

Jimmy's Place

The gun looked heavy and awkward. The old woman carried it in front of her like she was carrying the flag-banner in a parade, both hands gripping the stock that anchored into her chest. The tip of the barrel dipped to the ground. She stumbled behind it like the gun was an untrained dog dragging her forward.

He was sitting in the deck's shaded corner--their new house, just six months since they moved in--a Fall, a Winter. His first April on the mountain. The hill in back of the house--from where the old woman had emerged--was dotted with wild red bud and dogwood. They mingled together like something Seurat would have painted. He liked to take off his glasses and blur the colors even more. When he pointed the scene out to Bobbie, she had looked a mini-second and pronounced it "pretty," while shaking her head at him. She wasn't used to men admiring scenery. Women, either. When you see something every day, it's hard to see it. She was always surprised by what he looked at--at what he saw. Him, too. "It's more than pretty," he had objected, but that just got another shake of the head. Bobbie had grown up in these hills--maybe a mile away as the crow flew--though that might be ten miles of twisty mountain road if you weren't a crow.

He put his glasses back on for the old woman. She hadn't spotted him. Her house was up on the second ridge above theirs. He could just make it out in the bare winter, but with the coming of leaves, it was hidden. The house was a put-together thing--two single wides lined up and aimed at each other like a Texas stand-off--just enough room for them on the narrow ridge. A dogtrot connected the two, open at the sides with some boards resting on cement blocks. The dogtrot ceiling was some more boards--giving some shelter from the rain if the rain aimed straight down--which it never did, far as he could tell. Everything slanted on these hills, even the rain. The single-wides looked pieced together, too. At least they looked that way from his deck. Hadn't seen them up close yet.

Hadn't met his neighbor, either. Not even a wave. She had come down to the edge of her property when they moved in, stood staring at the truck unloading. But when he decided to make his way up to say hi, she had turned her back and walked up the hill to her single-wides. She hadn't turned around.

"Hello," he had shouted--well, not really shouted. He felt somehow that they were intruding. A shout would have made it worse. He didn't know if she had heard him.

Bobbie--they weren't more than a one month married then-- had shook her head at him. Seems like she was always shaking her head at him. "That's ol Miz Richie. Not known for being neighborly. Best let her be."

"Well, that's not good. She's our only neighbor."

Bobbie gave a kind of snort. "Shouldn't have moved in on her property then."

"The bank says it's ours. Or your cousin Wally does."

Wally was a local builder. Far as he could tell, the bank and Wally were the same thing. Earl Cornet ran the bank but he was a cousin, too. Of Wally's at least. Small-town-hill politics. Bobbie told him not to worry about it and he didn't. Why would he? They had welcomed him in--especially after he married Bobbie. He liked the feeling. Small town banks. Everybody friendly. Not like the New York banks he

knew. Made you feel like a criminal no matter what you did. And so much paperwork, you felt like a doctor signing your name a million times. Never knowing what you were signing. Here he signed just a couple of times. Of course he still didn't know what he was signing, but it was easy. Wally had gotten them a deal. They wouldn't have been able to afford half the house without him.

"The bank can say what it wants. Wally, too. The Richies have owned this land as long as anybody can remember. First thing Mamaw asked me when she heard where we moving. 'You building a house on Richie land?'"

Richie land. The mountains were crisscrossed with lines he couldn't see. Lines you didn't cross. But you didn't know it till you crossed them. Too friendly. Not friendly enough. He learned quickly that the friendly "Come see me" didn't mean come see me. Except when it did.

He crossed a big line when he married Bobbie. He'd gone from Yankee English teacher outsider to the fellow who married a Cornet. Everybody knew it. Didn't seem to matter where he was—supermarket, doctor's office, bar—people would hold back looking at him, trying to place him. Then it would come to them.

"Oh, you're that fellow who married the Cornet girl—the younger one, Bobbie. You from New York, ain't you? How you making out?" Then the set up. "A lot different from New York, I bet. Talk funny down here, don't we?"

They talked funny in New York, too, he always told them, and they'd laugh, looking at him, smiling, wary. Bobbie was just one foot in the door. He was still an outsider. He turned to Bobbie now.

"Not much of a deal if we're paying for something that can't be bought."

Bobbie was looking at the old woman disappearing into the trees. It was October when they moved in; the leaves still hanging on—pale yellow on the poplars and a deep red for the dogwoods. She didn't answer right away. It usually took her awhile to answer him when he talked to her. In the beginning, he had thought she hadn't heard him. But she just took her time. Like she needed it. She turned to him finally.

