. Easter's fast heart slowed as she watched her friend breathing easily.

Soubrette never snored, never tossed and turned, never slept with her mouth gaping open. Black on the white pillow, her long hair spilled loose and curly.

“Angels?” Easter whispered. “Can you make my hair like Soubrette’s?” This time the angels whispered, Give us the licklest taste of her blood, and all Sunday long tomorrow your hair will be so nice. See that hatpin? Just stick Soubrette in the hand with it, and not even too deep. Prettiest curls anybody ever saw. Easter only sighed. It was out of the question, of course. The angels sometimes asked for the most shocking crimes as if they were nothing at all. “Never mind,” she said, and lay down to sleep.

While true that such profoundly sustaining traditions, hidden under the guise of the imposed religion, managed to survive centuries of slavery and subjugation, we should not therefore suppose that ancient African beliefs suffered no sea changes. Of course they did. ‘The Devil’ in Africa had been capricious, a trickster, and if cruel, only inasmuch as bored young children, amoral and at loose ends, may be cruel: seeking merely to provoke an interesting event at any cost, to cause some disruption of the tedious status quo. For the Devil in America, however, malice itself was the end, and temptation a means only to destroy. Here, the Devil would pursue the righteous and the wicked, alike and implacably, to their everlasting doom...

—White Devils/Black Devils, Luisa Valéria da Silva y Rodríguez

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The end begins after Providence loses all wiggle room, and the outcome becomes hopeless and fixed. That moment had already happened, Ma'am would have said. It had happened long before either one of them were born. Ma'am would have assured Easter that the end began way back in slavery times, and far across the ocean, when that great-grandfather got snatched from his home and the old wisdom was lost.

Easter knew better, though. A chance for grace and new wisdom had always persisted, and doom never been assured . . . right up until, six years old, Easter did what she did one August day out in the tobacco fields.

On that morning of bright skies, Pa headed out to pick more leaves and Easter wanted to come along. He said, Let's ask your mama.

"But he said, Wilbur." Ma'am looked surprised. "He told us, You ain't to take the baby out there, no time, no way."

Pa hefted Easter up in his arms, and kissed her cheek, saying, "Well, it's going on three years now since he ain't been here to say Bet not or say Yep, go 'head. So I wonder how long we suppose to go on doing everything just the way he said, way back when. Forever? And the baby wants to go . . ." Pa set her down and she grabbed a handful of his pants leg and leaned against him. "But, darling, if you say not to, then we won't. Just that simple."

Most men hardly paid their wives much mind at all, but Pa would listen to any little thing Ma'am said. She, though, hated to tell a man what he could and couldn't do—some woman

just snapping her fingers, and the man running lickety-split here and there. Ma'am said that wasn't right. So she crossed her arms and hugged herself, frowning unhappily. "Well ..." Ma'am said. "Can you just wait a hot minute there with the mule, Wilbur? Let me say something to the baby." Ma'am unfolded her arms and reached out a hand. "Come here, girl."

Easter came up the porch steps and took the hand—swept along in Ma'am's powerful grip, through the open door, into the house. "Set." Ma'am pointed to a chair. Easter climbed and sat down. Ma'am knelt on the floor. They were eye-to-eye. She grasped Easter's chin and pulled her close. "Tell me, Easter—what you do, if some lady in a red silk dress come trying to talk to you?"

"I shake my head no, Ma'am, and turn my back on her. Then the lady have to go away."

"That's right! But what if that strange lady in the red dress say, Want me to open up St. Peter's door, and show you heaven? What if she say to you, See them birds flying there? Do me one itsy bitsy favor, and you could be in the sky flying too. What then, Easter? Tell me what you do."

"Same thing, Ma'am." She knew her mother wasn't angry with her, but Ma'am's hot glare—the hard grip on her chin—made tears prick Easter's eyes. "I turn my back, Ma'am. She have to go, if I just turn my back away."

"Yes! And will you promise, Easter? Christ is your Savior, will you swear to turn your back, if that lady in the pretty red dress come talking to you?"

Easter swore up and down, and she meant every word too. Ma'am let her go back out to her father, and he set her up on

the mule. They went round the house and down the other way, on the trail through woods behind Ma'am's back garden that led to the tobacco fields. Pa answered every question Easter asked about the work he had to do there.

That woman in the red dress was a sneaky liar. She was 'that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world . . .' Warned by Ma'am, Easter guarded night and day against a glimpse of any such person. In her whole life, though, Easter never did see that lady dressed all in red silk. Easter knew nothing about her. She only knew about the angels.

She didn't see them, either, just felt touches like feathers in the air—two or three angels, rarely more—or heard sounds like birds taking off, a flutter of wings. The angels spoke to her, once in a while, in whispering soft harmony. They never said anything bad, just helpful little things. Watch out, Easter—gon' rain cats and dogs once that cloud there starts looking purplish. Your folks sure would appreciate a little while by theyself in the house. Why not be nice? Ma'am's worried sick about Pa over in Greenville, with those white folks, so you'd do best to keep your voice down, and tiptoe extra quiet, else you 'bout to get slapped into tomorrow. And, Easter, don't tell nobody, all right? Let's us just be secret friends.

All right, Easter said. The angels were nice, anyway, and it felt good keeping them to herself, having a secret. No need to tell anybody. Or just Brother, when he came out the woods to play with her in the front yard, or when Ma'am let her go walking in the deep woods with him. But in those days Brother used to wander far and wide, and was gone from

home far more often than he was around.

The tobacco fields were full of angels.

Ever run, some time, straight through a flock of grounded birds, and ten thousand wings just rushed up flapping into the air all around you? In the tobacco fields it was like that. And every angel there stayed busy, so the tobacco leaves grew huge and whole, untroubled by flea-beetles or cutworms, weeds or weather. But the angels didn't do all the work.

Pa and a friend of his from St. Louis days, Señor, dug up the whole south field every spring, mounding up little knee-high hills all over it. Then they had to transplant each and every little tabacky plant from the flat dirt in the north field to a hill down south. It was back-breaking work, all May long, from sunup to sundown. Afterwards, Pa and Señor had only small jobs, until now—time to cut the leaves, hang and cure them in the barn. Señor had taught Pa everything there was to know about choosing which leaf when, and how to roll the excellent criollito tabacky into the world's best cigars. What they got out of one field sold plenty well enough to white folks over in Greenville to keep two families in good clothes, ample food, and some comforts.

A grandfather oak tree grew between the fields, south and north. Pa agreed with Easter. "That big ole thing is in the way, ain't it? But your brother always used to say, Don't you never, never cut down that tree, Wilbur. And it do make a nice shady spot to rest, anyway. Why don't you go set over there for a while, baby child?"

Easter knew Pa thought she must be worn out and sorry she'd come, just watching him stoop for leaves, whack them

off the plant with his knife, and lay them out in the sun. But Easter loved watching him work, loved to follow and listen to him wisely going on about why this, why that.

Pa, though, put a hand on her back and kind of scooped her on her way over toward the tree, so Easter went. Pa and Señor began to chant some work song in Spanish. *Iyá oñío oñí abbé . . .*

Once in the oak tree's deep shade, there was a fascinating discovery round the north side of the big trunk. Not to see, or to touch—or know in any way Easter had a name for—but she could feel the exact shape of what hovered in the air. And this whirligig thing'um, right here, was exactly what kept all the angels hereabouts leashed, year after year, to chase away pests, bring up water from deep underground when too little rain fell, or dry the extra drops in thin air when it rained too much. And she could tell somebody had jiggered this thing together who hardly knew what they were doing. It wasn't but a blown breath or rough touch from being knocked down.

Seeing how rickety the little angel-engine was, Easter wondered if she couldn't do better. Pa and Señor did work awful hard every May shoveling dirt to make those hills, and now in August they had to come every day to cut whichever leaves had grown big enough. Seemed like the angels could just do everything . . .

"You all right over there, baby girl?" Pa called. Dripping sweat in the glare, he wiped a sleeve across his brow. "Need me to take you back to the house?"

"I'm all right," Easter shouted back. "I want to stay, Pa!" She waved, and he stooped down again, cutting leaves. See

there? Working so hard! She could help if she just knocked this rickety old thing down, and put it back together better. Right on the point of doing so, she got one sharp pinch from her conscience.

Every time Easter got ready to do something bad there was a moment beforehand when a little bitty voice—one lonely angel, maybe—would whisper to her. Aw, Easter. You know good and well you shouldn't. Nearly always she listened to this voice. After today and much too late, she always would.

But sometimes you just do bad, anyhow.

Easter picked a scab off her knee and one fat drop welled from the pale tender scar underneath. She dabbed a finger in it, and touched the bloody tip to the ground.

The angel-engine fell to pieces. Screaming and wild, the angels scattered every which way. Easter called and begged, but she could no more get the angels back in order than she could have grabbed hold of a mighty river's gush.

And the tobacco field . . . !

