

Watchmen of the Wall

“Were those man-shapes under / the trees” (Home Brew, 22-23) Patricia Dobler.

Elizabeth hoped not. She stayed later than she should have at Miriam’s.

She’d cut through the alley that ran alongside Arsenal Park. It was only a short walk home, cutting through the park, but somehow walkin’ after dark made the distance seem a lot longer. She hated leaving Miriam’s house--the chaos there felt good. Miriam’s mom and dad, along with her brothers and sisters, seemed to never stop talking and laughing. There was no quiet place to do homework. They decided to work on their algebra homework at the kitchen table after dinner thinking maybe everyone would clear out. No such luck--Miriam’s little brothers had an ongoing contest to see which of them could scream the loudest as they banged in and out of the back screen door. By the time the streetlights come on Elizabeth and Miriam still had another half hour of work left.

Staying late meant being able to be away from Mama. She’d be asleep by the time Elizabeth got home, maybe. Mama asleep was so much better than Mama awake this time-a-night. Daytime was still bearable. After supper-time though, Mama changed into a vengeful fire-breathing angel. She’d spit out scripture nightly between swigs of whiskey and puffs on her hand rolled smokes.

Before Papa died, things were different. Mama sang. She was only thirty four. Still young. Still pretty—as long as she didn't smile—but smiles didn't happen anymore--at least not around Mama. Elizabeth thought Mama looked like an angel—as long as she kept her mouth shut. Mama's coal black hair against white-pale skin made her blue eyes pull in everything that she looked at. When she smiled though, any thought of a halo disappeared. Mama's crooked, coffee- and cigarette-stained teeth showed the real Mama. Hidden away and downright ugly.

Mama was nasty when she started drinkin' before supper. There was no more singing--day or night. Father Rice stopped by just once—one evening right after Papa died. Mama started quoting Scripture at him before he even had a chance to sit down in the living room. Something from Kings about, “the man of God sayin' let her alone—she's vexed.” Every once in a while she pulled out a good one. Mama cursed at Father and said things people should never say about priests or God. Mama said them and Elizabeth was pretty sure Mama was goin' to hell for it. You can't chase a priest out of the house and expect heaven.

Mama's running off Father Rice didn't end all bad. Elizabeth and her sister Mary didn't go to St. Joe's or Catholic school anymore. Mama decided. Mama said they were confirmed and that's all she owed the Church of their souls. No more stupid uniform skirts and rich girls with stiff white blouses. No more hand-me-down uniforms. She wasn't the charity case at St. Joe's no more. Uniforms weren't so bad, but the name different than her own written on the inside of the waistband stung every time she put the skirt on.

Everyone in public school was from the same kind of family and lived in the same neighborhood. Soon Elizabeth'd be old enough to waitress after school. She'd go to Woolworth's or G. C. Murphy's soda fountain downtown and get an after school job. Mary said

the work was hard, but the tips and the boys who stopped for soda made it the best job in the world.

Just a little more of the park and she'd be at St. Joe's—and almost home.

She quickened her step a little—she was sure that something moved from behind one of the trees to her right. The ember of a cigarette glowed bright for a second. She really wished she could of stayed overnight at Miriam's.

It was a man alright. He just stood there, watching. Elizabeth squinted to see who it was when the end of the cigarette flared up again.

She needed to run but couldn't.

“Hey honey, whatcha doin' out so late on a school night?”

Elizabeth tensed a little. At least she knew the voice. Uncle Jack.

He worked his way round the trees, the tip of his cigarette flaring as the breeze moved the world around. She told him that she had been at her friend's house and lost track of time.

“Your Mama's gonna be upset—surprised she ain't out lookin' for you.”

Elizabeth moved her head mechanically up and down. A drunk with cigarette-stained teeth, a bottle-a-whiskey and a mouth full of the bible wasn't caring much where she was.

Uncle Jack didn't work no more. Had seizures—epileptic. He was kicked in the head pretty bad in one of the foster homes. Kicked in the head one too many times Elizabeth thought. Couldn't work. Wouldn't work.

