

Under the Rhododendrons

There was a dark patch in the grass and a slight depression where the body had been buried last year. Kathy noticed it first. “Sue, take a look out back where we planted the rhododendrons. Looks like the ground’s sunk. We might need to fill it in.”

I knew where she meant. I’d hoped we’d buried George deep enough that this wouldn’t happen, but looks like I was wrong. There were actually two problems. The second, the dark patch, would require more thought.

Down here, in these Great Smoky Mountains, the soil is just right for rhododendrons, azaleas, a couple of hollies, and a lot of flowers. Kathy and I had agreed on rhodys, because they grow so quickly and get big fast. And they’re a lot prettier to look at than George was. I thought about it all night. When I woke, I realized the best way to deal with it was to strip the sod, fill in the depression, and plant two more rhodys. That way the cops would still believe that George had left town, running away from his debts. And his dear sisters were clearly uninformed (and still slightly out of touch).

George had gotten himself into trouble since he was old enough to screw up. If it wasn’t the hot cars, it was the moonshine running, gambling, or later, running numbers for the bosses in town. We seldom saw him sober, and dreaded it when we did. I know our poor parents took to their graves the shame and guilt of wondering what they’d done wrong in raising him to love outlaw ways.

I blame it on the comic books and Robert Mitchum. *Thunder Road* brought Mitchum to the world’s (and George’s) attention. A young hot-rodder, traveling the dark roads with a load of moonshine, and out-running all the cops, he was George’s hero. After that, it was all comic

books that glorified violence and bad boys. Even the ones that had superheroes grabbed George's interest, because he tried to figure out exactly what the villain had done wrong. He thought he could avoid those problems if he was just smart enough. He had a high opinion of his intelligence.

George was the oldest, 6 years ahead of me, with Kathy the youngest by two years.. Once we'd graduated from high school, she and I got jobs in town, clerking at the grocery and McCroy's. The pay wasn't all that great, but we managed to make ends meet. Ma and Pa had passed by then, and there was some savings left after all the expenses were paid. George occasionally threw us some money, "for food" he'd say, although he seldom ate at home. He was usually out with his buddies, driving, fixing cars, gambling, drinking. That was fine with us. The less we saw of him, the better, for he was a mean drunk. And he drank a lot.

About a year ago he had come running in the house, white as a sheet. "Quick," he said to me. "I gotta leave. They're onto me, and I'm dead if they find me." I hid him in the old corn crib at the side of the barn, and told him to lay low until dark. That night I drove him in his rattly old truck down to the bus station, and made sure he got on the bus to Memphis. He'd left us some money, but took his log book with him. I drove the truck home. And waited.

Next day, Sheriff Crawford showed up with two deputies. They asked about George, wanted to search the place. I said they'd need a warrant, but the sheriff had already thought about it. "Miss Sue, I'm so darned sorry to bother you and Miss Kathy so early on this beautiful April Sunday, but there's something I need to tell you. Let's us go into the kitchen where we can talk."

Kathy and I looked at each other and knew. We somehow just knew that George's drinking had got him into a world of trouble. "It's like this," Sheriff Johnson said. "There was a fight yesterday afternoon down at Smitty's." (Jason Smith had Saturday chicken fights. Against the law, but the law tended to look away.) "You know how it can get, when a bunch of men get together and gamble and drink. Passions were high when Billy Biggs' scrawny little rooster got the better of Caleb's champion cock. George accused Caleb of drugging his rooster, things got out of hand, and in the melee, Caleb was knifed in the back. George was seen with a knife in his hand, standing over Caleb. I've got a warrant to arrest George on suspicion of murder. I need to find him, as much for his own protection as to get this case solved quick, before it blows up in this town."

Kathy just stared at me, a slight green tinge around her eyes. She had felt George's temper before, as had I. but she knew nothing about this cock fight and George's bus trip. "Sheriff," I had to think fast. And the truth was the best defense. "George had come running in the house late yesterday afternoon, all in a rush. He asked me to drive him to the bus station because something had come up pretty quick, and he needed to get to Memphis. I took him to the bus station yesterday evening, and saw him get on the bus. I can only guess that he's in Memphis, but I don't know where."

