

A Day's Work

James sat in the back of the house, squinting out the sunlight that glared at him through the porch screen. The volume of the birds and insects was turned up, each making their best attempt at music. Beads of water ran from his glass and dripped down his arm as he propped it on his stiff wooden chair. He let the moisture streak to his elbow, where he'd rolled his shirtsleeves. The water darkened the distance it traveled and cooled his skin, though he knew it would be a matter of minutes before he was bone dry again. He felt a constant dryness these days.

From inside, his wife's voice called, "You ain't gone yet?" "Naw," he responded. "I'm sure he can hold on until I get there. From what I hear, there isn't much wrong with him, I figure."

She poked her head through the door archway, the briskness of her hand causing the fading green paint chips to scatter and fall to the floor while she scolded him, "Well, I hope no one does such a thing to you in your hour. You best get along now before the Lord finds you sittin', doin' nothin' but watchin' the bugs."

He shifted, dusted off his polished black shoes, and said, "Grab my bag, please, May." She let go of the door with no small sigh of irritation and turned to disappear into the house's shadows. His voice trailed wearily after her, "And the money, too. I'm bringin' it up to be kept today."

May turned back sharply. "No. Don't you go takin' that money back up there. There ain't no better place for it than right here in this house." At the sight of James' sad expression, she added, "I've gone and lost too much already from banks."

"C'mon now, May. Nothin's gonna happen to the money. It's like I told you last night. The bank is as safe as anywhere. Safer, even." He added with a slight grin, "Nothin' to be afraid of 'cept fear, so I hear."

She balled her fists until her fingers turned white. It was a posture she'd perfected as a young girl standing her ground between her mama and her daddy. Now, even her bare toes clinched the cracked yellow linoleum like a tree branch hanging over a ravine. James had never been like her daddy, but he'd seen the old bearing come back enough recently to know that she was headed closer to the skinny end of the limb.

She opened parched, sun-dried lips. "No," she slammed the word down with blunt, flat force: a rolled newspaper onto a fly. "No's what I said, James, and no's what I mean. The best place for the things we mean to keep is right in front of our faces."

The comment hit him squarely where she'd aimed. He shoved his hands into his pockets and looked down at his shoelaces. His posture was pushed downward by the force of the blow. He sighed, almost spoke, and then swallowed the words back. It wasn't a conversation they could have right now, when she was so close to the edge of the cliffside. After all, most of their neighbors felt the same as May, and Lord knows she had more reason.

James had always had confidence in the folks around him. He wanted to believe in people, so he did, but she hadn't forgiven him for the last time. His trust had all but broken them both. Now, more need than optimism made him hold onto hope that she might change her mind.

In an upbeat voice, he said, "We'll talk about it later. Gimme that medicine bag. I don't wanna be hangin' round here doin' nothin' when the Lord comes back," he repeated back to her and forced a droopy smirk onto the cracks of his face.

Once she'd returned with his bag, he walked a few steps down the road, then turned to watch his wife go inside. She hadn't spared an eye nor a second to send him off unto a day's work. As he turned to drag on, a small prick of intuition made him stop again. He retreaded his steps, then slinked up to the house and looked into the open kitchen window from which he had a clear view. He waited to see her familiar routines pass by, but he didn't hear her weight creaking back toward him. What he did hear came from the now unused downstairs bedroom: the unmistakable clicking sound of their suitcase popping open. He moved around to the next window and stood tiptoed, his balance a surprise even to himself. James craned his head to figure out what his wife was doing and saw that May had busied herself by stuffing every dollar he'd earned into the stiff brown box.

More than wondering what she was doing, it threw him for a moment to think of all the house calls, the cases of cholera, scarlet fever, and influenza packed together like that. It crammed a feeling he'd always carried: that the money didn't amount to much more than a bloodletting that sucked his friends and neighbors dry. To take a dollar from the dying didn't seem much of a living, but May had always said James was troubled by a heart that bled too easily. Lately, seeing so many others go without did nothing but make the feeling of robbery swell. And then there were the girls and what they'd done. Did they feel the weight of others' work as they carelessly tossed it into the cab of the pickup?