Ice frosted the ground, the leaves, the plants, and then melted under sun beating down hotter than summer's worst. The blazing blue sky went cloudy and dark, and boiling low clouds spat frozen pellets, some so big they drew blood and raised knots. Millions of little noises, little motions, each by itself too small to see or hear, clumped into one thick sound like God's two hands rubbing together, and just as gusts of wind stroke the green forest top, making the leaves of the trees all flip and tremble, there was a unified rippling from one end of the tobacco field to the other. Not caused by hands, though, nor by the wind—by busy worms, a billion

hungry worms. Grayish, from maggot-size to stubby snakes, these worms ate the tobacco leaves with savage appetite. While the worms feasted, dusty cloud after dusty cloud of moths fluttered up from the disappearing leaves, all hail-torn and frost-blackened, half and then wholly eaten.

In the twinkling of an eye, the lush north field was stripped bare. Nothing was left but naked leaf veins poking spinily from upright woody stems—not a shred of green leaf anywhere. But one year's crop was nothing to the angels' hunger. They were owed much more for so many years' hard labor. Amidst the starving angels, Pa and Señor stood dazed in the sudden wasteland of their tobacco field. All the sweet living blood of either this man or the other would just about top off the angels' thirsty cup.

Easter screamed. She called for some help to come—any help at all.

And help did come. A second of time split in half and someone came walking up the break.

Like the way you and Soubrette work on all that book learning together. Same as that. You gotta know your letters, gotta know your numbers, for some things, or you just can't rightly take part. Say, for instance, you had some rich colored man, and say this fellow was very rich indeed. But let's say he didn't know his numbers at all. Couldn't even count his own fingers up to five. Now, he ain't a bad man, Easter, and he ain't stupid either, really. It's just that nobody ever taught numbering to him. So, one day this rich man takes a notion to head over to the bank, and put his money into markets and bonds, and what have you. Now let me ask you, Easter. What

you think gon' happen to this colored man's big ole stack of money, once he walks up in that white man's bank, and gets to talking with the grinning fellow behind the counter? You tell me. I wanna hear what you say.

Ma'am. The white man's gonna see that colored man can't count, Ma'am, and cheat him out of all his money.

That's right he is, Easter! And I promise you it ain't no other outcome! Walk up in that bank just as rich as you please—but you gon' walk out with no shoes, and owing the shirt on your back! Old Africa magic's the same way, but worse, Easter, cause it ain't money we got, me and you—all my babies had—and my own mama, and the grandfather they brung over on the slave ship. It's life. It's life and death, not money. Not play-stuff. But, listen here—we don't know our numbers no more, Easter. See what I'm saying? That old-time wisdom from over there, what we used to know in the Africa land, is all gone now. And, Easter, you just can't walk up into the spirits' bank not knowing your numbers. You rich, girl. You got gold in your pockets, and I know it's burning a hole. I know cause it burnt me, it burnt your brother. But I pray you listen to me, baby child, when I say—you walk up in that bank, they gon' take a heap whole lot more than just your money.

Nothing moved. Pa and Señor stood frozen, the angels hovering just before the pounce. Birds in the sky hung there, mid-wingbeat, and even a blade of grass in the breath of the wind leaned motionless, without shivering. Nothing moved. Or just one thing did—a man some long way off, come walking this way toward Easter. He was miles off, or much

farther than that, but every step of his approach crossed a strange distance. He bestrode the stillness of the world and stood before her in no time.

In the kindest voice, he said, “You need some help, baby child?”

Trembling, Easter nodded her head.

He sat right down. “Let us just set here for a while, then”—the man patted the ground beside him—“and make us a deal.”

He was a white man tanned reddish from too much sun, or he could’ve had something in him maybe—been mixed up with colored or Indian. Hair would’ve told the story, but that hid under the gray kepi of a Johnny Reb. He wore that whole uniform in fact, a filthy kerchief of Old Dixie tied around his neck.

Easter sat. “Can you help my Pa and Señor, Mister? The angels about to eat ’em up!”

“Oh, don’t you worry none about that!” the man cried, warmly reassuring. “I can help you, Easter, I most certainly can. But”—he turned up a long forefinger, in gentle warning—“not for free.”

Easter opened her mouth.

“Ot!” The man interrupted, waving the finger. “Easter, Easter, Easter . . .” He shook his head sadly. “Now why you wanna hurt my feelings and say you ain’t got no money? Girl, you know I don’t want no trifling little money. You know just what I want.”

Easter closed her mouth. He wanted blood. He wanted life. And not a little drop or two, either—or the life of some chicken, mule, or cow. She glanced at the field of hovering

angels. They were owed the precious life of one man, woman, or child. How much would he want to stop them?

The man held up two fingers. “That’s all. And you get to pick the two. It don’t have to be your Pa and Señor at all. It could be any old body.” He waved a hand outwards to the world at large. “Couple folk you ain’t even met, Easter, somewhere far away. That’d be just fine with me.”

Easter hardly fixed her mouth to answer before that still small voice spoke up. You can’t do that. Everybody is somebody’s friend, somebody’s Pa, somebody’s baby. It’d be plain dead wrong, Easter. This voice never said one word she didn’t already know, and never said anything but the God’s honest truth. No matter what, Easter wasn’t going against it, ever again.

The man made a sour little face to himself. “Tell you what then,” he said. “Here’s what we’ll do. Right now, today, I’ll call off the angels, how about that? And then you can pay me what you owe by-and-by. Do you know what the word ‘currency’ means, Easter?”

Easter shook her head.

“It means the way you pay. Now, the amount, which is the worth of two lives, stays exactly the same. But you don’t have to pay in blood, in life, if you just change the currency, see? There’s a lot you don’t know right now, Easter, but with some time, you might could learn something useful. So let me help out Señor and your Pa today, and then me and you, we’ll settle up later on after while. Now when you wanna do the settling up?”

Mostly, Easter had understood the word “later”—a

sweet word! She really wouldn't have minded some advice concerning the rest of what he'd said, but the little voice inside couldn't tell her things she didn't already know. Easter was six years old, and double that would make twelve. Surely that was an eternal postponement, near about. So far away it could hardly be expected to arrive. "When I'm twelve," Easter said, feeling tricky and sly.

"All right," the man said. He nodded once, sharply, as folks do when the deal is hard but fair. "Let's shake on it."

Though she was just a little girl, and the man all grown up, they shook hands. And the angels mellowed in the field, becoming like those she'd always known, mild and toothless, needing permission even to sweep a dusty floor, much less eat a man alive.

"I'll be going now, Easter." The man waved toward the field, where time stood still. "They'll all wake up just as soon as I'm gone." He began to get up.

Easter grabbed the man's sleeve. "Wait!" She pointed at the ruins of two families' livelihood. "What about the tabacky? We need it to live on!"

The man looked where Easter gestured, the field with no green whatsoever, and thoughtfully pursed his lips. "Well, as you can see, this year's tabacky is all dead and gone now. 'Tain't nothing to do about that. But I reckon I could set the angels back where they was, so as next year—and on after that—the tabacky will grow up fine. Want me to do that, Easter?"

"Yes!"

The man cocked his head and widened his eyes, taking an

attitude of the greatest concern. “Now you show, Easter?” he asked. “Cause that’s extry on what you already owe.”

So cautioning was his tone, even a wildly desperate little girl must think twice. Easter chewed on her bottom lip. “How much extra?” she said at last.

The man’s expression went flat and mean. “Triple,” he said. “And triple that again, and might as well take that whole thing right there, and triple it about ten more times.” Now the very nice face came back. “But what you gon’ do, baby girl? You messed up your Pa’s tabacky field. Gotta fix it.” He shrugged in deepest sympathy. “You know how to do that?”

Easter had to shake her head.

“Want me to then?”

Easter hesitated . . . and then nodded. They shook on it.

The man snapped his fingers. From all directions came the sounds and sensations of angels flocking back to their old positions. The man stood and brushed off the seat of his gray wool trousers.

Easter looked up at him. “Who are you, Mister? Your name, I mean.”

The man smiled down. “How ’bout you just call me the banker,” he said. “Cause—whew, baby girl—you owe me a lot! Now I’ll be seeing you after while, you hear?” The man became his own shadow, and in just the way that a lamp turned up bright makes the darkness sharpen and flee, his shadow thinned out along the ground, raced away, and vanished.

“¡Madre de Díos!” Señor said, looking around at the field that had been all lush and full-grown a moment ago. He and

Pa awakened to a desolation, without one remnant of the season's crop. With winces, they felt at their heads, all cut and bruised from hailstones. Pa spun around then, to look at Easter, and she burst into tears.

These tears lasted a while.