“Don't you worry Lizbeth, I'll walk you home. Gimme a chance to catch up with my sister and Mare.”

“I thought Mama quit talking to you,” said Elizabeth, “she said you was crazy and oughtta be left alone.”

“Your Mama got problems,” Jack shrugged at her.

“You ain’t been around for a while,” Elizabeth shrugged back at him as she started for home, “Whatcha been doing? Been working?”

Jack’s cigarette flared. “Here and there—you know how it is.”

She didn’t know how it was. Her Papa always worked—two or three jobs at a time. Mama never had to work. Elizabeth missed him even though he was never home much.

“Whatta you doin’ out so late? Where’s Mare?”

“I was at Miriam’s. We had some schoolwork we was working on together.”

He cleared his throat, took a deep puff on his cigarette, exhaled, and looked at her sideways. “Schoolwork—more like talkin’ about boys I bet—good lookin’ girl like you—I bet you have lotsa fellas hangin’ around.”

Elizabeth’s face turned terribly hot. Elizabeth had talked a little about Jimmy Kowalski to Miriam.

She felt that dirty creepy feeling starting in her stomach. Every time she got close to Uncle Jack it come back. When she was little, he used to pull her into his lap when he’d visit. She couldn’t get up—tried to pull away once and Mama had yelled at her—told her she was being rude— and to an uncle who loved her. She was hurting his feelings. It made her feel bad cause she done something wrong.

Uncle Jack leaned into her and she felt the thick black fog spreading from her stomach up through her chest, stopping as her throat closed around it.

Elizabeth hurried as they went past the side of the church towards home.

Lotus Way, short and all cobblestone, was less alley and more driveway for the rowhouses on either side. Same red brick—three houses stuck into one. She started down the

grade and the rubber sole of her left shoe caught and her ankle twisted on the cobblestone. She almost fell. Uncle Jack didn't notice. She looked over just in time to see the flare as Uncle Jack lit another cigarette. The sulphur from the lit match burned the hair in her nose.

They reached the stoop that led to the front door. Lights were all out. Elizabeth started praying that Mama was in bed and not sprawled out on the couch or across the kitchen table like most nights.

After searching and finally finding her keys in the front pocket of her bookbag, Elizabeth opened the door and switched on the light. The haze from cigarette smoke against the deep red oriental-flocked wallpaper felt suffocating.

There lay Mama, nothing on but a black slip, head thrown backwards across the couch. Elizabeth's eyes watered. A little dribble of drool traveled out the corner of Mama's mouth and onto her cheek. For such a tiny woman she could sure snore. How did Mary sleep through it? Mama's hand hung over the end table above a glass of whiskey and water. One of Papa's shoes sat next to the glass on the table. Mama had taken to using his shoes as ashtrays. Guess it was her way at getting back at him for dying.

One of these days something's gonna catch on fire, Elizabeth thought to herself.

"What the hell is this?" Uncle Jack boomed as he shoved her aside to look. Mama shifted a little, but didn't wake up. Suddenly her legs flopped open. Elizabeth's face flared with redness that worked its way down, taking over her body.

Uncle Jack reached over and picked up Mama's half empty glass. After swirling the contents around, he sniffed it. He threw it back in one gulp.

"Good whiskey goin' to waste."

Mama stirred a little but not enough to sit decent. Uncle Jack backed into Elizabeth and turned around.

The smell of stale cigarettes, whiskey, and sweat surrounded and smothered her.

Elizabeth closed her eyes tight as she held her breath. She emptied. Suddenly she found herself watching Uncle Jack from a corner of the ceiling.

Softly at first she heard Mama's voice. As the voice grew and filled the room, Elizabeth recognized the verse as one of Mama's favorites from the Song of Solomon:

“The watchman that went about the city found me,

they smote me, they wounded me;

the keepers of the wall took away my veil from me.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes tight and floated to the window to find the stars.

The End