

## The Hermit of Emory Wood

First time I met Hermit, I nearly jumped outta my skin. I came upon him at the creek down by the ravine, in the thicker part of the woods - but still inside Emory County. He was a scary lookin man, all bald on top, with a forest of a beard growin like crazy on his face. He had on a loose-fittin brown robe coverin his shoulders and trailin down to the ground, and he was leanin over the creek, skinnin somethin small. And when I saw the cloud of blood escape from his fingers into the water, and his strange cloak, well, I thought he was skinnin a baby and that his robe was made outta human hair. Like he scalped people, or somethin. And he had this thick black layer of soot all rubbed into the hem of his cloak. I got to thinkin maybe he was the Grim Reaper. Way his head snapped up when he saw me standin there, you'd think he'd been scared as I was, like I came stompin down there with a slasher mask on or somethin, instead of bein jes a scrawny girl still in a trainer bra. Anyways, I let out a little scream when I saw him, like a puff of air, and we just stared at each other fer a second. And then I saw he was skinnin a rabbit and his cloak was probably jes made outta some hemp or somethin.

I met him right in the middle of summer, the day after the fire at Mrs. Henderson's house. Neggie, their oldest girl, left her curlin iron plugged in all night and a towel fell on top it. The fire nearly killed them all in their beds, but Mrs. Henderson said they was saved by an angel of the Lord. Somebody banged a big pot and spoon together til the whole family woke up, but once they was all outside, all of 'em said they weren't the one to bang it.

When I tell a story Hermit usually rolls his eyes a lot. He think I don't start 'em like I should. He wrote out instructions fer me once on his little piece of chalkboard, tellin me I should start in the beginning and set up "exposition". He says no one ever knows what I'm talkin bout

because I start stories in the middle. I know what he wants, even though I pretend not to. He wants me to tell bout the padlock.

Well, I got a big brass padlock on my bedroom door back home in Emory County. I fastened it as best I could with an electric screwdriver we keep in the garage. The regular old doorknob lock on my door was busted a long time ago, few years after my momma died, and after she was gone I needed a bigger one.

I was a bit worried what Daddy would say when he saw the lock, so I kept the screwdriver under my bed. When Daddy was feelin alright, I'd take the lock off and hide it. And when I could hear him comin down the lane at night, roarin drunk, I hurried on up and bolted that lock back into place. This way, his feelins didn't get hurt and he didn't get sore at me fer too long. Usually when he woke up in the mornin with a splittin headache, he just called fer me to bring him an aspirin. He couldn't 'member if he came in my room or not the night before, so he didn't 'member pushin on that door that wouldn't budge. I kept two glasses in my room fer nights like that, one filled with water and one empty fer me to pee in. I know it aint lady-like, but I can sure tell you I wasn't about to unlock that door and walk to the bathroom to do my business. I kept some peanuts, too, taped under the windowsill.

If he was drunk durin the daytime, then I didn't have to use the lock. I'd just slide out of the house real smooth and scamper on down to the ravine to wait him out fer a few hours. That's where I met Hermit that first time.

Well, once I saw that he was skinnin a rabbit and not a baby, and that if his robe was made outta human hair he'd probably be scratchin a lot more'n he was, I calmed down a bit. I yelled hi at him, and he didn't budge, just kept starin at me like my head was on fire. I realized

then that there was a tarp slung over a clothesline stretchin 'tween two trees, and I figured he'd been sleepin in there. There was a campfire by the creek where some of the ash was still smokin.

You been out here long? I asked.

He shook his head.

Well, why you all covered in soot for? You roll around in your campfire or somethin?

He set down that bloody rabbit and rinsed his hands real good in the water. Then he went over to his tarp and pulled out a bit of chalkboard. Like the kind we use at school, but a lot smaller, with a smart wooden border 'round the edges. And he had a little chunk of white chalk, and with that he wrote *Hi, my name's Hermit* in neat script.

Well, I just stood there gapin at him, wonderin where this lunatic sprang from.

Don't you talk?

Hermit shook his head.

Well, why not? You dumb or somethin?

He wiped at the letters with his sooty sleeve and scribbled somethin new. *I've taken a vow of silence.*

That was bout the stupidest thing I ever heard of, and I told him so. He just shrugged and wrote on that darn chalkboard again.

*To each his own.*

I snorted at him and tucked my hands in my pockets.

