

New World

Cliff had his coffee on the front porch that morning. His rocking chair had a smooth motion that mimicked even the softest of cradles. Abigail used to bring him sweet tea but now she was gone, leaving the smell of perfume and a bed imprint in her wake. Drinking tea on the porch had always been something they did together, their second favorite activity. But now her rocking chair with the white arm rests sat still and unmoved except for on occasion when Raggedy, the household calico cat, would plant herself there wishing for the soft pillowy material of Abigail's blouse and lap would provide. Now he drank coffee.

Cliff's house sat on the edge of the town, a town that had grown like a mycelial network from where Cliff's family had first bought land and built a house. Back when Texans were buying thousands of acres with only the promise of developing the land and attempting to survive the Comanches. From his porch he was able to see when most people entered the town and even once in a while when they left. His home had become a sort of cornerstone to the community, a landmark that said "you're now entering Milo."

Many people traveled to the small town that Cliff called home, because of the swimming hole. It had become famous around the country a few decades before when a young girl with leukemia fell in and was miraculously healed. Some say that her cancer was already in remission when she fell in, others say that the water in Milo was sacred. Ever since that doctor had declared the girl cancer-free, Milo had grown in fame. Visitors came from all around, to take a dip, to submerge pictures of their loved ones suffering with ailments. Milo had a steady stream of tourists per year and because of his location, he'd see most of them when on their pilgrimage.

However the numbers had waned. Blame it on the nihilism of the era or new medical breakthroughs that had made prayers turn into stints in a hospital waiting room. Whatever the reason, the swimming hole had become just another swimming hole. Eighty years had passed since the original miracle, enough for new generations to be born, and hear the stories of a time they never lived.

Cliff calmly sipped his coffee as the first Milo resident ran by seemingly excited. Moving through his field of vision from right to left like reading the Torah, or more aptly a manga.

"Hey Cliff!"

Cliff calmly raised his coffee mug and gave the young man a soft smile as he ran by.

"Are you not coming?"

Cliff knew this is the part of the story where one would usually say "to what?" But he was old, and tired.

"Nope."

The young man kept running. Behind him, a family of five jogged by, the father pulling two little girls and the mother holding a baby boy.

“Let’s go Cliff!” Shouted the father.

“Nah.”

The mother of the family didn’t even look over at Cliff as she ran, but rather at her baby boy who seemed to have some sort of abnormality on the side of the neck, a tennis ball sized growth that did not allow him to rest his head normally.

“Hm.” said Cliff as he sipped his coffee.

Day before yesterday, his trip to the city nearby had only deepened his love for the simple ways of the front porch. How was Cliff supposed to know that the Apple store didn’t service flip phones? Abi used to take care of all that, the bills were a mess to sort out when she passed. He was still getting notices in the mail of bills that he didn’t even know they paid. Cliff hated the level of condescension with which the Apple store worker spoke to him. There is not much difference between the way in which people speak to babies than to the elderly.

“I can’t figure out why my phone is no longer ringing, it just starts vibratin’ and I only catch it if its on or near me.”

“Well sir, now see, this is an Apple Store, we work exclusively on Apple® products.”

“Can you just get my phone to ring?”

“Well I could do my best but I haven’t worked on these... oh okay well look, it looks like you just accidentally turned the volume all the way down.”

“How did I do that?”

“Well it could have been anything, you could have leaned on it, or really anything.”

“So this one is the volume here?”

“Yes, if you press the top part of that button it turns the volume up, if you press the bottom part of that button it turns the volume down.”

“What if I want to turn the whole thing off?”

“You’ve never turned this phone off sir?”

The community continued to walk by Cliff's house. Old, young, rich, poor. Some urgently, some desperately.

"Let's go Cliff! It's happening again!"

"Hm."

Day before yesterday Cliff had gotten a call.

"Hey Dad."

"Hey honey."

"I guess you know why I'm calling."

"Hm. Yeah. That's nice of you, but I haven't changed my mind."

"Dad there's nothing there anymore."

"I'm here."

"Hm. Yeah . . . How are you holding up?"

When American men speak, there are usually few pauses. They are geniuses at filling gaps in conversation with a mention of the weather, quips about the president, raving about their sports teams. Like a salesman realizing his pitch is dependent on the flow of the conversation, American men know what they're selling and how to make it palatable. Cliff seemed at a loss for words.

"Dad, are you doing okay?"

"I went out to the hole a couple of days ago before going into town. Ever since you and your sisters abandoned us..."

"Dad, we got married."

"... your mom and I would go to the hole on Saturday morning with our lawn chairs and our thermoses of sweet tea and watch the sunrise. Before running errands. For some reason there wasn't anyone there yesterday when I went, so I stayed a little longer than usual. As I was sitting there, the sun began to rise and it may have been the most beautiful one yet. I leaned over to comment on it to your mother and I realized I was just talking to Raggedy. The best part of watching the sunrise for me was turning and seeing her smile while watching, with the purple, pink, and orange sky casting her face in its light. I don't know how to admire things without

turning to share my admiration with her. What's the point of a beautiful thing if I'm the only one having the experience?"