He'd given them the keys, and that's what bothered him. The twins had gone far beyond his reach, but he had tossed them the keys to drive away. They'd been at home, their curious friends with them, and the girls had asked to skip the revival and drive out to see Marlene Dietrich at the movie. Something about the way the girls had stayed shut in their room the weeks prior had been bothering May. She'd told him, "It's how they look at each other, how they

whisper when I walk by. I don't know. It's like I'm Lieutenant Bligh and they're 'bout to throw me off the boat, maybe." James had kept telling her there was nothing to worry about. "They're just young girls carryin' grief, that's all. No one is walkin' the plank here." She had wanted them to go with them, to listen to the insufferable little man preach his way through Revelations, "He may not be fire and brimstone, but he will at least bore Hell out of them." But James had not wanted the fight, and he'd let them drive off into the night.

In the room, the midmorning light tilted in and put a beam straight on their life savings. In this cast, the inside of the suitcase looked like that deep white bloodletting bowl he'd stopped using more recently than he wanted to admit. There was pain in every drop it caught from every fevered soul he had ever treated. He preferred being paid in chickens now. It was cleaner. They fussed and had to be plucked and made a damn mess, but that feeling of taking wasn't the same. No. There was honor in walking home with one of those sonsabitches.

After she'd finished, he dropped down and leaned against the wall of the house. He tried to wrap his mind around it all. May had pressed every dollar into the luggage he hadn't used since he was a much younger man: back when the appeal of other places far beyond his Texas home were more compelling to him. He remembered that feeling and knew he must have planted it into his daughters too, but he must not have done enough to help them dig it up when the earth scorched and left them just feeling aimless.

He dug that thought up and replaced it in his mind around the hurts of his neighbors. He tried to forgive himself for the times he carried away the last of their hopes in his pocket. Shame kept him sitting.

He peaked above the windowsill when he heard May struggling to carry her load into the parlor. He couldn't see it, but he listened as the lid of their dust-lined piano lifted and then heard

her grunts as she raised the case and dropped it inside. She closed the lid back down with an unmelodic thud. It was the most music she'd played in years - the most since he was treating their boy for a fever from which no one in the house would ever recover, the girls least of all.

Still sitting beneath the window, James' mind was roaming. He felt like he could still hear the old music ringing: a duet she'd played with the boy. May's voice had carried, "Heart and soul, I fell in love with you, lost control, the way a fool would do, gladly..." The two of them had sat side by side and awkwardly stumbled over the keys as the boy lost his place. May had sang off the cuff, dropping her voice with the sudden, accidental key change, and it had made the boy lose his way altogether. He fell, giggling and dramatic from the piano bench onto the floor. May had told him, teasingly, "A regular Cole Porter, you are." It was the last time they'd played together. It was the last time she'd played.

He could hear that she'd returned to her normal routine in that busy, distracted way she'd had since she was a girl. She was always calculating her next move, but her calculations were now so shortsighted that they only mapped out the fall of her next footstep.

Convinced he'd seen the bulk of the action, James finally went on to his work. He turned and cut through the wheat fields, bending down to pick up a long stalk of grass to chew on as he moved. It hadn't rained an inch in over three months, and he couldn't remember the grass snapping louder underneath his feet. It had hurt the farmers badly, and many of his old friends had moved on. Their sons packed their scant possessions into their Fords, and they rolled down their drives, leaving a lifetime's worth of toil, an empty house, and a wall of red dust in their wakes. Those too stubborn to quit usually called on James to come to their aid only when they were most desperate, but that kept him busy enough. These days everyone seemed desperate.

When he was yards away from the house he was headed, a woman in a worn, patchwork dress stepped out to meet him. She raised her hand, "Dr. James. I'm sure glad you're here. Petey hadn't felt up to nothin'. Hadn't so much as gotten up from bed to lay an eye on these fields. You know I sure can't do it, not like this," gesturing to her swollen stomach.

"Hello, Clara. Let's see what I can do." James walked inside and exchanged a few one-sided pleasantries with his friend, though the man was far more interested in sleeping off what ailed him. After listening to his heartbeat and examining him over, he said in a low voice, next to the patient's heat-reddened ear, "Now Petey, me and you both know what this is, and it's not a bit like you. You're gonna sweat it off this morning, but don't be worryin' your wife drinkin' away your problems and not gettin' your lowly self out of bed for so long. She's got her own troubles." James looked up at Clara, who was watching from the doorway, "Clara, he just needs water and somethin' cool on his face. He might sleep a bit more, but I expect he will be up again before supper."