"Some things can get bought. Others can't."

some kind of cocker breed. "Rusty," she chant in a sing-song, standing in the dog-trot that acted as a sort of porch. "Rusty," she'd sing in a plaintive twang, a kind of mountain ballad. The dog wandered all over the hills, not knowing or caring where the property lines were. But it always came running at the sound of the old woman's voice.

He had started putting a bowl of water out for Rusty on the deck. The dog would stop and check it out in its wanderings. An easy pet. Water and a scratch behind the ears. He thought he might add a few dog treats.

But Bobbie dumped the bowl when she saw it and shoed the dog away.

"Ain't a good idea. Don't want Miz Richie thinking we're stealing her dog. Already stole her land."

Rusty was already back at the dog-trot. He saw a door open and Rusty disappeared inside with his other neighbor.

He was getting pretty tired of that line. “Listen. Maybe it’s some kind of Indian idea—where nobody gets to own the land—or maybe it’s some mystical thing where land ownership goes beyond bank deeds. Only thing I know is that it’s costing us a whole lot of mortgage payments if we’re stealing. You’d think stealing be a whole lot cheaper.”

Bobbie just looked at him for a bit. He knew the look—like he was speaking a different language—or she was. He knew she was wondering if it was worth translating. If he’d ever understand. Now she ran her hands down her jeans. They were tight on her. Complained she had put ten pounds on, cooking for him, but he didn’t think so. Still the same look—down home sexy. A bit mean.

“Wally got it real cheap for us. And we ain’t paying Miz Richie, are we?”

“We *ain’t* paying Miz Richie.”

She paused a moment, letting his “ain’t” lay in the air like a leaf caught in an updraft. “There you go,” she said, and turned away. Done explaining.

She’d been a student—not a regular student. One of the creative writing classes he offered to the community. Just six weeks—no credit. Writing poetry. He had wanted to date her from the first class—they met once a week for two hours, but he held off. He wasn’t going to be that guy. Didn’t want to be. But he liked the way she looked—the way she carried herself. More than that. She was like a drone in his ears that grew louder every time he saw her. The drone calmed down to a murmur in-between classes, but it never really went away. In class he tried to steer clear of her. Concentrated on poetry so bad, he saw some of the students perk up. That kind of attention, their stuff must have something in it. No, he wanted to say sometimes. I’m here because your poetry’s worthless. Its nothingness calms me down.

He figured he could make it six weeks.

She scared him. Scared everybody. Even the old guy in the class who managed to hit on every other woman in the class, who took the class to hit on every woman—even the grandmas—steered clear of her. When he made them pair up and critique each other, they scrambled to avoid getting paired with her.

She told it like it was. “Crap,” is all she said to one girl who teared up right away.

“Constructive criticism,” he told her.

“Sentimental crap,” she added.

He took over. “Your images are strong,” he told the girl, who looked at him like he was rescuing her from a mugging—which he was. “Your Papaw sounds like a good man. But did he ever do anything you didn’t like? You don’t want to make him out perfect?”

The girl’s eyes grew wider. Maybe he was another mugger. “Well, he drinks a bit,” she finally said.

“There you go,” he said.

“You want me to write about Papaw drunk?”

"No, I don't want you to write about anything..." He paused. "Well, maybe," he finished weakly. Bobbie was smiling, maybe the first time he had seen her smiling, but at least didn't say what he knew she was thinking.

Sentimental Crap.

He had to give her some attention. The poetry in the class ranged from sweet Papaws and pretty meadows to what he called mountain rap—two young guys out to prove you didn't need to live in a ghetto—at least not a city ghetto—to know about cutting and 'hoe's.

Nobody got shot or cut in Bobbie's poetry, but it felt like it wasn't long coming. One poem she called

Housekeeping.

You didn't walk the dog again.

I stepped in shit in the living room.

Dragged it into the kitchen.

It follows me—shit footprints into the bedroom.

You lying there.

Cocked again.

Open your eyes halfway, wave me to the bed

which ain't been made in a week. "Come on

in, Sugar." I slip right down to my panties,

but I leave my shoes on.

"Wow," is all he could manage when he read it. "This your husband?"

"Boyfriend. But we broke up. Couple weeks ago. Not sure he knows about it yet."