Pa gathered her up in his arms and rushed her back to the house, but neither could Ma'am get any sense from Easter. After many hours she fell asleep, still crying, and woke after nightfall on her mother's lap. In darkness, Ma'am sat on the porch, rocking in her chair. When she felt Easter move, Ma'am helped her sit up, and said, "Won't you tell me what happened, baby child?" Easter tried to answer, but horror filled up her mouth and came pouring out as sobs. Just to speak about meeting that strange man was to cry with all the strength in her body. God's grace had surely kept her safe in that man's presence, but the power and the glory no longer stood between her and the revelation of something unspeakable. Even the memory was too terrible. Easter had a kind of fit and threw up what little was in her belly. Once more she wept to passing out.

Ma'am didn't ask again. She and Pa left the matter alone. A hard, scuffling year followed, without the money from the cigars, and only the very last few coins from the St. Louis gold to get them through.

He was the Devil, Easter decided, and swallowed the wild tears. She decided to grow wise in her way as Pa was about tobacco, though there was nobody to teach her. The Devil wouldn't face a fool next time.

1908

The mob went up and down Washington Street, breaking storefront windows, ransacking and setting all the black-owned business on fire. Bunch of white men shot up a barbershop and then dragged out the body of the owner, Scott Burton, to string up from a nearby tree. After that, they headed over to the residential neighborhood called the Badlands, where black folks paid high rent for slum housing. Some 12,000 whites gathered to watch the houses burn.

—Dad

1877 AUGUST 24

At the church, the Ladies' Missionary Society and their daughters began to gather early before service. The morning was gray and muggy, not hot at all, and the scent of roses, as sweet and spoiled as wine, soaked the soft air. "Easter, you go right ahead and cut some for the tables," Mrs. Toussaint said, while they walked over to the church. "Any that you see, still nice and red." She and Soubrette carried two big pans of jambalaya rouge. Easter carried the flower vases. Rosebushes taller than a man grew in front of every house on the Drive, and were all heavily blooming with summer's doomed roses. Yet Easter could only stop here and there and clip one with the scissors Mrs. Toussaint had given her, since most flowers had rotted deeply burgundy or darker, long past their prime.

With more effort than anybody could calculate, the earth

every year brought forth these flowers, and then every year all the roses died. “What’s wrong, Easter?” Soubrette said.

“Aw, it’s nothing.” Easter squeezed with her good hand, bracing the scissors against the heel of her ruint one. “I’m just thinking, is all.” She put the thorny clipping into a vase and made herself smile.

At the church there were trestles to set up, wide boards to lay across them, tablecloths, flower vases, an immense supper and many desserts to arrange sensibly. And my goodness, didn’t anybody remember a lifter for the pie . . . ? Girls—you run on back up to the house and bring both of mine . . .

She and Soubrette were laying out the serving spoons when Easter saw her parents coming round Rosetree Drive in the wagon. Back when the Mack family had first come to Rosetree, before Easter’s first birthday, all the white folks hadn’t moved to Greenville yet. And in those days Ma’am, Pa, and her brother still had “six fat pocketfuls” of the gold from St. Louis, so they could have bought one of the best houses on the Drive. But they’d decided to live in the backwoods outside of town instead (on account of the old Africa magic, as Easter well knew, although telling the story Ma’am and Pa never gave the reason). Pa unloaded a big pot from the wagon bed, and a stack of cloth-covered bread. Ma’am anxiously checked Easter over head to toe—shoes blacked and spotless, dress pressed and stiffly starched, and she laid her palm very lightly against Easter’s hair. “Not troubled at all, are you?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Don’t really know what’s got me so wrought up,” Ma’am said. “I just felt like I needed to get my eyes on you—see you.

But don't you look nice!" The worry left Ma'am's face. "And I declare, Octavia can do better by that head than your own mama." Ma'am fussed a little with the ribbon in Easter's hair, and then went to help Mrs. Toussaint, slicing the cakes.

Across the table, Mrs. Freeman said, "I do not care for the look of these clouds." And Mrs. Freeman frowned, shaking her head at the gray skies. "No, I surely don't."

Won't a drop fall today, the angels whispered in Easter's ear. Sure 'nough rain hard tomorrow, though.

Easter smiled over the table. "Oh, don't you worry, Mrs. Freeman." And with supernatural confidence, she said, "It ain't gon' rain today."

The way the heavysset matron looked across the table at Easter, well, anybody would call that scared, and Mrs. Freeman shifted further on down the table to where other ladies lifted pot lids to stir contents, and secured the bread baskets with linen napkins. It made Easter feel so bad. She felt like the last smudge of filth when everything else is just spic-and-span. Soubrette bumped her. "Take one of these, Easter, will you?" Three vases full of flowers were too many for one person to hold. "Maman said to put some water in them so the roses stay fresh." Together they went round the side of the church to the well.

When they'd come back, more and more men, old folks, and children were arriving. The Missionary ladies argued among themselves over who must miss service, and stay outside to watch over supper and shoo flies and what have you. Mrs. Turner said that she would, just to hush up the rest of you. Then somebody caught sight of the visiting preacher,

Wandering Bishop Fitzgerald James, come down the steps of the mayor's house with his cane.

1863

So that riot started off in protest of the draft, but it soon became a murder spree, with white men killing every black man, woman, or child who crossed their path. They burned down churches, businesses, the homes of abolitionists, and anywhere else black people were known to congregate, work, or live—even the Colored Orphan Asylum, for example, which was in Midtown back then. Altogether, at least a hundred people were killed by whites. And there's plenty more of these stories over the years, plenty more. Maybe you ought to consider Rosetree. That there's a story like you wouldn't believe.

—Dad

Eyes closed, sitting in the big fancy chair, Wandering Bishop Fitzgerald James seemed to sleep while Pastor Daniels welcomed him and led the church to say amen. So skinny, so old, he looked barely there. But his suit was very fine indeed, and when the Wandering Bishop got up to preach, his voice was huge.

He began in measured tones, though soon he was calling on the church in a musical chant, one hard breath out—huh!—punctuating each four beat line. At last the Wandering Bishop sang, his baritone rich and beautiful, and his sermon,

this one, a capstone experience of Easter's life. Men danced, women lifted up their hands and wept. Young girls cried out as loudly as their parents. When the plate came around, Pa put in a whole silver dollar, and then Ma'am nudged him, so he added another.

After the benediction, Ma'am and Pa joined the excited crowd going up front to shake hands with the visiting preacher. They'd known Wandering Bishop Fitzgerald James back before the war, when he sometimes came to Heavenly Home and preached for the coloreds—always a highlight! A white-haired mulatto, the Wandering Bishop moved with that insect-like stiffness peculiar to scrawny old men. Easter saw that his suit's plush lapels were velvet, his thin silk necktie cherry-red.

"Oh, I remember you—sure do. Such a pretty gal! Ole Marster MacDougal always used to say, Now, Fitzzy, you ain't to touch a hair on the head of that one, hear me, boy?" The Wandering Bishop wheezed and cackled. Then he peered around, as if for small children running underfoot. "But where them little yellin' babies at?" he said. "Had you a whole mess of 'em, as I recall."

Joy wrung from her face until Ma'am had only the weight of cares, and politeness, left. "A lovely sermon," she murmured. "Good day to you, Bishop." Pa's forearm came up under her trembling hand and Ma'am leaned on him. Easter followed her parents away, and they joined the spill of the congregation out onto the town green for supper. Pa had said that Easter just had a way with some onions, smoked hock and beans, and would she please fix up a big pot for him.

Hearing Pa say so had felt very fine, and Easter had answered, “Yes, sir, I sure will!” Even offered a feast, half the time Pa only wanted some beans and bread, anyhow. He put nothing else on his plate this Sunday too.

The clouds had stayed up high, behaving themselves, and in fact the creamy white overcast, cool and not too bright, was more comfortable than a raw blue sky would have been. Men had gotten the green all spruced up nice, the animals pent away, all the patties and whatnot cleaned up. They’d also finally gotten around to chopping down the old lightning-split, half-rotten crabapple tree in the middle of the green. A big axe still stuck upright from the pale and naked stump. Close by there, Soubrette, Mrs. Toussaint, and her longtime gentleman friend, Señor Tomás, had spread a couple blankets. They waved and called, Hey, Macks!, heavy plates of food in their laps. Easter followed Ma’am and Pa across the crowded green.

Pa made nice Frenchy noises at Miss and Mrs. Toussaint, and then took off lickety-split with Señor, gabbling in Spanish. Ma’am sat down next to Mrs. Toussaint and they leaned together, speaking softly. “What did you think of the Wandering Bishop?” Easter asked Soubrette. “Did you care for the sermon?”

“Well . . .” Soubrette dabbed a fingerful of biscuit in some gravy pooled on Easter’s plate. “He had a beautiful way of preaching, sure enough.” Soubrette looked right and left at the nearby grown-ups, then glanced meaningfully at Easter—who leaned in close enough for whispers.

