

Pete's Story

“Cody was always Ma’s favorite. One look at the kid, and ‘quite sure he’d be yours too,” the older man recounted. “He was, ya know, just one of those kids, full of life. I remember him running up them steps after school every day into her arms,” he said as he pointed a work wearied and bent index finger at the wooden stairs. “He was the youngest, just a squirt; the youngest of us six kids. Carl Lee was just a year or two older than him.” He looked off of the porch, possibly seeing Cody run up those very steps. A moment over 70 years old, and only seconds ago. Sometimes the mind was like that.

“I was the oldest of the kids, but still no more than 15 at the time. A scrawny 15 on the count that I had been sickly as a young child. The rocking chair creaked under his weight as he stretched his back and sat up from his slouching position. “Jolie, only 13, was bigger than me at that time, and would sometimes show me just how much bigger she was.” He smiled and stared at the thread bare welcome rug on the rotted clap-board porch.

The wooden door sprung open as a little blond boy, no more than six, entered the porch; the wooden door slamming into place behind him. “Grandpa, what ya doing?” he asked through his snaggle teeth; orange freezer pop, spilling onto his yellowed T-shirt. The older man looked at the boy for a second without answering. His eyes then wandered back to the women to whom he had been speaking, as she leaned against the railing on the porch. “I haven’t thought about this stuff in a while,” he continued.

“Cody, probably wasn’t older than Ben here when it happened.” At the call of his name, Ben looked up from his freezer pop his golden brown hair playing gently in the wind; He squinted one eye – his pretty blue eyes, the sky and the ocean– against the sun to see the women sitting there interviewing his grandpa. She smiled down at him.

“One day we got from school late. It was my last year at school anyway ‘cause Pa said that there was no need for learnin’ beyond middle school anyways. Ma had tried to keep me in school for as long as she

could, but that battle was a losin' one. I was pretty good at most of that school stuff, 'cept that cursive writin', never could get it, never could figure out what it was good for, but it didn't much matter when there was eight people in the house that needed feedin'."

He began rocking a slow, but steady pace in his chair. "When we got here, Pa was home. That weren't the usual. Once in a great while, he came home just after leavin' the mill, and even those days it was late. He almost never showed when the sun was still in the sky. On most occasions, he slunk in the house stinking of hooch well after the youngin's were sleep. Everyone was a little leery when we walked up 'cept for Cody, of course. He was too young to know anythin' yet, I reckon. He ran up the steps as usual, but instead of Ma meeting him with a hug, the door to the house flung open so hard the back of it near hit the siding. The old man looked up at the wooden door in anticipation.

"Pa said, 'What the hell you in such a hurry for, you little bastard.' Moonshine spilled from the large Mason jar onto the porch. Cody stopped in his tracks, about right there, he said pointing at the top of the stairs. 'Jo,' Ma shouted after him, 'It's okay', she said as she grabbed his shoulder."

"I could see the fire of a bruise forming under her eye, he pointed to his right eye. I was a statue in the front yard. Pa was blocking the front door, and she looked like a kid behind 'em. She whatin no more than five two. He was a big fella, at least six foot three, 300 plus pounds.

He was a giant to us kids, and even we were bigger 'in her. I remember when we was little in happier days, before he took to the drink; he would pick her up just like one of us and carry her in his arms. She would be a gossipin' to all her friends about how if someone said something out of de way to her, how her Jo would tell 'em this or do this to 'em. She doted on her Jo, and he doted on her. Hell, you don't have six kids and all those years together without there being somethin' there."

“Pa slapped her hand from his shoulder and told her, ‘Georgia, you’re gonna make him into one a those little sissy boys.’ Cody just stood there, shifting his weight from foot to foot. I wanted to tell him to move. I think it so hard, hopin’ he could hear me. I wanted him to move.

He looked at the top of the stairs, the memory of Cody shimmering in the midday sun. He could almost see him standing there in his too-short, faded, blue jean overalls, with the worn frayed knee; his blond hair unruly atop his head. His grey-blue eyes large with surprise and fear. He wanted him to move.

‘You’re going to make him like that little sissy out there,’ Pa said as he pointed towards me. “I wanted to disappear,” the man said holding his shaking, head low. “I ACTUALLY PRAYED FOR IT.”