Clara looked at him, her eyes glassy and a redness running up her cheeks, "I'm sorry, Dr. James. I shouldn't have called for you. I just didn't know what to do. It ain't like Petey. He's been so tired; last night, he wasn't a bit like himself. He couldn't think like normal. Couldn't look at me. Then he wandered off, and I just passed out 'fore I knew where he'd gone. I get so tired. When morning came around, and he wouldn't get up, I didn't know what to think. I...I have nothin' for you, Dr. James. You ain't been nothin' but good to us, and I can't give you even a nickel now. I'm real, real sorry."

He put one hand awkwardly on her shoulder, moving the other to dab his handkerchief at a drop of sweat before it hit his eyes, "Don't worry about it, dear. Pay me what you can when you can."

He turned to walk away, making a mental note to come back in the next day or so and have a conversation with Petey Rayburn when he sobered up again. James was half down the drive when Clara called from the uneven wood slats of her porch, "You know, I can tune a piano. We had one when we was little. Mama taught me to play and to tune. I'd be glad to work on yours a bit. It sure is a pretty one just to be sittin' there. Maybe it could get Mrs. May thinkin' about playin' again. Mama used to tell me she was real good."

James smiled. He thought of the thick, crookedness of May's aching fingers as they used to be: long, deliberate, determined, precise. The music she played was like that, too. Every note was exactly the one it was supposed to be. It was precisely in order. The melody stopped all those years ago when the world had become disordered. Chaotic. She couldn't pick it back up again or rearrange the notes in her head. They were like chickens scrambling about in the yard. No, she never did like chickens of any kind.

The thought of watching May's face turn a few shades when Clara Rayburn came up to tune her suitcase-filled piano gave James a good laugh. Maybe May would laugh too. More than notes in key, he wanted to hear that. If she could laugh, perhaps the stubborn woman would think about letting him take money to the bank after all. They could move on to whatever was next for two folks that had passed the middle and were aiming to make a nice end. There'd be no harm in trying.

He smiled deviously, crooked, "Now, that sounds like a fine idea. How'd you like to come on up there with me now? Petey is going to need a bit of time for himself anyway."

They went through the field and up the road to his house; for a while, the crunching of the crops was all that was audible. Then Clara started, "You know, Dr. James. Not one of us blames you for what those girls of yours did. They may've robbed that bank, but they were taught

right and wrong. They got the morals in there that you an' May give them. Some folks just take a bad turn, that's all. And, since your boy passed..." her voice trailed, "I hope I didn't say too much. I just...I just wanted you to know." James looked down at his feet, coughing out a small thank you.

She stopped speaking as they walked into May's simple but meticulously clean kitchen. A cast iron pan was simmering a piece of chicken on the white enamel stove. James left May and Clara to greet each other and ask about their families while he snuck around the corner, taking the handkerchief from his pocket to recover himself.

When talk turned to gossiping about the preacher, he wandered to the parlor. At the piano, James lifted the lid, grabbed the suitcase, and took it upstairs to the unused closet in their son's bedroom. Pushing back his old clothes, the ones too special to May to ever part with, and moving the rifle the boy had used to shoot armadillos, James sat the suitcase down. He felt confident that May wouldn't bother to look there. Some spaces were jammed too closed for May to remember they'd open again. He hoped he wasn't one of them. What else did they have left but each other and this damned suitcase?

James shook his head at it all: the money, the rifle, the thought of those armadillos rolling up to their backs. Then, he returned downstairs to tell his wife about the exchange he'd made for his day's work. "Darlin', Clara has offered to tune that piano of yours. Maybe that'll keep it from collectin' so much dust."

May's eyes widened, and she choked out, "Well...no. I mean, what would you want to go and do that for? Got no reason for it. We don't use the thing. James Griffin, don't you make her do that..."

But Clara interrupted and took the older woman's hand, "Oh, it was my idea, Mrs. May; I wanted to do it for you. Let me."

James marveled at the two of them, wondering which would win the battle of wills. May wasn't a woman to be easily deterred, but neither was Clara Rayburn. She had the stubbornness of a woman who'd kept her husband off the bottle for so long that she couldn't stand the thought of him returning to it now. She'd rather call the doctor to speak to him than believe such a thing was possible again. Or, maybe he'd misread that morning call. Perhaps Clara called James just to let him know she always would, no matter what the twins had done.

In the battle of accepting kindness, there was only so much argument a Southern woman could use to protest politely. May conceded with as much reluctance as James ever saw on her face. Her chest was heaving as she retreated into her kitchen and back to her skillet. When Clara had gone around the corner, May's stirring slowed, and James knew she was listening for the precise moment when the young woman would open the lid and see the odd thing sitting in it.