Señor, the Macks, and the Toussaints always sat on the

same pew at church, had dinner back and forth at one another's houses, and generally just hung together as thick as thieves. Scandal clung to them both, one family said to work roots and who knew what all kind of devilment. And the other family . . . well, back east Mrs. Toussaint had done some kind of work in La Nouvelle-Orléans, and Easter knew only that rumor of it made the good church ladies purse their lips, take their husbands' elbows, and hustle the men right along—no lingering near Mrs. Toussaint. These were the times Easter felt the missing spot in the Mack family worst. There was no one to ask, "What's a 'hussy cat'?" The question, she felt, would hurt Soubrette, earn a slap from Ma'am, and make Pa say, shocked, "Aw, Easter—what you asking that for? Let it alone!" His disappointment was always somehow worse than a slap.

Brother, she knew, would have just told her.

The youngest Crombie boy, William, came walking by slowly, carrying his grandmother's plate while she clutched his shoulder. The old lady shrieked.

"Ha' mercy," cried Old Mrs. Crombie. "The sweet blessed Jesus!" She let go of her grandson's shoulder, to flap a hand in the air. "Ain't nothing but a witch over here! I ain't smelt devilry this bad since slavery days, at that root-working Bob Allow's dirty cabin. Them old Africa demons just nasty in the air. Who is it?" Old Mrs. Crombie peered around with cloudy blue eyes as if a witch's wickedness could be seen even by the sightless. "Somebody right here been chatting with Ole Crook Foot, and I know it like I know my own name. Who?"

Easter about peed herself she was that scared. Rude

and bossy, as she'd never spoken to the angels before, she whispered, "Y'all get," and the four or five hovering scattered away. Ma'am heard that whisper, though, and looked sharply at Easter.

"Who there, Willie?" Old Mrs. Crombie asked her grandson. "Is it them dad burn Macks?"

"Yes'm," said the boy. "But, Granny, don't you want your supper—?"

"Hush up!" Old Mrs. Crombie blindly pointed a finger at the Macks and Toussaints—catching Easter dead in its sights. "All Saturday long these Macks wanna dance with the Devil, and then come set up in the Lord's house on Sunday. Well, no! Might got the rest of you around here too scared to speak up, but me, I'ma go ahead say it. 'Be vigilant,' says the Book! 'For your adversary walks about like a roaring lion.' The King of Babylon! The Father of Lies!"

And what were they supposed to do? Knock an old lady down in front of everybody? Get up and run in their Sunday clothes, saying excuse me, excuse me, all the way to edge of the green, with the whole world sitting there watching? Better just to stay put, and hope like a sudden hard downpour this would all be over soon, no harm done. Ma'am grabbed Willie down beside her, said something to him, and sent the boy scurrying off for reinforcements.

"And Mister Light-Bright, with the red beard and spots on his face, always smirking—oh, I know just what that one was up to! Think folk around here don't know about St. Louis? Everybody know! The Devil walked abroad in St. Louis. And that bushwhacked Confederate gold, we all know just how

you got it. Them devil-hainted tabacky fields too—growing all outta season, like this some doggone Virginia. This ain't no Virginia out here! Well, where he been at, all these last years? Reaped the whirlwind is what I'm guessing. Got himself strick down by the Lord, huh? Bet he did."

Preacherly and loud, Old Mrs. Crombie had the families within earshot anything but indifferent to her testimony. But no matter the eyes, the ears, and all the grown folk, Easter didn't care to hear any evil said of Brother. She had to speak up. "Ma'am, my brother was good and kind. He was the last one to do anybody wrong."

"And here come the daughter now," shouted Old Mrs. Crombie. "Her brother blinded my eyes when I prayed the Holy Ghost against them. Well, let's see what this one gon' do! Strike me dumb? Ain't no matter—til then, I'ma be steady testifying. I'ma keep on telling the Lord's truth. Hallelujah!"

At last the son showed up. "Mama?" Mr. Crombie took firm hold of his mother's arm. "You just come along now, Mama. Will you let hungry folk eat they dinner in peace?" He shot them a look, very sorry and all-run-ragged. Ma'am pursed her lips in sympathy and waved a hand, it's all right.

"Don't worry none about us," Pa said. "Just see to your Ma." He spoke in his voice for hurt animals and children.

"Charleston?" Old Mrs. Crombie said timidly, the fire and brimstone all gone. "That you?"

"Oh, Mama. Charlie been dead. White folk hung him back in Richmond, remember? This Nathaniel."

Old Mrs. Crombie grunted as if taking a punch—denied the best child in favor of this least and unwanted. "Oh," she

said, "Nathaniel."

"Now y'all know she old," Mr. Crombie raised his voice for the benefit of all those thereabouts. "Don't go setting too much store by every little thing some old lady just half in her right mind wanna say."

Old Mrs. Crombie, muttering, let herself be led away.

Ma'am stood up, and smiled around at Pa, Mrs. Toussaint, Señor, and Soubrette. "Everybody excuse us, please? Me and Easter need to go have us a chat up at the church. No, Wilbur, that's all right." She waved Pa back down. "It ain't nothing but a little lady-business me and the baby need to see to, alone." When one Mack spoke with head tilted just so, kind of staring at the other one, carefully saying each word, whatever else was being said it really meant old Africa magic. Pa sat down. "And don't y'all wait, you hear? We might be a little while talking. Girl." Ma'am held out a hand.

Hand-in-hand, Ma'am led Easter across the crowded green, across the rutted dirt of the Drive, and up the church steps.

"Baby child," Ma'am said. When Easter looked up from her feet, Ma'am's eyes weren't angry at all but sad. "If I don't speak, my babies die," she said. "And If I do, they catch a fever from what they learn, take up with it, and die anyhow." As if Jesus hid in some corner, Ma'am looked all around the empty church. The pews and sanctuary upfront, the winter stove in the middle, wood storage closet in back. "Oh, Lord, is there any right way to do this?" She sat Easter at the pew across from the wood-burning stove, and sat herself. "Well, I'm just gon' to tell you, Easter, and tell everything I know. It's plain

to see that keeping you in the dark won't help nothing. This here's what my mama told me. When . . .”

. . . They grabbed her pa, over across in Africa land, he got bad hurt. It was smooth on top of his head right here [Ma'am lay a hand on the crown of her head, the left side] and all down the middle of the bare spot was knotted up, nasty skin where they'd cut him terrible. And there, right in the worst of the scar was a—notch? Something like a deep dent in the bone. You could take the tip of your finger, rest it on the skin there, and feel it give, feel no bone, just softness underneath

. . .

So, you knew him, Ma'am?

Oh, no. My mama had me old or older than I had you, child, so the grand folk was dead and gone quite a ways before I showed up. Never did meet him. Well . . . not to meet in the flesh, I never did. Not alive, like you mean it. But that's a whole 'nother story, and don't matter none for what I'm telling you now. The thing I want you to see is how the old knowing, from grand folk to young folk, got broke up into pieces, so in these late days I got nothing left to teach my baby girl. Nothing except, Let that old Africa magic alone. Now he, your great-grandpa, used to oftentimes get down at night like a dog and run around in the dark, and then come on back from the woods before morning, a man again. Might of brought my grandmama a rabbit, some little deer, or just anything he might catch in the night. Anybody sick or lame, or haunted by spirits, you know the ones I mean—folk sunk down and sad all the time, or just always angry, or the people plain out they right mind—he could reach out his hand and

brush the trouble off them, easy as I pick some lint out your hair. And a very fine-looking man he was too, tall as anything and just . . . sweet-natured, I guess you could say. Pleasant. So all the womenfolk loved him. But here's the thing of it. Because of that hurt on his head, Easter—because of that—he was simple. About the only English he ever spoke was Yeah, mars. And most of the time, things coming out his mouth in the old Africa talk didn't make no sense, either. But even hurt and simple and without his good sense, he still knew exactly what he was doing. Could get down a dog, and get right back up again being people, being a man, come morning—whenever he felt like it. We can't, Easter. Like I told you, like I told your brother. All us coming after, it's just the one way if we get down on four feet. Not never getting up no more. That's the way I lost three of mine! No. Hush. Set still there and leave me be a minute . . . So these little bits and pieces I'm telling you right now is every single thing I got from my mama. All she got out of your great grand and the old folk who knew him from back over there. Probably you want to know where the right roots at for this, for that, for everything. Which strong words to say? What's the best time of day, and proper season? Why the moon pull so funny, and the rain feel so sweet and mean some particular thing but you can't say what? Teach me, Ma'am, your heart must be saying. But I can't, Easter, cause it's gone. Gone for good. They drove us off the path into a wild night, and when morning came we were too turned around, too far from where we started, to ever find our way again. Do you think I was my mama's onliest? I wasn't, Easter. Far from it. Same as you ain't my only child.

I'm just the one that lived. The one that didn't mess around. One older sister, and one younger, I saw them both die awful, Easter. And all your sisters, and your brothers . . .