"Thank you Miss Sue, Miss Kathy. Please, I need you to let me know when he returns. Those boys out at Smitty's are right riled up about Caleb, and I want to make sure George is safe. I don't want another murder on my books."

The deputies made pretty quick work of searching for George, noting the mess in his room, but that was nothing unusual. They seemed particularly interested in his log book, which had

lists not only of his moonshine runs, but who all the numbers runners were controlled by. I said nothing to them, hoping they'd figure out that there was no way he'd ever leave it behind.

Things continued, as normal as possible for the next few weeks, considering both Kathy and I were constantly being asked if we'd heard from George. We'd got only the one letter, and Sheriff Crawford borrowed it for his files. I never told him about the money, or what George'd slipped inside as an afterthought.

About the middle of May, in one of those rainstorms we get when Spring is about to flood open, there was a pounding on the door late in the night. I'd taken to locking up the house, since we were constantly being watched and had absolutely no one to protect us. Not that the locks were all that good; if someone wanted to get in, the windows would be just as easy. I turned on a low light by my bed, grabbed the old baseball bat I kept close, and went to the kitchen door. A hoarse whisper rasped, "Kathy, it's me. Be a doll and let me in." George was back.

And George was back. He had his small duffel bag and was wringing wet. I let him in fast and shut the door behind him. "Sue, sorry, I thought you were Kath. I had to come home. Memphis got too hot for me, and I could only think about coming home where it's safe."

"Oh, George! It's not safe here, either! The sheriff thinks you killed Caleb, and he and his deputies are constantly asking us about you, where you are, have we heard from you, are you coming home. Get in here and get those wet clothes off. There are clean shirts and pants in your room. We don't want you catching cold. Are you hungry? I'll get you something to eat." I spoke quickly, hoping he wasn't in one of his moods.

He ate some eggs and toast, and stumbled off to his bed. First thing the next morning, I woke Kathy and told her what happened. "You go off to work. I'll have to call in sick to make

sure George stays hid. Better stop at the liquor store on your way home and get some beer. If anyone asks, tell them we have a new sow about to give birth, and we will need to calm her down. Daddy always used beer, and I see no reason to change. George will just have to settle for whatever you get.” I gave her some money and the truck keys, and pushed her out the door. I didn’t want her there when George woke up.

That was a good thing, for George was as nervous as a hen on a griddle. He paced constantly. He’d start sentences, then trail off. This went on all day, and the agitation was only eased when I went out to the barn to feed chickens and check the pigs. George being home would mean extra work for both Kathy and me, plus dealing with George’s moods. For all the harassment from both the sheriff and George’s “friends,” not having him home was easier than him actually being home.

Over the course of the day, George told me part of his story. He’d gotten to Memphis and stayed with some friends for the first few days. He had to move constantly, afraid his old cronies would find him out. He got money in street corner card games and shooting craps, but his patience with life had worn thin, and he felt more insecure with every passing day. He finally decided he needed to come home and clear his name. It took him three days to hitchhike from Memphis. He kept a low profile and stayed away from anything that looked like it had security cameras or wanted an id. As soon as he got his head straight, he was going to go to the sheriff.

“I didn’t kill him, Sue. Truly. Yeah, I was angry, and a little drunk, and I swung at him. But I didn’t kill him. Hell, I don’t even have a knife. My fists have always been enough.”

“George, I know. You’ve got a temper on you, but I don’t think killing’s in your blood. Kathy’ll be home soon from work. I’ll kill one of the old hens, and we’ll have fried chicken for

supper, just like we used to. I think I've even got some potatoes, so we can celebrate you being home with mashed taters and gravy! Biscuits would be nice, too, and I'll pick some early greens."

About the time Kathy came in, the chicken was cut up and ready to fry. "Kathy, can you get the chicken started? I need to go check the sow. Looks like she's just about ready to drop her litter, and I want to make sure she stays calm." I grabbed a can of beer and headed to the barn.