He made it five weeks into the class before she asked him if he wanted to go for a drink. He did.

"How come you made me ask you," she said that first date. "I saw the way you was looking at me the first class. Guys make girls make the first move in New York?"

"Sometimes," he said. He explained himself. Or tried to. That was the first time she gave him that look.

She had taken him home for the drink. Home was a little A-frame two miles from town. He had followed her up a road that curved straight up with steep banks on both sides. She barreled on up like one wrong move wouldn't mean a plunge fifty feet down. He didn't know if he could find his way back in the dark. He said that. She looked at him.

"Well don't go back in the dark, then."

He took a breath. "Maybe girls are different in Kentucky."

She got mad. "You want to, Mister, you can head on out right now. Plenty of light if you drive real slow."

He waved his hands in surrender. She calmed down.

"I don't jump into bed with anybody. But I figure we've been dating five weeks now. Bed's overdue."

"How long you staying?" she asked after the drink. Her small breasts folded into two small mounds when she lay on her back. He cupped his hands on them, let them rest a second. She was his first mountain girl. Dated a Lexington girl for a few months—figured the three hour drive worth the peace of coming home alone. But steered clear of mountain girls. Too complicated. Too something. He didn't know.

"I'm not going anywhere. I like it here."

She shook her head. "Everybody leaves from here. Or wants to. And foreigners like you never stay. But sometimes it takes them a year or two to figure out they're leaving."

She brushed his hands away. He put them back. He figured being with her the drone would have calmed down. But it seemed even louder.

"Not me."

She didn't say anything more. _____

The "drink" lasted through the next day. He thought the A-frame was hidden away, but somehow everybody seemed to know about them within a day or two. By the time the last class had rolled around, everybody was treating them like a couple.

They were a couple.

No secrets in the mountains," she told him. "Everybody knows your business."

This was his business. He forgot his fear of mountain girls being complicated—of not being able to know them like he knew other girls. That Lexington girl. A nice girl. Liked him. A lot. But he'd gotten bored. He always got bored.

Bobbie didn't bore him. Her long legs. The twang to her consonants. Her small breasts—she didn't bother with a bra. The way she sprinkled "aint's" through her sentences though she had a degree from Eastern and half a masters. Why half? he had asked her.

"Ran out of money. Or maybe just ran out."

Ran out? He wanted to ask her more but didn't. He liked not knowing. He liked not understanding.

He liked the way she lay gentle and still after they made love. Not moving as if she was thinking about it. He lay there with her. Thinking about it.

But he didn't know what she was thinking.

He liked the way she pushed him off when she didn't want him. The way she grabbed him when she did.

He liked that she wanted him. Or seemed to. He was different, she said. Different. He didn't know how to take that.

"Different good or different bad?"

She just smiled. "Different."

They were a couple and then they were married. He didn't even remember proposing. She said he did. He didn't care. Or he cared too much to care.

When her cousin Wally told them about the new houses he was building up some hills less than two miles from the college, she'd been the one who told him about them. Hadn't said anything about it being Richie land then. Wally was a local wheeler-dealer. Hand in everything. He would have steered clear of him, but Bobbie said it was too good a deal to pass up. And Wally would take care of them. He was kin.

"So how it'd go from Richie land to your cousin Wally to us?" he asked her. The old woman's dog had tried visiting again but Bobbie had shooed him off.

"Two reasons." He waited. They were staining the deck. Her cousin had left a lot of things undone—part of the bargain. Sometimes it didn't feel that much of a bargain. A sunny day in November—almost too late in the season, but Bobbie said the winter would warp the deck out if they didn't protect it. Wasn't supposed to freeze the rest of the week. "Should be safe," she said.

He could tell she was irritated that he hadn't known that---about the wood twisting. "I'm just an English teacher," he told her but she didn't smile. He had used that line before. He waited for her answer. She finished the corner she was working on before she raised her head.

"Two reasons. One named Meth, the other Oxy."

"The old woman's an addict?"

"Not her. Jimmy. Her boy. Old man left the land to him. Except maybe five acres of up and down to her. And that little flat ridge that her single-wides rest on."

"I thought a widow got more than that."

Bobbie just shrugged. "She got what she got. Jimmy got the land. Then Meth and Oxy got the land. Then Wally. Then the bank."

"Then us."

She didn't say anything more. Kept staining her way out of the corner.