Easter stood looking through the open doors of the church on a view of cloudy sky and the town green. The creamy brightness of early afternoon had given way to ashen gray, and the supper crowd was thinning out though many still lingered. Arm dangling, Ma'am leaned over the back of the pew and watched the sky, allowing some peace and quiet for Easter to think.

And for her part Easter knew she'd learned plenty today from Ma'am about why and where and who, but that she herself certainly understood more about how. In fact Easter was sure of that. She didn't like having more knowledge than her mother. The thought frightened her. And yet, Ma'am had never faced down and tricked the Devil, had she?

"Oh, Easter . . ." Ma'am turned abruptly on the pew ". . . I clean forgot to tell you, and your Pa asked me to! A bear or mountain lion—something—was in the yard last night. The dog got scratched up pretty bad chasing it off. Durn dog wouldn't come close, and let me have a proper look-see . . ."

Sometimes Ma'am spoke so coldly of Brother that Easter couldn't stand it. Anxiously she said, "Is he hurt bad?"

"Well, not so bad he couldn't run and hide as good as always. But something took a mean swipe across the side of him, and them cuts weren't pretty to see. Must of been a bear. I can't see what else could of gave that dog, big as he is, such a hard time. The barking and racket, last night! You would of thought the Devil himself was out there in the yard! But,

Easter, set down here. Your mama wants you to set down right here with me now for a minute.”

Folks took this tone, so gently taking your hand, only when about to deliver the worst news. Easter tried to brace herself. Just now, she'd seen everybody out on the green. So who could have died?

“I know you loved that mean old bird,” Ma'am said. “Heaven knows why. But the thing in the yard last night broke open the coop, and got in with the chickens. The funniest thing . . .” Ma'am shook her head in wonder. “It didn't touch nah bird except Sadie.” Ma'am hugged Easter to her side, eyes full of concern. “But, Easter—I'm sorry—it tore old Sadie to pieces.”

Easter broke free of Ma'am's grasp, stood up, blind for one instant of panic. Then she sat down again, feeling nothing. She felt only tired. “You done told me this, that, and the other thing”—Easter hung her head sleepily, speaking in a dull voice—“but why didn't you never say the one thing I really wanted to know?”

“And what's that, baby child?”

Easter looked up, smiled, and said in a brand new voice, “Who slept on the pull-out cot?”

Her mother hunched over as if socked in the belly. “What?” Ma'am whispered. “What did you just ask me?”

Easter moved over on the pew close enough to lay a kiss in her mother's cheek or lips. This smile tasted richer than cake, and this confidence, just as rich. “Was it Brother Freddie slept on the pull-out cot, Hazel Mae? Was it him?” Easter said, and brushed Ma'am's cheek with gentle fingertips. “Or was it you?”

Or was it sometimes him, and sometimes you?”

At that touch, Ma'am had reared back so violently she'd lost her seat—fallen to the floor into the narrow gap between pews.

Feeling almighty, Easter leaned over her mother struggling dazed on the ground, wedged in narrow space. “. . . ooOOoo . . .” Easter whistled in nasty speculation. “Now here's what I really want to know. Was it ever nobody on that pull-out cot, Hazel Mae? Just nobody at all?”

Ma'am ignored her. She was reaching a hand down into the bosom of her dress, rooting around as if for a hidden dollar bill.

Easter extended middle and forefingers. She made a circle with thumb and index of the other hand, and then vigorously thrust the hoop up and down the upright fingers. “Two peckers and one cunt, Hazel Mae—did that ever happen?”

As soon as she saw the strands of old beads, though, yellow-brownish as ancient teeth, which Ma'am pulled up out of her dress, lifted off her neck, the wonderful sureness, this wonderful strength, left Easter. She'd have turned and fled in fact, but could hardly manage to scoot away on the pew, so feeble and stiff and cold her body felt. She spat out hot malice while she could, shouting.

“One, two, three, four!” Easter staggered up from the end of the pew as Ma'am gained her feet. “And we even tricked that clever Freddie of yours, too. Thinking he was so smart. Won't never do you any good swearing off the old Africa magic, Hazel Mae! Cause just you watch, we gon' get this last one too! All of yours—”

Ma'am slung the looped beads around Easter's neck, and falling to her knees she vomited up a vast supper with wrenching violence. When Easter opened her tightly clenched eyes, through blurry tears she saw, shiny and black in the middle of puddling pink mess, a snake thick as her own arm, much longer. She shrieked in terror, kicking backwards on the ground. Faster than anybody could run, the monstrous snake shot off down the aisle between the pews, and out into the gray brightness past the open church doors. Easter looked up and saw Ma'am standing just a few steps away. Her mother seemed more shaken than Easter had ever seen her. "Ma'am?" she said. "I'm scared. What's wrong? I don't feel good. What's this?" Easter began to lift off the strange beads looped so heavily round her neck.

At once Ma'am knelt on the ground beside her. "You just leave those right where they at," she said. "Your great grand brought these over with him. Don't you never take 'em off. Not even to wash up." Ma'am scooped hands under Easter's arms, helping her up to sit at the end of a pew. "Just wait here a minute. Let me go fill the wash bucket with water for this mess. You think on what all you got to tell me." Ma'am went out and came back. With a wet rag, she got down on her knees by the reeking puddle. "Well, go on, girl. Tell me. All this about Sadie. It's something do with the old Africa magic, ain't it?"

The last angel supped at Easter's hand, half-cut-off, and then lit away. Finally the blood began to gush forth and she swooned.*

*Weird, son. Definitely some disturbing writing in

this section. But overarching theme = a people bereft, no? Dispossessed even of cultural patrimony? Might consider then how to represent this in the narrative structure. Maybe just omit how Easter learns to trick the Devil into the chicken? Deny the reader that knowledge as Easter's been denied so much. If you do, leave a paragraph, or even just a sentence, literalizing the "Fragments of History." Terrible title, by the way; reconsider.

—Dad

People presently dwelling in the path of hurricanes, those who lack the recourse of flight, hunker behind fortified windows and hope that this one too shall pass them lightly over. So, for centuries, were the options of the blacks vis-à-vis white rage. Either flee, or pray that the worst might strike elsewhere: once roused, such terror and rapine as whites could wreak would not otherwise be checked. But of course those living in the storm zones know that the big one always does hit sooner or later. And much worse for the blacks of that era, one bad element or many bad influences—'the Devil,' as it were—might attract to an individual, a family, or even an entire town, the landfall of a veritable hurricane.

—White Devils/Black Devils, Luisa Valéria da Silva y Rodríguez

1877 AUGUST 24

There came to the ears of mother and daughter a great noise from out on the green, the people calling one to another in surprise, and then with many horses' hooves and crack upon crack of rifles, the thunder spoke, surely as the thunder had spoken before at Gettysburg or Shiloh. Calls of shock and wonder became now cries of terror and dying. They could hear those alive and afoot run away, and hear the horsemen who pursued them, with many smaller cracks of pistols. There! Shouted white men to each other, That one there running! Some only made grunts of effort, as when a woodsman embeds his axe head and heaves it out of the wood again—such grunts. Phrases or wordless sound, the whiteness could be heard in the voices, essential and unmistakable.

Easter couldn't understand this noise at first, except that she should be afraid. It seemed that from the thunder's first rumble Ma'am grasped the whole of it, as if she had lived through precisely this before and perhaps many times. Clapping a hand over Easter's mouth, Ma'am said, "Hush," and got them both up and climbing over the pews from this one to the one behind, keeping always out-of-view of the doors. At the back of the church, to the right of the doors, was a closet where men stored the cut wood burned by the stove in winter. In dimness—that closet, very tight—they pressed themselves opposite the wall stacked with quartered logs, and squeezed back into the furthest corner. There, with speed and strength, Ma'am unstacked wood, palmed the

top of Easter's head, and pressed her down to crouching in the dusty dark. Ma'am put the wood back again until Easter herself didn't know where she was. "You don't move from here," Ma'am said. "Don't come at nobody's call but mine." Easter was beyond thought by then, weeping silently since Ma'am had hissed, "Shut your mouth!" and shaken her once hard.

Easter nudged aside a log and clutched at the hem of her mother's skirt, but Ma'am pulled free and left her. From the first shot, not a single moment followed free of wails of desperation, or the shriller screams of those shot and bayoneted.

Footfalls, outside—some child running past the church, crying with terror. Easter heard a white man shout, There go one! and heard horse's hooves in heavy pursuit down the dirt of the Drive. She learned the noises peculiar to a horseman running down a child. Foreshortened last scream, pop of bones, pulped flesh, laughter from on high. To hear something clearly enough, if it was bad enough, was the same as seeing. Easter bit at her own arm as if that could blunt vision and hearing.

Hey there, baby child, whispered a familiar voice. Won't you come out from there? I got something real nice for you just outside. No longer the voice of the kindly spoken Johnny Reb, this was a serpentine lisp—and yet she knew them for one and the same and the Devil. Yeah, come on out, Easter. Come see what all special I got for you. Jump up flailing, run away screaming—Easter could think of nothing else, and the last strands of her tolerance and good sense began to fray and

snap. That voice went on whispering and Easter choked on sobs, biting at her forearm.