Cliff scratched his nose where a tear might have fallen, had he been born in a different time. For now they just accumulated behind his eyes, longing to burst through his glistening pupils... "I don't know why she couldn't have waited just a bit longer. We were old and close to the end anyway."

"I know dad. That's why I want you to come live with us..."

Cliff finished his phone call as Milonites kept running by, four-wheeling by. Cliff's curiosity got the better of him. He finally asked one young man with an usually pale daughter that half carried half pushed down the road.

"It's happened again! Another miracle! Let's go!"

Cliff harrumphed, thinking about how he had been there only a few days prior and nothing seemed out of the ordinary. After some time, he finally turned to Raggedy, "what do you say ol' girl?"

He took his time to pack the old-side-by-side, ATV's were the only vehicles that made it to the swimming hole. Lawn chair, straw hat, picnic foods, as determined by old habits left over from the age of Abigail. People continued streaming by as he prepared. He grabbed Raggedy, she wasn't too fond of the swimming hole but Cliff liked the company.

Cliff walked slowly, sometimes being passed by other ATV's, bicycles. "Boy, some of these folks are really booking it" he commented to Raggedy. He passed by families holding sick relatives in wheelbarrows, on comedically makeshift stretchers. Grandmothers, children, anemic teenagers, all being carried in one way or another along this path that led to the swimming hole. Cliff was reminded of the Bible picture book his mother had him read when he was young, the people of Israel walking out of Egypt on their way to the promised land.

Cliff had been a paramedic as a younger man. Early in his career he was sent to a particularly gruesome car accident. The witness who had called in the emergency via pay phone said that a group of teenagers had been driving too fast, possibly high on more than life. The police report would later confirm due to marks found on the road, their opponents never came forward. One of the passengers was in serious need of a tourniquet. After caring for the teenager he reached around for his marker to note the time and write the letter 'T' on the patient's forehead as he had been instructed in his training. He had been told and understood this was of utmost importance since emergency room nurses and doctors would need to know if their patient had a tourniquet before providing any assistance. Finding no markers, and his partner being of no use, Cliff dipped his gloved pointer finger in the patients pooling blood and wrote a 'T' on his forehead that looked more like a cross and moved on to care for the others.

At a distance he could hear splashes and people cheering. As he got closer to this holy ground, the desperation seemed to increase, people began to break into full sprints. He could hear shouts in the distance near the hole, sounding like pentecostal tent meetings, sporting events, concerts.

Time at his house without Abigail seemed to pass more slowly. He filled it with various projects, some more pressing than others. A fence post that only slightly needed mending. Removing leaves from the storm shelter. Feeding the chickens. He'd let his breakfast preparation take hours, on purpose. Eggs pushed through a fine mesh sieve for a smooth consistency to his eggs. Roasted potatoes that were boiled then made crispy in duck fat. Homemade biscuits with compound butter he made himself. One day he forgot bacon. The small grocery store in Milo had recently metamorphosed as all things in the age of convenience. Rows of self-checkout machines with a supervisor and a tablet, ensuring that ribeyes were not being rung up as chuck roast. Cliff was here for bacon.

"You can remove your card sir... Sir. Sir."

Cliff finally reacted to the commotion realizing it was aimed at him. "Is it done?"

"Yes sir, well... actually, it says there is an error with your card, let me see." The card had expired.

"Do you have another form of payment?"

"I had cash but I just put in gas. Do you take checks?"

"Oh, I'm sorry sir, we no longer take checks."

"That's all I have."

"Do you not have your cards on your phone?"

"No. I didn't even know I could do that." Cliff pulled out his phone and stared at it.

"Yes sir, well, oh I see. No, sorry sir. You may have to come back."

As the hole came into view he confronted a sight that made him slow. The swimming hole was red from edge to edge. The water had turned the color of blood, or was it blood? Children splashed in the water, adults jumped for joy on the edge of the hole after jumping in. Babies were being baptized, their heads dripping red.

Raggedy, true to cat form normally hated water, yet she leaped from the seat and ran to the water-side, licking at the liquid, her light orange and white muzzle turning red as she lapped, she even beginning to move into the hole itself. Cliff had no choice but to go for her.

“Raggedy, gosh darn it come here girl.” She began to move out into the water, Cliff had no choice but to step in. When the water hit his ankles, he sank slightly, sucked in by the sludge of the swimming hole bottom. He swiped at her, but Raggedy seemed determined to swim further in. “Rag, come here girl.” As he moved further in, tears began to pool in his eyes, emotion breaking out of the deep. The water was warm against his legs as he was forced further and further in. The blood red water crept up his thighs, passing his manhood, his waist. He was nearly chest deep by the time Raggedy finally let him grab her, tears finally flowing. He stood in the crimson pool, holding his pet close to his chest, heaving as children-made-whole frolicked around him and parents leapt for joy, spraying red everywhere, spurred on by this miracle of the new world.