He didn't write much poetry anymore. Getting her seemed to satisfy the poetry in him. One more guy mistaking being horny for being poetic. But she did. She'd show him the first few months and then stopped. He never had much to add beyond his wow. She had gone beyond him. Bu she didn't hide her poetry journal from him when she stopped coming to him—like she didn't mind him reading. One poem was called "Buck Hunting".

"Buck Hunting"

*Your daddy took you hunting when you was eight;
First time, you bragged later to me, after we
made love or what you called making love.
I called it getting fucked.
First time, you bragged, you
bagged a doe.
I begged my daddy for years to let
me go with him.
Ain't something girls do, he'd tell me.
Broke him down finally when I turned twelve.
Come on, then, he spit at me, tobacco juice just
splatting by my shoes.
First time, first time, I told you, though maybe
you thought I meant something else,
I got a buck.*

He didn't want to startle the old woman. Rusty had come trotting after her and was headed for the deck. Looking for the water they didn't put out for him anymore. The old woman would spot him any time now.

"Bobbie," he half whispered through the open screen. "Bobbie," he spoke louder. "Come quick."

She finally heard him. None too soon. The old woman's eyes had followed Rusty's wanderings and found him instead. Bobbie, too. The old woman looked startled. She pulled the gun up from its slant to the ground. She leveled it. At them.

"Who are you? What you doing on my land?"

"Hi Miz Richie," Bobbie said soft by him. "I'm Bobbie. Bobbie Cornet. You remember me. My mamma, Sally, and you used to go to that little church out by Little Creek—Calvary Baptist. Remember?"

The old woman looked confused but kept the gun steady. "What you doing on my land."

"It's not your...." he started to say but Bobbie rasped "hush" at him.

"Jimmy said we could come. Said we could put up this house. Said you wouldn't mind. Didn't he tell you about us?"

"Jimmy?" She had lowered the gun a little. Or the weight had. "You seen Jimmy?"

"All the time. Ain't he been to visit? Next time I see him, I give him hell. Neglecting his mamma like that."

"Jimmy. He let you build here?" The gun was all the way lowered. The dog was nuzzling at him, whining for water.

"He did. Said with the trees you wouldn't see us. At least not in summer. You want to come in for a spell? Have some sweet tea? Rest a bit?"

"No, no," the old woman looked tired now, the gun tip resting on the ground. "Heard somebody. Thought it was strangers poking around." She spotted the dog. "Rusty! Come back here. Don't be bothering them folks."

"Oh, he ain't no trouble," Bobbie said, but Rusty zipped on back to the old woman. They both trudged back up the hill to the single wises. Though you really couldn't see them with the leaves back on the trees, through the purple-white haze of red buds and dogwoods. His first April on the mountain.

"So maybe she shoots first next time and asks questions later?" he said when he had caught his breath.

"She can't hardly lift that gun let alone shoot it."

"Well, that's a comfort. And what about Jimmy? When she finds out Jimmy didn't 'let' us build on his land."

"Jimmy?" Bobbie didn't spit, but she looked like she might start. "Jimmy might think he did. You ever see Jimmy? Jimmy's gone. Far gone."

She had gone to spend the night with her mamma. Did that maybe twice a week sometimes. Left him a plate he could microwave when he got hungry.

She had left her journal open again.

"Salvation Creek"

*Remember that creek by Calvary
Baptist Church our Mammias
brought us to?
Got us saved when I was twelve, you fourteen.
Had held off, you told me.*

Didn't want redemption without me.

*The water still clear in that creek
then, running off a mountain that
rose steep and round.*

*Roundness all sliced off now like
a pumpkin top.
Creek filled up.*

*It was April when they dipped us in, but
the water felt like March.*

*Preacher Mathias held my back and pushed me down
and I swallowed.
Mamma warned me to keep my mouth shut, but
I never could.*

*Oh, remember how your mamma and
my mamma shouted.
The cold, the hand on my back, the joy.
I thought it was the end, not the
beginning like they promised.*

*We was saved, they told us, whatever
that meant.*

*Later, June, July, we'd sneak out of
church and go back to the waters.
You'd put your hand on my back and
push me down.
The creek was lower, and so slow moving,
a leaf would sink before it drifted.
We lay on our backs with the sun in our faces.*

*Sometimes the mammas would
come looking for us.
We'd rustle back into our clothes before
they found us.*

But you only get saved once In this life.

If you're lucky.