Some girl screamed nearby. It could have been any girl in Rosetree, screaming, but the whisperer snickered, Soubrette. I got her!

Easter lunged up, and striking aside logs, she fought her way senselessly with scraped knuckles and stubbed toes from the closet, on out of the church into gray daylight.

If when the show has come and gone, not only paper refuse and cast-off food but the whole happy crowd, shot dead, remained behind and littered the grass, then Rosetree's green looked like some fairground, the day after.

Through the bushes next door to the church Easter saw Mr. Henry, woken tardily from a nap, thump with his cane out onto the porch, and from the far side of the house a white man walking shot him dead. Making not even a moan old Mr. Henry toppled over and his walking stick rolled to porch's edge and off into roses. About eight o'clock on the Drive, flames had engulfed the general store so it seemed a giant face of fire, the upstairs windows two dark eyes, and downstairs someone ran out of the flaming mouth. That shadow in the brightness had been Mrs. Toussaint, so slim and short in just such skirts, withering now under a fiery scourge that leapt around her, then up from her when she fell down burning. The Toussaints kept no animals in the lot beside the general store and it was all grown up with tall grass and wildflowers over there. Up from those weeds, a noise of hellish suffering poured from the ground, where some young woman lay unseen and screamed while one white man with

dropped pants and white ass out stood afoot in the weeds and laughed, and some other, unseen on the ground, grunted piggishly in between shouted curses. People lay everywhere bloodied and fallen, so many dead, but Easter saw her father somehow alive out on the town green, right in the midst of the bodies just kneeling there in the grass, his head cocked to one side, chin down, as if puzzling over some problem. She ran to him calling Pa Pa Pa but up close she saw a red dribble down his face from the forehead where there was a deep ugly hole. Though they were sad and open his eyes slept no they were dead. To cry hard enough knocks a body down, and harder still needs both hands flat to the earth to get the grief out.

In the waist-high corn, horses took off galloping at the near end of the Parks' field. At the far end Mrs. Park ran with the baby Gideon Park, Jr. in her arms and the little girl Agnes following behind, head hardly above corn, shouting Wait Mama wait, going as fast as her legs could, but just a little girl, about four maybe five. Wholeheartedly wishing they'd make it to the backwood trees all right, Easter could see as plain as day those white men on horses would catch them first. So strenuous were her prayers for Mrs. Park and Agnes, she had to hush up weeping. Then a couple white men caught sight of Easter out on the green, just kneeling there—some strange survivor amidst such thorough and careful murder. With red bayonets, they trotted out on the grass toward her. Easter stood up meaning to say, or even beginning to, polite words about how the white men should leave Rosetree now, about the awful mistake they'd made. But the skinnier man got out

in front of the other, running, and hauled back with such obvious intent on his rifle with that lengthy knife attached to it, Easter's legs wouldn't hold her. Suddenly kneeling again, she saw her mother standing right next to the crabapple stump. Dress torn, face sooty, in stocking feet, Ma'am got smack in the white men's way. That running man tried to change course but couldn't fast enough. He came full-on into the two-handed stroke of Ma'am's axe.

Swapt clean off, his head went flying, his body dropped straight down. The other one got a hand to his belt and scrabbled for a pistol while Ma'am stepped up and hauled back to come round for his head too. Which one first, then—pistol or axe? He got the gun out and up and shot. Missed, though, even that close, his hand useless as a drunk's, he was so scared. The axe knocked his chest in and him off his feet. Ma'am stomped the body twice getting her axe back out. With one hand she plucked Easter up off the ground to her feet. "Run, girl!"

They ran.

They should have gone straight into the woods, but their feet took them onto the familiar trail. Just in the trees' shadows, a big white man looked up grinning from a child small and dead on the ground. He must have caught some flash or glimpse of swinging wet iron because that white man's grin fell off, he loosed an ear-splitting screech, before Ma'am chopped that face and scream in half.

"Rawly?" Out of sight in the trees, some other white man called. "You all right over there, Rawly?" The fallen man, head in halves like the first red slice into a melon, made no

answer. Nor was Ma'am's axe wedging out of his spine soon enough. Other white men took up the call of that name, and there was crash and movement in the trees.

Ma'am and Easter ran off the trail the other way. The wrong way again. They should have forgotten house and home and kept on forever into wilderness. Though probably it didn't matter anymore at that point. The others found the body—axe stuck in it—and cared not at all for the sight of a dead white man, or what had killed him. Ma'am and Easter thrashed past branches, crackled and snapped over twigs, and behind them in the tangled brush shouts of pursuit kept on doubling. What sounded like four men clearly had to be at least eight, and then just eight couldn't half account for such noise. Some men ahorse, some with dogs. Pistols and rifles firing blind.

They burst into the yard and ran up to the house. Ma'am slammed the bar onto the door. For a moment, they hunched over trying only to get air enough for life, and then Ma'am went to the wall and snatched off Brother's old Springfield from the war. Where the durn cartridges at, and the caps, the doggone ramrod . . . ? Curses and questions, both were plain on Ma'am's face as she looked round the house abruptly disordered and strange by the knock-knock of Death at the door. White men were already in the yard.

The glass fell out of the back window and shattered all over the iron stove. Brother, up on his back legs, barked in the open window, his forepaws on the windowsill.

"Go on, Easter." Ma'am let the rifle fall to the floor. "Never mind what I said before. Just go on with your brother now."

I'm paying your way.”

Easter was too afraid to say or do or think, and Brother at the back window was just barking and barking. She was too scared.

In her meanest voice, Ma'am said, “Take off that dress, Easter Sunday Mack!”

Sobbing breathlessly, Easter could only obey.

“All of it, Easter, take it off. And throw them old nasty beads on the floor!”

Easter did that too, Brother barking madly.

Ma'am said, “Now—”

Rifles stuttered thunderously and the dark wood door of the house lit up, splintering full of holes of daylight. In front of it Ma'am shuddered awfully and hot blood speckled Easter's naked body even where she stood across the room. Ma'am sighed one time, got down gently, and stretched out on the floor. White men stomped onto the porch.

Easter fell, caught herself on her hands, and the bad one went out under her so she smacked down flat on the floor. But effortlessly she bounded up and through the window. Brother was right there when Easter landed badly again. He kept himself to her swift limp as they tore away neck-and-neck through Ma'am's back garden and on into the woods.*

*Stop here, with the escape. Or no; I don't know. I wish there were some kind of way to offer the reader the epilogue, and yet warn them off too. I know it couldn't be otherwise, but it's just so grim.

—Dad

EPILOGUE

They were back! Right out there sniffing in the bushes where the rabbits were. Two great big ole dogs! About to shout for her husband, Anna Beth remembered he was lying down in the back with one of his headaches. So she took down the Whitworth and loaded it herself. Of course she knew how to fire a rifle, but back in the War Between the States they'd hand-picked Michael-Thomas to train the sharpshooters of his brigade, and then given him one of the original Southern Crosses, too, for so many Yankees killed. Teary-eyed and squinting from his headaches, he still never missed what he meant to hit. Anna Beth crept back to the bedroom and opened the door a crack.

"You 'wake?" she whispered. "Michael-Thomas?"

Out of the shadows: "Annie?" His voice, breathy with pain. "What is it?"

"I seen 'em again! They're right out there in the creepers and bushes by the rabbit burrows."

"You sure, Annie? My head's real bad. Don't go making me get up and it ain't nothing out there again."

"I just now seen 'em, Michael-Thomas. Big ole nasty dogs like nothing you ever saw before." Better the little girl voice—that never failed: "Got your Whitworth right here, honey. All loaded up and ret' to go."

Michael-Thomas sighed. "Here I come, then."

The mattress creaked, his cane thumped the floor, and there was a grunt as his bad leg had to take some weight as he rose to standing. (Knee shot off at the Petersburg siege,

and not just his knee, either . . .) Michael-Thomas pushed the door wide, his squinting eyes red, pouched under with violet bags. He'd taken off his half-mask, and so Anna Beth felt her stomach lurch and go funny, as usual. Friends at the church, and Mama, and just everybody had assured her she would—sooner or later—but Anna Beth never had gotten used to seeing what some chunk of Yankee artillery had done to Michael-Thomas' face. Supposed to still be up in there, that chip of metal, under the ruin and crater where his left cheek . . . “Here you go.” Anna Beth passed off the Whitworth to him.

Rifle in hand, Michael-Thomas gimped himself over to where she pointed—the open window. There he stood his cane against the wall and laboriously got down kneeling. With practiced grace he lay the rifle across the window sash, nor did he even bother with the telescopic sight at this distance—just a couple hundred yards. He shot, muttering, “Damn! Just look at 'em,” a moment before he did so. The kick liked to knock him over.