“Jolie attempted to walk up the stairs, ‘You little bitch, where the hell ya think you’re going?’ She stopped on the second rung in shock. She looked up at Pa then at Ma. See Pa had always spared her. In some respects, she was his favorite, her being his namesake and all. If an evil sum bitch like Jo Danvers was capable of having the feeling in his heart for a favorite, then of some sort, she was it. If we ain’t know it before then, we knew it for sure then, somethin’ just whatin right. But none of us knew how wrong things was gone get.”

The older man continued on, “He reached to take a drink of the shine in the Mason jar. Ma grabbed his arm as he motioned it upwards, ‘Jo let them alone,’ she said as the glass began to tumble from Pa’s thick groggy grip. I remember the glass falling slow like in one of those picture shows. Jolie stepped down off the porch, and grabbed Cody with her. We knew it was gone be big trouble then. Everyone’s eyes were glued to the Mason jar. He grabbed for it, twice but missed it both times. I wished hard that he could catch it. ‘Please don’t let it fall,’ I thought. “I ain’t hardly wished so hard in my life ya know,” he said looking straight at the women. I guess kids wish for the simplest of thangs when they young, but I wished hard on that. Ain’t help none though. I startled at the clack that it made when it the porch. It didn’t break, but the shine splashed all over. He reached to get the jar, his huge fingers covering the

neck of the jar. No more than a sip remained. Pa's eyes widened at the realization, then became small beads in his reddened face. 'Look what you did,' he said as he shook the glass at Ma. 'Do you see this? How am I going to pay for another bottle of this? I already got this on credit, and you know I lost my job,' he said as she began to back away from him. He threw the glass at her feet, the echo of the empty glass on the floor was like a holler in an empty mine shaft, and was more deadly. He grabbed her by the neck, and squuzz hard. The older man wrung his hand together, the sound of crumbling paper filled the air.

"Cody broke free of Jolie, ran up the stairs, and began punching Pa in the back. Cody was the onliest one of us that weren't yella. He loved Ma so much he weren't scared. His little taps were enough to get Pa's attention, he released Ma. She fell back gasping for air and rubbing on her neck as if to pump air from it. Pa came towards Cody. Cody weren't no fool; he backed away from that monster that loomed over him. He was back where he started, when we first came home. I ran towards the porch, as Pa said, 'You got some balls huh, and hear I thought you was a sissy. You think you can take me?' Cody began to back down the stairs when Pa pushed him. Cody's foot got stuck under him, so instead of fallin' and tumblin' down the stairs, Cody's upper body snapped down like the hammer on a pistol and the base of his skull— he rubbed his own neck as if it strained against the telling of the story— where the head meets the neck hit the sharp angle of that step. He pointed to the bottom step. Sometimes I can still hear the wallop that it made. 'Get your ass up, boy,' Pa said as he stood on the porch looking down at Cody. "Boy, you hear me?" he asked. 'I guess you a sissy after all,' he said as he went over and sat in a chair that used to be here." The older man shook his head now, and looked away from the women, hiding moisture in his eyes.

Ben seeing his distress offered his grandfather his freeze pop. "Get boy," he said to Ben, but Ben stayed right by his Grandfather's side.

“So Ma rushes out of the house, while I’m trying to get Cody to wake up. I heard the thump show nough, but us youngsters had fell down those steps so many times, till it didn’t make no sense. We all thought he was playing possum, until he just wouldn’t wake up. His head just slumped back or to the side as we tried to move him. When Ma got Cody, I said, “I’m going to get Doc Lee.”

‘I ain’t got no money for doctors,’ Pa roared. ‘Let him be.’

“Ma nodded for me to go anyway, and I run off for him.... almost five miles up the road.”

“I returned with the Doc; and Cody was in the room that he shared with James, Carl Lee, and me, but he was in the big bed. Mom had a scarf around her neck, and I knew then, that the fix was in. Jolie came to the door with a bowl of warm water because she said that Cody had chilled through and through.