He started wipin at the chalkboard again. *Who are you?*

I knew I weren't supposed to talk to no strangers, but I figured tellin him my name couldn't do no harm, 'specially since he couldn't even say it no how. So I told him I was Mayella but I didn't tell him what my last name was. I told him I lived at the edge of the woods closer to town, but I didn't tell him what street it was. I can be real careful like that sometimes.

I asked him what he was doin there in the woods.

*Just passing through, he wrote. Be gone by tomorrow.*

Where you goin?

He didn't bother to clean off his chalkboard for that question, he just wrote a G in the air with his finger, and when I guessed Georgia he nodded like that was right.

I told him that was a shame, since he seemed interestin enough, and not too many new things happened in Emory. That made him smile.

*Mayella, he wrote, Would you like to eat some rabbit stew with me?*

Now to tell you the truth, Daddy started drinkin before breakfast that mornin, (seein as he and I woke up real early cause of all the screaming at the Henderson's bout that fire) so I was mighty hungry, and rabbit stew sure did sound good. I jes weren't so sure I could trust Hermit. So I went right up to Hermit and looked him square in the eye. Most folks think you gotta be real clever bout things like that, but I know how it really is. People lie in they eyes, meanin you can always see it.

Hermit, I said direc'ly, You gonna hurt me?

Hermit shook his head real hard and fast, and I was glad I found him, 'cause I could see he was harmless as a fly.

That night Daddy got the smart kind of drunk. The smart kind of drunk is worse 'an the dumb kind of drunk, 'cause it makes Daddy a problem solver. He threw himself against my bedroom door fer near forty minutes, callin me all kinds of names and tellin me he gonna kill me if I didn't let him in. I was munchin on my peanuts and readin a real good article about David Cassidy in *Tiger Beat* when things outside got a little too quiet.

I sat up in bed, real still and real awake, and jes listened to the air stir around me, like I picture the Indians doing in the old days.

*Wack!!*

Somethin slammed against my bedroom door, real hard and loud.

Daddy? I called out.

I heard the loud noise again, and this time I saw a bit of my door splinter in at me. That's when I figured it out that Daddy had gotten the rusty old ax outta the garage and was beatin my door in.

I screamed fer a second, and then I dropped my magazine on the floor and started tearin at my window screen, tryin'a get it open. But Daddy had a pretty good start on bustin down that door, and he grabbed me by my ankles 'fore I made it halfway through.

That time Daddy was all revved up, and it hurt more'n it used to. He'd only ever hurt me once at a time before, but that night he hurt me twice and then he passed out cold on my bedroom floor, right on top of the *Tiger Beat* exclusive fold-out poster of David Cassidy.

I hadn't ever slipped away at night before. But now my padlock wasn't gonna help me none, and I knew I had to do somethin. I stepped over Daddy snorin on the floor and jes started

walkin. Opened the front door and kept on walkin. Somethin sticky was drippin down my leg, and I paused once in the moonlight, jes to take a once over of myself, and I saw that I had blood and some of Daddy's juice drippin outta me. Then somethin silly happen'. My private parts jes sorta let go, and I wet myself right out in the clearin behind our house, big girl that I was.

I musta made quite a racket, clammerin through those bushes and trees, 'cause when I reached the creek where Hermit was all set up, he was sittin up with a lantern like he was expectin me. He musta seen it was me comin, 'cause he already had somethin written on that stupid chalkboard of his.

*What are you doing here, Mayella?*

I thought maybe I'd get 'round to answerin his question when I was good and ready to.

Look here, Hermit, I told him, My Momma and Daddy is both dead, and I live in an orph'nage at the edge of town. They don't hardly ever feed us, so I'm starvin to death, really, I swear.

I paused to let him take in my scrawny form, hopin I was skinny enough to convince him.

I cleared my throat and continued, I want you to take me to Georgia with you in the mornin.

He stared at my face pretty hard fer a minute, so I thought maybe I weren't layin it on heavy enough.

They beat us with whips at the orph'nage, I added like a cherry on top.

Well, Hermit got up and walked over to me. He looked surprised when I flinched, and so he took a little step back, holding up his hands like he was under arrest fer somethin. He was

lookin at the tiny trail of blood dribblin down my leg, and I was afraid he could sSilohl the urine on me from my accident in the clearin.