Anna Beth had fingertips jammed in her ears against the report, but it was loud anyhow. Through the window and down the yard she saw the bigger dog, dirty mustard color—had been nosing round in the honeysuckle near the rabbit warren—suddenly drop from view into deep weeds. Looked like the littler one didn't have the sense to dash off into the woods. All while Michael-Thomas reloaded, the other dog nudged its nose downward at the carcass unseen in the weeds, and just looked up and all around, whining—pitiful if it weren't so ugly. Michael-Thomas shot that one too.

“Ah,” he said. “Oh.” He swapped the Whitworth for his cane, leaving the rifle on the floor under the window. “My head’s killing me.” Michael-Thomas went right on back to the bedroom to lie down again.

He could be relied on to hit just what he aimed for, so Anna Beth didn’t fear to see gore-soaked dogs yelping and kicking, only half-dead, out there in the untamed, overgrown end of the yard, should she take a notion to venture out that way for a look-see. Would them dogs be just as big, up close and stone dead, as they’d looked from far-off and alive?

But it weren’t carcasses nor live dogs, either, back there where the weeds grew thickest. Two dead niggers, naked as sin. Gal with the back of her head blown off, and buck missing his forehead and half his brains too. Anna Beth come running back up to the house, hollering. ❀



THE TELL-TALE HEART

BY EDGAR ALLEN POE

TRUE!—NERVOUS—VERY, VERY DREADFULLY NERVOUS I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the

life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever.

Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it—oh so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly—very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha! would a madman have been so wise as this, And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously—oh, so cautiously—cautiously (for the hinges creaked)—I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights—every night just at midnight—but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he has passed the night. So you see he would have been a very profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept.

Upon the eighth night I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. A watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine. Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers—of my sagacity. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts. I fairly chuckled at the idea; and perhaps he heard me; for he moved on the bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back—but no. His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness, (for the shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers,) and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on steadily, steadily.

I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in bed, crying out—"Who's there?"

I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed listening;—just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall.

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief—oh, no!—it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him,

although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself—"It is nothing but the wind in the chimney—it is only a mouse crossing the floor;" or "It is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp." Yes, he had been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions: but he had found all in vain. All in vain; because Death, in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim. And it was the mournful influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel—although he neither saw nor heard—to feel the presence of my head within the room.

When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little—a very, very little crevice in the lantern. So I opened it—you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily—until, at length a simple dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye.

It was open—wide, wide open—and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness—all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones; but I could see nothing else of the old man's face or person: for I had directed the ray as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot.

And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the sense?—now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when

enveloped in cotton. I knew that sound well, too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage.

But even yet I refrained and kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man's terror must have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment!—do you mark me well I have told you that I am nervous: so I am. And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me—the sound would be heard by a neighbour! The old man's hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once—once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more.

If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment

of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.

I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even his—could have detected anything wrong. There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all—ha! ha!

When I had made an end of these labors, it was four o'clock—still dark as midnight. As the bell sounded the hour, there came a knocking at the street door. I went down to open it with a light heart,—for what had I now to fear? There entered three men, who introduced themselves, with perfect suavity, as officers of the police. A shriek had been heard by a neighbor during the night; suspicion of foul play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed to search the premises.

I smiled,—for what had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search—search well. I led them, at length, to his chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon

the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things. But, ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they sat and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct:—It continued and became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definiteness—until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears.

No doubt I now grew very pale;—but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased—and what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I gasped for breath—and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly—more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why would they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men—but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! what could I do? I foamed—I raved—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder—louder—louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!—no, no! They heard!—they suspected!—they knew!—they were making a mockery of my horror!—this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything

was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! and now—again!—hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!

“Villains!” I shrieked, “dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks! here, here!—It is the beating of his hideous heart!” ❀

The Tell-Tale Heart



A ROSE FOR EMILY

BY WILLIAM FAULKNER

I

WHEN MISS EMILY GRIERSON DIED, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old man-servant—a combined gardener and cook—had seen in at least ten years.

It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons

and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores. And now Miss Emily had gone to join the representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson.

Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town, dating from that day in 1894 when Colonel Sartoris, the mayor—he who fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron—remitted her taxes, the dispensation dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity. Not that Miss Emily would have accepted charity. Colonel Sartoris invented an involved tale to the effect that Miss Emily's father had loaned money to the town, which the town, as a matter of business, preferred this way of repaying. Only a man of Colonel Sartoris' generation and thought could have invented it, and only a woman could have believed it.

When the next generation, with its more modern ideas, became mayors and aldermen, this arrangement created some little dissatisfaction. On the first of the year they mailed her a tax notice. February came, and there was no reply. They wrote her a formal letter, asking her to call at the sheriff's office at her convenience. A week later the mayor wrote her himself, offering to call or to send his car for her, and received in reply a note on paper of an archaic shape, in a thin, flowing calligraphy in faded ink, to the effect that she no longer went out at all. The tax notice was also enclosed, without comment.

They called a special meeting of the Board of Aldermen.

A deputation waited upon her, knocked at the door through which no visitor had passed since she ceased giving china-painting lessons eight or ten years earlier. They were admitted by the old Negro into a dim hall from which a stairway mounted into still more shadow. It smelled of dust and disuse—a close, dank smell. The Negro led them into the parlor. It was furnished in heavy, leather-covered furniture. When the Negro opened the blinds of one window, they could see that the leather was cracked; and when they sat down, a faint dust rose sluggishly about their thighs, spinning with slow motes in the single sun-ray. On a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace stood a crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father.

They rose when she entered—a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough as they moved from one face to another while the visitors stated their errand.

She did not ask them to sit. She just stood in the door and listened quietly until the spokesman came to a stumbling halt. Then they could hear the invisible watch ticking at the end of the gold chain.

Her voice was dry and cold. "I have no taxes in Jefferson. Colonel Sartoris explained it to me. Perhaps one of you can

gain access to the city records and satisfy yourselves.”

“But we have. We are the city authorities, Miss Emily. Didn’t you get a notice from the sheriff, signed by him?”

“I received a paper, yes,” Miss Emily said. “Perhaps he considers himself the sheriff...I have no taxes in Jefferson.”

“But there is nothing on the books to show that, you see we must go by the—”

“See Colonel Sartoris. I have no taxes in Jefferson.”

“But, Miss Emily—”

“See Colonel Sartoris.” (Colonel Sartoris had been dead almost ten years.) “I have no taxes in Jefferson. Tobe!” The Negro appeared. “Show these gentlemen out.”

II

So she vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before about the smell.

That was two years after her father’s death and a short time after her sweetheart—the one we believed would marry her—had deserted her. After her father’s death she went out very little; after her sweetheart went away, people hardly saw her at all. A few of the ladies had the temerity to call, but were not received, and the only sign of life about the place was the Negro man—a young man then—going in and out with a market basket.

“Just as if a man—any man—could keep a kitchen properly,” the ladies said; so they were not surprised when the smell developed. It was another link between the gross, teeming world and the high and mighty Griersons.

A neighbor, a woman, complained to the mayor, Judge Stevens, eighty years old.

“But what will you have me do about it, madam?” he said.

“Why, send her word to stop it,” the woman said. “Isn’t there a law?”

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary,” Judge Stevens said. “It’s probably just a snake or a rat that man of hers killed in the yard. I’ll speak to him about it.”

The next day he received two more complaints, one from a man who came in diffident deprecation. “We really must do something about it, Judge. I’d be the last one in the world to bother Miss Emily, but we’ve got to do something.” That night the Board of Aldermen met—three graybeards and one younger man, a member of the rising generation.

“It’s simple enough,” he said. “Send her word to have her place cleaned up. Give her a certain time to do it in, and if she don’t...”

“Dammit, sir,” Judge Stevens said, “will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?”

So the next night, after midnight, four men crossed Miss Emily’s lawn and slunk about the house like burglars, sniffing along the base of the brickwork and at the cellar openings while one of them performed a regular sowing motion with his hand out of a sack slung from his shoulder. They broke open the cellar door and sprinkled lime there, and in all the outbuildings. As they recrossed the lawn, a window that had been dark was lighted and Miss Emily sat in it, the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol. They crept quietly across the lawn and into the shadow

of the locusts that lined the street. After a week or two the smell went away.

That was when people had begun to feel really sorry for her. People in our town, remembering how old lady Wyatt, her great-aunt, had gone completely crazy at last, believed that the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were. None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such. We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door. So when she got to be thirty and was still single, we were not pleased exactly, but vindicated; even with insanity in the family she wouldn't have turned down all of her chances if they had really materialized.

When her father died, it got about that the house was all that was left to her; and in a way, people were glad. At last they could pity Miss Emily. Being left alone, and a pauper, she had become humanized. Now she too would know the old thrill and the old despair of a penny more or less.