‘I’m glad that you came so fast, I’m worried sick,’ Ma started. ‘He took a spill off the porch while playing,’ she cut her eyes at me to make sure that I towed the line. ‘He won’t wake up and Jo and I have been just worried sick.’ Pa played his part, still and silent in the corner of the room, he nodded at the Doc. The Doc took his stethoscope out and placed it on Cody’s chest. He leaned his head towards Cody listening. He moved the stethoscope and repeated this process two more time. He placed the back of his hand upon Cody’s head. ‘He has a chill,’ Jolie said. He placed the thermometer into Cody’s mouth as he placed the silver of the stethoscope under Cody’s nose and leaned in observing.

‘Mr. and Mrs. Danvers can I speak to you outside the room?’ Doc Lee asked as he took the thermometer from Cody’s mouth.

Though he had taken Ma and Pa into the dining room, there’s only so much privacy in a shot-gun house.

I heard him. The man looked down as he repeated the doctor’s words.

He told her, ‘Ma’am, I can’t hear the heart, and the boy’s temperature is 95 degrees.’

‘Jolie say he had a chill, and his heart, what that mean?’ Ma asked.

'Well Ma'am,' the doc continued, 'he's not breathing neither... Cody's gone.'

"Boy," the man said as he shook his head, recounting the story. He turned to Ben, "Go get grandpa's smokes."

"Ma wailed.... I ain't never heard a sound like that before. I been in combat, served in the war. Heard men wail from being shot down, but nothing like that. That type of pain is more than physical. It hurt me, you know," he nodded as if it were impossible not to understand. Ben returned with the Marlboros and matches. The man's hand shaking, he struck the match on the rocking chair. He took a long drag, from the cigarette, "and just like that, instead of six, we was five. Five Danvers kids, Cody, the best one of us kids was gone."

"You hear things over the years about what was what. In a small town rumors leak like in a sieve. You put things together between the rumors and what you know'd to be true, and start getting some ideas. Doc Lee made sure they took a good look over Cody. I guess somethin' didn't seem right to him. When they cut him open, they say Cody's spina' cord was separated from his brain. Folks kinda knew Cody didn't just take no ordinary spill. But what'n no DNA and all that fancy stuff they talk about now to figure how things been done, and who done it.

Though they couldn't throw him in jail or what not since we all vouched for it being an accident, that didn't stop people from knowing that he was the cause. Pa became an outcast in this town. He didn't take to the shine no mo after that, but he still was ornery and like to push and punch. Finally, one day he didn't come home; which at first was normal, but then he didn't come home the next day or the one after that neither. It became a month then two. People in town started helping Ma out, and soon with my workin' we was doin' better than when he was here."

"I had heard that he was in a town about two towns over," he pointed off as if to show the woman the general direction. "Town by the name of Breckenridge. No more than 10 miles from where we sat now.

When I was say about 25, I found out where he lived and went over there. I watched from a distance at the house a few times and would come back home. I was getting a plan together. One day, I saw a little small man came out of the house. I figured I had been scoutin' the wrong place, I almost turned away. But somethin caught my eye, probably that Danvers hair, can't quite tell ya now. I looked again and sho nuff, it was him. He sat in a chair 'bout like this one. I hardly recognized him; he looked so old and helpless. It was hard to see him that way" ...he looked at the women for the first time in a while. Looked at her straight in the eyes, "Not because I felt sorry for him. It was hard because I came to the realization that he had taken away the one thing that I had relished for ten years. I had thought about so many ways I could kill him you see, and there he was beatin' me to it," he said as he threw the cigarette on the floor of the porch and stamped it out with worn house shoes. "I had finally decided that I could wait no longer to carry out the job. I left Nancy, my wife, and the kids at the house. I had decided to take his life with my bare hands as he had taken my brother's." He raised his fist and looked at them. "I had hoped for a fight. I had hoped for the man that had pushed my brother off the porch some years before. I wanted him to push the man I had become. I weren't scrawny no more. Years of hard labor had made me strong. I wanted to face the giant of my childhood. I had high hopes for killing the man that had taken so much from me," he said with a sarcastic chuckle, as he looked into the empty field. "But Dammit," he hit his small fist on the arm of the wooden chair startling the women, "He took that from me too. He wasn't a giant anymore; he was feeble and weak. He was nothing, and killing him would make me nothing too. I had a family to live for, and he had one to die for. I left and left him to it." He lit another cigarette, and rocked slowly in his chair. He nodded his head as if to say, "Yep, that's about right." She put her pencil into her purse and closed her notebook.