He'd left his chalkboard over by the tarp, so when he was done lookin at me all over, he jes gave me a thumbs up. Well, I sure felt relieved that I had a place to go, and a person to go there with. 'Specially a person who wouldn't hurt me none - like I told you, I see it in the eyes - and who knew how to kill and skin rabbits. So I smiled real big and said thank you all polite. And that started a very easy way of talkin between us without him havin to say nothin to me: jes a thumbs up fer yes and a thumb down fer no; anythin harder'n that he jes wrote on the board.

Well, I gotta say it felt real good fer the first couple days, bein away from Daddy and free in the woods with Hermit. Hermit was real nice, and of course he was quiet. He set traps fer little rabbits and squirrels and I helped him cook them up over the fire. He was peculiar, though. Every time we caught somethin he'd get real solemn and say a long, silent prayer over the little critter. I asked him bout it one night when I was particularly hungry and thought maybe we could get right to the cookin part. I shouldn't'a, because then he got out his old chalkboard and I had to wait even longer while he wrote out an answer. And it was a long one that he had to write real tiny and cramped.

*We take something from them, so I just send them a little grace in return. Life is just a series of sending and receiving grace.*

I snorted at that 'cause I sure as hell would like to see Hermit talkin to my Daddy bout sendin and receivin grace.

We made our way nice and slow down through Georgia. Hermit told me he figured we'd shoot for Valdosta. I wanted to stick to the woods in case Daddy had people lookin for me, but

whenever we came across a town, Hermit insisted on goin through it. At night we'd set up the big tarp and some blankets, and then Hermit'd leave me with the lantern while he went and jes walked through the town fer an hour or two before comin back to camp.

Hermit? I asked him suddenly one day right in the middle of his prayin over a squirrel, when the quietness was closin 'round me like an itchy blanket, What'd you take a vow of silence for?

He pretended not to hear me, but I knew he must've. He might be mute but I knew he wasn't deaf. He finished his prayer - jes like no one asked nothin - and skinned that squirrel. It was my job to fry the bits of meat in his old fryin pan. Once I laid out all the pieces and got the fire good and hot, I sat back on my heels and saw that Hermit had been busy scribblin on his chalkboard.

*I regret a lot of the things I used to say. And the things worth saying, I didn't say. So now I don't say anything at all.*

So how come you don't count writin as breakin your vow of silence? Ain't that still like talkin?

Hermit smiled at me and shrugged. He took another minute scribblin away.

*Writing and speaking are different.*

After I read that Hermit rubbed out the chalk with his sleeve, and then he wrote some more.

*When the world gets quiet, it's easier to hear God.*



I didn't really know what to say bout that. Normally I woulda told him how crazy he was, but he seemed real serious when he lifted his board fer me to read it, so I just sat there real quiet, thinkin maybe if I didn't talk so much, he might hear God easier and his prayers wouldn't be so long. That's the thing bout bein with Hermit, sometimes you end up bein silent, too.

I didn't know then that the truth was as silent as he was. That it could sneak up from behind and jump you 'fore it ever made a peep. Anyway it weren't til we reached Lawrenceville a few days later that the truth caught up to Hermit.

After we ate some jerky and a bit of dry bread with peanut butter, he turned the lantern on and left me so he could walk around the town. I was real antsy, so I got to pacin back and forth. Every once in a while, I would git to thinkin bout Daddy, and whether or not he was lookin fer me. I figured the chances was slim, since he didn't like to do a thing more'n an hour or two, 'less it was drinkin or sleepin. Daddy didn't like havin cops 'round the place, neither, so I didn't think he'd call anybody. But still, some nights when Hermit left me to go into the town and the woods got real loud with crashin and crinklin sounds, I got to thinkin what would happen if Daddy came while Hermit was gone.

I opened Hermit's old army duffel bag to git another piece of jerky, even though he told me I couldn't have anymore since it had to last another couple days. I found the jerky and I found somethin else, too. Turns out, Hermit been carryin his past 'round over his shoulder with him.

It was jes a bit of newspaper that had two big pictures on it, one of a man I didn't know, and one of Hermit. Only, Hermit had a full head of hair, and he weren't called Hermit, neither; the name under the picture said Harry Odette. And his name was in bold across the front of the

page, too, sayin “Harry Odette Starts a Fire in Aberdeen.” I had to read that article real slow in the lantern light about three times ‘fore I could make out that Hermit’s name was really Harry, and that he was the insurance agent for the man in the other picture whose name was Siloh Lattis. Siloh Lattis hung himself when he didn’t get no money after a fire burned down his store. Cause Harry said it was Mr. Lattis’s own fault bout that fire and that he wouldn’t get no money. And the whole town of Aberdeen didn’t seem to like that too much, seein as at the bottom of the article there was a third little picture with a bunch of angry people holdin signs.