The sow was restless, so I poured the beer into the trough for her and waited a while for her to start calming down. When I returned to the house Kathy was in tears at the stove, the chicken and grease on the floor and the skillet covering part of it. George was enraged. "What the hell do you think you're doing? That's NOT how it's done! You little bitch, just as stupid as you are ugly." George took a step towards her, his fist raised. Kathy backed up to the corner, but there was no protection for her.

I reached down and grabbed the frying pan and smacked George up side the back of his head. He went down like a dead weight, landing on the chicken. Kathy was white with terror, and an angry red mark was showing on the side of her face. George had lost control again, and as he always did, he picked on the weakest one he could find. As I held Kathy, who was not sobbing, I said, "this is the last time I'm letting this happen. He's out of here today, regardless of whether he has a place to go, or not. I'm done with him."

I grabbed some ice and towels and sent Kathy off to her room. She's always been the one who got the worst of George's temper, and I needed some time to clean up the mess he made and think. George hadn't moved. And he wasn't breathing. Momma's cast iron skillet finally did to George what he had done to many other people. And he wouldn't do it again.

The next day was a Saturday, so we were both off. I had had a lot of trouble getting to sleep, once I moved the body to the wood shed by the house and cleaned up the blood, grease, and chicken. I'd burned my hand on the skillet handle, and it throbbed during the night. When Kathy got up, I told her my plan. Just bury George in the yard, get rid of the clothes and his bag, and pretend to the sheriff and George's hunters that we'd not seen him since he left in April.

Between the two of us we managed to dig a deep enough hole to get George into. It wasn't quite as deep as I'd have liked, but it would have to do. Kathy takes after Momma's petite side of the family, and I range more to Dad's taller and heftier side, but I was basically one-handed. We finished, with a lot of breaks for rest and food, to get where we could put him in the ground. I'd stripped off all of his clothes the night before and wrapped him in an old sheet. We were able to drag him down into the back and roll him into his grave. Filling the hole in was a lot easier than digging it out. By dark, there was a slightly raised mound of soft earth to mark George's last resting place. He wouldn't be with the rest of the family in the cemetery, but I wasn't so sure they'd have wanted him.

The chicken had all been ruined the night before, so there weren't any left-overs. We just had eggs and toast, and baths. We'd both have to go back to work the next day and act like nothing had happened. I would have, unfortunately, burned my hand on a hot skillet, and Kathy had fallen coming up the path in the rain on Friday night.

That was just over a year ago, like I told you earlier. Kathy's still a little shy around loud noises, but my hand has healed. In clearing out George's duffel that he'd brought with him, I found three wads of money, mostly 5's and 10's, which looked like his winnings from Memphis. Shame his lucky streak didn't last after he got home. I tucked it under the loose floorboard in my bedroom, the place I'd kept my treasures since I was little. The rest of the things, including the

log book, I burned. Like most country folk, we had a brush pile, and we periodically burned it for the ash to use on our garden. I slowly started clearing out George's room of his clothing and few books.

Sheriff Crawford stopped by on an irregular basis. His motive was to find out if we knew where George was, but he always acted like he was concerned for us. He'd seen the empty beer cans on an early visit just after we'd buried George and planted the rhododendrons on his grave. I told him we'd had a new sow that was giving birth, and Daddy'd always given them beer to calm them during delivery and to prevent them from eating their young. And that we'd planted the rhodys to add some color to the yard. Especially now, since George was gone, our evenings were freer, and both of us like to sit on the back porch of an evening after chores, and watch the sun go down. Crawford agreed, and said it was the most peaceful time of day for him. The last time the Sheriff had stopped by, I showed him a letter "from George." I'd saved the envelope of that last letter he'd sent. George wrote from New Orleans. He'd caught a freighter in Memphis, and was planning on seeing more of the world working on an ocean-going freighter. Crawford took that letter with him, too.

Kathy and I had decided the easiest thing to do was to strip the sod, bring some more dirt in from the garden to raise the soil where it had settled over George's decomposed body. And get a couple of more rhodies, perhaps some white ones to go with the blood red ones we had planted last year. George may be gone, but he definitely won't be forgotten.