He waited a day before he asked her. The drone in his ears had simmered to a murmur the first couple months they had married. But it had gotten louder lately.

"How come you're still writing about that boyfriend? Is he the same one you wrote about in class?"

She looked a little surprised, like he was asking her something she thought he knew.

"Of course, it was the same one. I only had one."

He felt stunned. She was 28—almost 29.

"You only had one boyfriend?"

"I told you our first time I didn't jump into bed with anyone. Just you. And him. I thought you knew that." She paused.

"You want me to write about you?"

"How about us?"

"Oh, us." She didn't say anything.

“Sentimental crap?”

She looked up then quick. Smiled.

“Not sentimental.”

“What’s his name?” “Who?”

“The boyfriend.”

She looked a second like he was accusing her. “I don’t have a boyfriend no more. Just a husband.”

“The one you write about. Getting fucked. Getting saved. The old boyfriend.” She

looked puzzled again like he should have known. He waited. The drone got louder.

“Wally.” She said, finally.

“Wally? Your cousin?”

“Nobody told you that?”

“Told me what?”

She stared at him awhile like he was a stranger. A foreigner. Maybe she had always stared at him like that. Then she went into the bedroom and lay down. He followed her.

“Your cousin was your boyfriend?”

She didn’t answer for a minute. “Oh, I don’t know what kind of cousins we are. Third maybe. Our mammas were cousins. What’s that matter?”

He couldn’t take it in. He felt out of breath like he did when they had to leave the car down by the highway when it snowed. Though Bobbie gunned on up if she was driving. Sometimes she pushed him aside and drove his car. Sometimes she walked ahead of him.

He couldn’t take it in.

“So this deal we got on the house? It wasn’t because you was cousins. It’s like a wedding present from your old boyfriend?”

She had turned her head away. That meant she didn’t want to talk. But he didn’t care. He grabbed her shoulder and pulled her over. It was the first time he had ever grabbed her like that. She looked fierce. He took his hand away.

“I thought you knew about Wally. Everybody knows about Wally. I thought somebody’d tell you.”

“I’m an outsider. Didn’t you remember that? Nobody tells me nothing.”

The old woman came back a week after Bobbie had left. Said she was going to stay with her mamma for awhile. He didn’t know where she was staying. He felt choked with the July heat. He couldn’t see the river for the trees but he knew it was there—sending up enough humid air to drown in, the hills pushing the watery air like a funnel up the narrow hills, covering everything with a sticky residue. Both

the old woman and Rusty were panting, but she carried the gun straight out still. Rusty made straight for the deck. He kept the water dish fill now that Bobbie was gone.

She had left the morning after their last fight.

"You sure the deal with Wally is real? Maybe Jimmy still owns the land? Maybe Wally's just playing us. Playing me."

"Bank says it's real."

"Bank? Wally's bank? Your cousin Earl Cornet's bank?"

She shrugged. Looked at him hard. "Want to make love?"

They had made love then, though the air-conditioning just sputtered. Part of Wally's deal. The sweat poured out of them as if they were a dammed up creek about to burst in a summer storm. About to burst. He worked over her like a laborer—climbing and sinking—like the hills she came from, his hands slipping over her small breasts, she turning away before he could grab on.

Making love.

Though she might have called it getting fucked.

Rusty had found the water dish and was lapping loudly. The old woman raised the gun and pointed it at him.

"Who are you? What you doing on my land?"

No Bobbie to call to now. No Bobbie to explain him. Them. What was he doing on her land? A stranger. A foreigner.

"I'm a friend of Jimmy's," he said, patting Rusty. "Jimmy told me I could build here."

"Jimmy? Jimmy's in the hospital. You ain't no friend of Jimmy's." And she kept the gun steady on him. "I ask you one last time, Mister. What you doing on my land?"

Rusty had dashed from the deck, back to the old woman's side. The old woman waited for his answer.

"Just lost my way. Sorry for trespassing," he said. He got up slowly. "I'll be going now," and headed off the back steps of the deck. He turned away from the old woman and walked steady to his car parked at the lower end of the drive.

"Just keep going and don't come back," he heard the old woman shout. Rusty started to bark. He didn't think he had ever heard Rusty bark before. He drove carefully down the hill, maneuvering slowly round the curves that bordered the fifty foot drops. Bobbie never slowed a bit on the curves, not even in Winter when they iced into treachery.

But then she knew these hills.

He didn't.