When I finished readin I set back on my heels and I tried to put two and two together, what with Hermit startin a fire in Aberdeen and then him bein all covered in soot the day after Mrs. Henderson’s big fire back in Emory. I figured I asked him all the wrong questions when I looked straight in his eyes ‘fore we left.

Hermit was out longer than usual that night, and I waited fer him, readin that article and chewin on my bottom lip. When he finally came crashin back through the forest, I was sittin up with the lantern. He came into the light, and I saw that he was covered in soot again, jes like he was the first day I met ‘im.

Well hi there, Harry Odette.

When Hermit heard me call ‘im that, he stopped right in his tracks and jes sort of looked at me, like he was a little school kid about to git put in time out.

You start fires all over. You started a fire in Aberdeen, I just learned bout that now, and you started Mrs. Henderson’s fire, too, didn’t you? And I reckon you been walkin through these towns lookin fer ways to start fires. And I reckon you jes did that now, didn’t you?

Hermit got out his chalkboard and took a long time scribblin on it, pausin and thinkin and erasin and then writin again.

*I didn't start an actual fire in Aberdeen. I started a social fire.*

Don't matter. What you did to poor Siloh Lattis still weren't fair. How you know he started that fire?

*I don't. Turns out he didn't. Found out after he died it was an electrical problem.*

You mean after he killed himself.

*Mayella I told you I regret things I said. I don't say anything anymore. I don't know what else I can do.*

Well you kin stop startin fires, thats what you kin do.

*I don't start them. I put them out.*

That stopped me fer a minute, and I tried rollin it over in my mind.

You sayin you didn't start that fire at Mrs. Hendersons?

*I saw it catch a curtain through the window. I started banging on my frying pan until they woke up.*

I was slow in believin him, no matter what his eyes said, 'specially since that newspaper wrote him up so mean. But Mrs. Henderson did say she was woke up by loud bangin on a pot, and I supposed that standin before me was that angel she swore was sent by the good Lord himself. Imagine, Hermit bein an angel. Angel that don't even talk none. Hermit started writin again while I stood there and thought bout it all.

*I go through the dry places. I look for fires and I help put them out.* He stared at me for a while after I read this. Waitin fer me to say somethin, I suppose. After a minute or two, he wiped the words off the chalkboard real slow, and wrote one sentence, leanin hard on the chalk.

*I'm sorry for what I did.*

Well, then he'd gone and done it, 'cause I couldn't pretend there weren't tons of things I wasn't sorry fer doin. And I think I mighta near keeled over if Daddy ever told me he was sorry fer what he done. I got to thinkin maybe there were jes two people in the world, the ones who's sorry when they do bad, and the ones that jes keep on doin it. And fer some reason, Hermit jes standin there real quiet and sorry made me go and ask somethin I didn't even know I was wonderin.

If I wanna be good - pure, even - and it ain't my fault that I ain't, am I still good?

Hermit gave me the thumbs up, so I knew I was good, and that we could keep goin on together.

After that, Hermit didn't leave me with the lantern when he walked through towns anymore. I started goin with him, and helped him put out the fires. There weren't very many. People's houses don't jes go burstin into flames, which I tried to tell Hermit one time, but then I hushed up 'cause I could see it made him think about all that stuff in the article.

Most times we jes circled through towns, and sometimes we'd hear about a wild fire that we'd help put out. Most times we jes listened fer the bell from the fire house, and then we'd follow the firefighters to the burnin house and we'd jes stand outside with the family. Help carry their stuff to a motel.

The few times we did happen upon a house before the firefighters, it was either smokin or else flamin like hell. Hermit'd use his big cloak to stifle the flames if the fire was small enough, and I'd scream at the top of my lungs to make sure nobody was still sleepin inside. Then we'd jes heap water atop and pray like mad. We liked those times the best because no one could thank us; we liked to be gone 'fore anybody realized we was there.

I asked Hermit one time how long he'd been quiet. He smiled real big and held up six fingers.

Six months? I gasped.

But Hermit shook his head.

Six years?

I got a thumbs up from Hermit, and I looked at him again like he was crazy, which I do a lot.