The day after his death all the ladies prepared to call at the house and offer condolence and aid, as is our custom. Miss Emily met them at the door, dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face. She told them that her father was not dead. She did that for three days, with the ministers calling on her, and the doctors, trying to persuade her to let them dispose of the body. Just as they were about to resort to law and force, she broke down, and they buried her father

quickly.

We did not say she was crazy then. We believed she had to do that. We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will.

III

She was sick for a long time. When we saw her again, her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows—sort of tragic and serene.

The town had just let the contracts for paving the sidewalks, and in the summer after her father's death they began the work. The construction company came with riggers and mules and machinery, and a foreman named Homer Barron, a Yankee—a big, dark, ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face. The little boys would follow in groups to hear him cuss the riggers, and the riggers singing in time to the rise and fall of picks. Pretty soon he knew everybody in town. Whenever you heard a lot of laughing anywhere about the square, Homer Barron would be in the center of the group. Presently we began to see him and Miss Emily on Sunday afternoons driving in the yellow-wheeled buggy and the matched team of bays from the livery stable.

At first we were glad that Miss Emily would have an interest, because the ladies all said, "Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer." But there were still others, older people, who said that even grief

could not cause a real lady to forget noblesse oblige - -without calling it noblesse oblige. They just said, "Poor Emily. Her kinsfolk should come to her." She had some kin in Alabama; but years ago her father had fallen out with them over the estate of old lady Wyatt, the crazy woman, and there was no communication between the two families. They had not even been represented at the funeral.

And as soon as the old people said, "Poor Emily," the whispering began. "Do you suppose it's really so?" they said to one another. "Of course it is. What else could..." This behind their hands; rustling of craned silk and satin behind jalousies closed upon the sun of Sunday afternoon as the thin, swift clop-clop-clop of the matched team passed: "Poor Emily."

She carried her head high enough—even when we believed that she was fallen. It was as if she demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson; as if it had wanted that touch of earthiness to reaffirm her imperviousness. Like when she bought the rat poison, the arsenic. That was over a year after they had begun to say "Poor Emily," and while the two female cousins were visiting her.

"I want some poison," she said to the druggist. She was over thirty then, still a slight woman, though thinner than usual, with cold, haughty black eyes in a face the flesh of which was strained across the temples and about the eye sockets as you imagine a lighthouse-keeper's face ought to look. "I want some poison," she said.

"Yes, Miss Emily. What kind? For rats and such? I'd

recom—”

“I want the best you have. I don’t care what kind.”

The druggist named several. “They’ll kill anything up to an elephant. But what you want is—”

“Arsenic,” Miss Emily said. “Is that a good one?”

“Is...arsenic? Yes, ma’am. But what you want—”

“I want arsenic.”

The druggist looked down at her. She looked back at him, erect, her face like a strained flag. “Why, of course,” the druggist said. “If that’s what you want. But the law requires you to tell what you are going to use it for.”

Miss Emily just stared at him, her head tilted back in order to look him eye for eye, until he looked away and went and got the arsenic and wrapped it up. The Negro delivery boy brought her the package; the druggist didn’t come back. When she opened the package at home there was written on the box, under the skull and bones: “For rats.”

IV

So the next day we all said, “She will kill herself”; and we said it would be the best thing. When she had first begun to be seen with Homer Barron, we had said, “She will marry him.” Then we said, “She will persuade him yet,” because Homer himself had remarked—he liked men, and it was known that he drank with the younger men in the Elks’ Club—that he was not a marrying man. Later we said, “Poor Emily” behind the jalousies as they passed on Sunday afternoon in the glittering buggy, Miss Emily with her head high and Homer

Barron with his hat cocked and a cigar in his teeth, reins and whip in a yellow glove.

Then some of the ladies began to say that it was a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people. The men did not want to interfere, but at last the ladies forced the Baptist minister—Miss Emily's people were Episcopal—to call upon her. He would never divulge what happened during that interview, but he refused to go back again. The next Sunday they again drove about the streets, and the following day the minister's wife wrote to Miss Emily's relations in Alabama.

So she had blood-kin under her roof again and we sat back to watch developments. At first nothing happened. Then we were sure that they were to be married. We learned that Miss Emily had been to the jeweler's and ordered a man's toilet set in silver, with the letters H. B. on each piece. Two days later we learned that she had bought a complete outfit of men's clothing, including a nightshirt, and we said, "They are married." We were really glad. We were glad because the two female cousins were even more Grierson than Miss Emily had ever been.

So we were not surprised when Homer Barron—the streets had been finished some time since—was gone. We were a little disappointed that there was not a public blowing-off, but we believed that he had gone on to prepare for Miss Emily's coming, or to give her a chance to get rid of the cousins. (By that time it was a cabal, and we were all Miss Emily's allies to help circumvent the cousins.) Sure enough, after another week they departed. And, as we had expected

all along, within three days Homer Barron was back in town. A neighbor saw the Negro man admit him at the kitchen door at dusk one evening.

And that was the last we saw of Homer Barron. And of Miss Emily for some time. The Negro man went in and out with the market basket, but the front door remained closed. Now and then we would see her at a window for a moment, as the men did that night when they sprinkled the lime, but for almost six months she did not appear on the streets. Then we knew that this was to be expected too; as if that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die.

When we next saw Miss Emily, she had grown fat and her hair was turning gray. During the next few years it grew grayer and grayer until it attained an even pepper-and-salt iron-gray, when it ceased turning. Up to the day of her death at seventy-four it was still that vigorous iron-gray, like the hair of an active man.

From that time on her front door remained closed, save for a period of six or seven years, when she was about forty, during which she gave lessons in china-painting. She fitted up a studio in one of the downstairs rooms, where the daughters and granddaughters of Colonel Sartoris' contemporaries were sent to her with the same regularity and in the same spirit that they were sent to church on Sundays with a twenty-five-cent piece for the collection plate. Meanwhile her taxes had been remitted.

Then the newer generation became the backbone and the spirit of the town, and the painting pupils grew up and fell

away and did not send their children to her with boxes of color and tedious brushes and pictures cut from the ladies' magazines. The front door closed upon the last one and remained closed for good. When the town got free postal delivery, Miss Emily alone refused to let them fasten the metal numbers above her door and attach a mailbox to it. She would not listen to them.

Daily, monthly, yearly we watched the Negro grow grayer and more stooped, going in and out with the market basket. Each December we sent her a tax notice, which would be returned by the post office a week later, unclaimed. Now and then we would see her in one of the downstairs windows—she had evidently shut up the top floor of the house—like the carven torso of an idol in a niche, looking or not looking at us, we could never tell which. Thus she passed from generation to generation—dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse.

And so she died. Fell ill in the house filled with dust and shadows, with only a doddering Negro man to wait on her. We did not even know she was sick; we had long since given up trying to get any information from the Negro.

He talked to no one, probably not even to her, for his voice had grown harsh and rusty, as if from disuse.

She died in one of the downstairs rooms, in a heavy walnut bed with a curtain, her gray head propped on a pillow yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight.

V

The Negro met the first of the ladies at the front door and let them in, with their hushed, sibilant voices and their quick, curious glances, and then he disappeared. He walked right through the house and out the back and was not seen again.

The two female cousins came at once. They held the funeral on the second day, with the town coming to look at Miss Emily beneath a mass of bought flowers, with the crayon face of her father musing profoundly above the bier and the ladies sibilant and macabre; and the very old men—some in their brushed Confederate uniforms—on the porch and the lawn, talking of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps, confusing time with its mathematical progression, as the old do, to whom all the past is not a diminishing road but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottle-neck of the most recent decade of years.

Already we knew that there was one room in that region above stairs which no one had seen in forty years, and which would have to be forced. They waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground before they opened it.

The violence of breaking down the door seemed to fill this room with pervading dust. A thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal: upon the valance curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose-shaded lights, upon the dressing table, upon the delicate array of crystal and the man's toilet

things backed with tarnished silver, silver so tarnished that the monogram was obscured. Among them lay a collar and tie, as if they had just been removed, which, lifted, left upon the surface a pale crescent in the dust. Upon a chair hung the suit, carefully folded; beneath it the two mute shoes and the discarded socks.

The man himself lay in the bed.

For a long while we just stood there, looking down at the profound and fleshless grin. The body had apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now the long sleep that outlasts love, that conquers even the grimace of love, had cuckolded him. What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay; and upon him and upon the pillow beside him lay that even coating of the patient and biding dust.

Then we noticed that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head. One of us lifted something from it, and leaning forward, that faint and invisible dust dry and acrid in the nostrils, we saw a long strand of iron-gray hair. ❀

COLOPHON

Header — Kirsty Regular 40/30 pt

Author — Minion Pro Regular Small Caps 14/16.8 pt

Body — Minion Pro Regular 12/14.4 pt

Dingbat — Pilcrow Sign, Kirsty Regular 12/14.4 pt

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