But the moment never came. After a few minutes, notes started ringing. May walked in to see, and sure enough, there wasn't a thing about that piano that could have surprised Clara: no suitcase, no money. She sat at the sight of its absence. James came in and suppressed an unnamable grin, "What's a'matter with you? Your chicken's burning in the kitchen." She returned to the stove, and found the food burnt so badly that it was hardly edible.

All night, James stuck as close as he could to the parlor and the piano, happy and humming to himself, wondering just how dogged the woman was going to be before she would let herself ask what might have happened out loud. He wanted the moment when she finally said it. He wanted that chance to laugh with her after she scolded him. He wanted, needed, some of her to come back to him after all they'd lost together.

But, as much as she must have suspected him, she didn't grant him that satisfaction. Her anger was a wall that would need scorching to bring down: influenza, then friends of her daughters coming around that she'd thought no better than chicken thieves, then their Ford peeling off into the night, not to come back again. No, it would need much more than a damn joke to turn her anger.

That night, crawling under the sheets, James heard a nervous growl from May's stomach. He had a moment's mind of telling her what he'd done, but it seemed like a little victory in a season when there'd been so few, and he wanted to hang onto it just a minute more. May's dry, level-headed focus won most days over James' meandering compassion, but he felt the glimmer of his optimism kindling. He'd never intended to sleep on it, but James always did fall asleep faster than he believed he would. When he was younger, he'd been known for falling asleep standing straight up while waiting with expecting mothers on their babies. These were nights both too long and too short; his body adapted to make the most of them.

He didn't feel when she'd crept out of bed, hear her creaking down the stairs, rearranging furniture, or searching. He awoke later in the night and moved his hand to the cold spot where his wife should have been; there was nothing there but the stubby old fabric posing as their sheets. Smoke in his lungs jolted him upright. He coughed out, "May...May, where are you?" Then, he leaped out of bed and down the stairs; for the second time in one day, he surprised himself with the agility he still had left in his body. He called her name again and heard nothing but saw a lump spread across the floor in front of the piano bench. It appeared that she'd tripped, shattering her lantern, and knocking her unconscious next to the spreading flames. "May...get up now!" She didn't move, so he gathered the strength his racing heart gave him, drew her up to his shoulder, and carried her out.

James sat still on the ground for a moment before May woke. The house had gone up so fast that he didn't even attempt to put it out. The heat seared his eyebrows and dried the dew off his bare feet. The flames didn't discriminate; they didn't have rooms to leave unopened: they burned the piano, the rifle, the frying pan, and the suitcase.

Once again, James pictured all of the dollars in the suitcase, what they represented: friends and neighbors, toil and labor, sickness and health, a whole life up in smoke. He imagined the bills blackening, curling, and changing colors: green to orange to black. He imagined them changing substance: coarse paper to jumping flames, then ash and smoke. With the smoke rose that vague guilt he carried; the remorse of a father outliving his son; the grief of his daughters taking every penny from their neighbors; and the shame of a man having it better than those around him. He wasn't glad to see the money gone, exactly, or the house and all of its memories: dead armadillos dropped proudly on clean kitchen tables, his boy puffed up like a cat dragging in a mouse, May fussing but tossing his hair, "You're a better shot than musician; I'll give you that!" To watch it go was a kind of sad that pressed on his chest, but he knew already that it wouldn't undo him. If May would sweep it clear with him in the morning, maybe they could start again. Perhaps they needed to. He turned to watch her breathing and wondered what she would do with another loss. Would the fire burn her up with it this time? And what, then?

May awoke, clearly confused at finding herself in the grass. Her back was damp, whether from sweat or dew, James wasn't quite sure. For the first time that day, she caught his glance. Her cheeks were glowing, and some odd reflection of light was dancing in her flooded eyes. What was that look?

She brought herself upright and squared her shoulders to the fire. For moments she said nothing, her face inscrutable. And, then, at once, James watched the corners of her eyes turn up.

Her fingers extended to their fullest length, the flames warming their ache. They landed on James's hand.

At last, she spoke, "It was in the boy's bedroom, wasn't it? Lord, James. Money sure does make good kindlin'."

A frightened chicken fluttered its way across their view of the yard. They looked at each other. Her shoulders began to shake, and a sound spilled out of her that James could not instantly name. Laughter. She shook with laughter until tears created lines from the dust caked on her face. Looking him in the eyes, she laced her fingers through his, "God, James, I hate those damn chickens."