I got to realizin that Hermit's silence was pretty important to him. He carried it around like he carried that old newspaper article and his fryin pan and that dumb chalkboard. I saw a picture once in a textbook back at school of a fancy Faber-jay egg that Csar Nicholas had back 'fore his life fell into the crapper. It was real delicate and golden, and there was a secret in the middle that you couldn't get to 'less you knew how. I got to thinkin that Hermit's silence was like the inside part of that Faber-jay egg.

That's why I was so surprised when Hermit saved my life like he did.

We was about half a day's walk from Valdosta, the place Hermit originally picked as our destination - though now I thought it weren't likely we'd stop goin - when an awful bad fire

broke out in one of the country homes. I 'member we knew it was particularly bad, 'cause the town didn't have no professional firefighters, only volunteers, and the house was in the middle of the driest patch of woods I ever saw.

The family gave up just as we got there, and ran fer the creek at the edge of their property. They was gonna wait there fer the firemen. But Hermit and I figured they gave up too soon, and we could 'least save some of their stuff fer 'em. Hermit grabbed my arm 'fore he went in, like he wanted me to wait outside, but soon as he was through the back door I went around to the front and stepped in real careful.

Well, I found myself in the livin room, with the curtains on fire and the paper on the walls curlin up all black and brown 'round the edges. I shoulda left then, probably, only I saw the pictures on the mantle. It sure was a nice mantle, right over the fireplace, standin all tall and fine like a mantle oughtta. And there were baby pictures and family pictures and an urn with some dead person's ashes inside. I figured it was silly to save ashes from a fire, but I thought maybe I could save the pictures. So I picked them up - they was already getting' pretty hot - and started outta the room. Only, the doorframe caught on fire right 'fore I could step outta it, and then a beam fell down, and I was trapped. I went fer the windows, but like I said the curtains were blazin like crazy.

Well, I started to panic then, and the smoke started getting' to me, makin me cough and weeze somethin horrible 'till I couldn't breath no more. I started hollerin real loud fer Hermit to come save me. From 'tween the curtains of the windows, I saw the volunteer firemen pull up in their red truck. They was standin far back, tryin'a get the hoses out. I screamed once more but they didn't hear me, and then I fell down and started to feel the world get real hot.

‘Fore I closed my eyes, I saw Hermit standin on the other side of that doorway, starin at me through the flamin beam, with a real terrified look on his face. I closed my eyes and gave myself over to the smoke. And I heard a voice I couldn’t recognize, fillin the whole house with sound, vibratin off the walls and rattlin the smoke in my lungs.

Help! Help us! There’s a girl in here!

I guess it was a while ‘fore I opened my eyes back up again, but when I did, I was outside ‘neath some trees and it was still dark outside. I had a big plastic mask over my face and it was pumpin some clean air into my lungs. Hermit was there next to me, smilin down at me in his big, soot-covered cloak. I thought how he looked like the Grim Reaper again, but a nice one who saved people ‘stead of killin ‘em.

How are you doing, Mayella?

I was surprised when he spoke, but then I smiled, too. ‘Cause my Daddy liked me bout as much as he liked his beer and porn, but here was a man who liked me enough to break open the Faber-jay egg he’d been keepin fer six long years.

Hermit and I stayed in that little town off the edge of Valdosta so the nurses at the tiny doctor’s offices could pump some liquid in my arm all night and tell me I was too skinny. Hermit decided he didn’t wanna leave. He got a job cuttin down trees fer the lumberyard in Valdosta and joined the volunteer fire department - said they needed him real bad. He rented a trailer at the bottom of the hill, which I told him was a bad idea ‘cause of floodin but he didn’t listen to me none, sayin too much water was never his problem. One of the rooms he painted a nice daisy yellow and put a mattress and a white bedspread in there fer me. The door had a nice knob lock on it, but I never used it. He said in the fall he was signin me up fer school.

Somethin seemed to kinda shift in Hermit. Whereas he used to carry around his silence, now he wouldn't shut up, tellin me all the time how he was gonna git some seed and plant a garden outside my window and Oh Mayella dear won't it be nice when the tomaters are ripe and we eat 'em in our salad and fool stuff like that. I barely got a word in edgewise anymore. Even with all the talking he was doin, Hermit never got 'round to askin' whether I actually wanted to stay with him or not, but I figured there was worse things in the world and I already knew what they was, and eatin tomaters with Hermit didn't seem so bad. In fact, they taste pretty good.