

Glint of Gold

There are more worlds than one, and in many ways they are unlike each other. But joy and sorrow, or, in other words, good and evil, are not absent in their degree from any of the worlds, for wherever there is life there is action, and action is but the expression of one or other of these qualities.

Becuma of the White Skin, James Stephens

Granddaddy Dobkins told stories. As a little girl, his words painted my mind with wonder and awe, my eyes wide and focused on the easy rhythm of his words. We would sit on the front porch while the sun painted the sky shades of gold and he'd rock in his wooden chair talking about the woman with fiery hair, cursed from long ago to eternal life on Earth. That was my favorite tale. Grandmama Mae Belle and Aunt Pitty Pat always listened without too much complaint, their rockers a few feet away.

"Dennie Mae," Granddaddy would say, "Listen here to me. Did you know that under this very porch is the solemn grave of my great-great-grandmama? She came here back in 1854, before the war between the states, and settled this town with my great-great-granddaddy. Oh it was alright for a spell, but as the town grew, the Baptists grew, and they proclaimed her a witch on account of her bright red hair and fair skin...just like yours Dennie Mae." Here he'd always wink at me, a glimmer of mischief in his eyes surrounded by skin that crinkled with time. It made me feel special, like I could spin magic, too, conjure ghosts, and tell stories.

He'd continue on, "Her mama taught her about magic in the old country, and rumor had it she'd place a spell on anyone that crossed her." Grandmama Mae Belle would always tsk..tsk at this while she rocked just a few feet away, tell Granddaddy she sure wished he'd stop with all this nonsense. Granddaddy never listened.

“Anyway, bein’ an Irish woman, she didn’t take kindly to what folks said. She walked right into a Sunday morning Baptist sermon and cursed them all - pointed a claddagh ring at the lot and said...” And here he would clear his throat, throw back a shot of whiskey, and proceed in Gaelic:

“Mé a mhulad duit uile, nuair a ardóidh mé arís, scriosfaidh mo áilleacht, agus déanfaidh sé an t-áilleacht.”¹

“And then she dropped dead.”

Of this, no one knows why. Apparently, it’s the way all Dobkins die, as if struck by an invisible bullet.

Granddaddy would always pause for dramatic effect after this, and then go on to tell the rest of the tale, “Nothin’ left to do but bury her even though legend says she wasn’t dead, she’d just run away through lands of clay and water and fire. But, old A.H. pulled up the porch and put her earthly body down beneath the ground. Some good Christian women made sure a blessed cross laid to rest with her, and the ring she had worn, on account of their fear she would actually rise again. Of course, here we are, over an’ hundred years later and the porch is still solid.” He’d bang his boot and make me jump every time. “She aint’ outta the ground yet,” he’d say with a final slug of his whiskey and Dr. Pepper, and he’d head off to bed.

His story never scared me; I wanted to meet this cunning woman I resembled, I wanted to know why they thought she ran away? But Grandmama Mae Belle would always pull me close and ruffle my hair, “Your Granddaddy just likes to tell stories, there ain’t no woman buried under this porch.” My Aunt Pitty Pat would just close her eyes and call upon the Lord’s good will.

But then, Granddaddy Dobkins died. Keeled over on the same front porch and dropped his whiskey and Dr. Pepper. None of this went well together: the whiskey, the soda, or the Texas

¹ I curse you all, when I rise again, my beauty will destroy, and yet make amends.

heat, but nevertheless, it's how Grandmama Mae Belle knew what happened. The slick beads of condensation had wrapped themselves around the cold tumbler and it slipped right out of his hand. Shattered on the porch and splintered the wood. "A fine mess you've made here," was all Grandmama Mae Belle said when she opened the screen to determine the ruckus out front. She let the door slap the frame behind her while she went to get the broom.

It's not that she didn't love Granddaddy, quite the contrary, it's just grief has a way of making folks turn in on themselves, reach for what they can control. Sweeping she could do. Sweeping came as natural as breathing.

The entire town of Dublin, TX, all 3,000 it seemed, turned out with casseroles and condolences, sweet tea and sympathy. Grandmama Mae Belle's kitchen looked like a Baptist potluck on Easter Sunday. Well-meaning folks rushed to her side like a revival running the devil out of town, and that included me: Aideen Maeve Dobkins, *not* of Dublin, TX. I, my friends, am from the big city with its glitter and shine and slog. It's a compromise.

Maybe I shouldn't say I came rushing to her side, but was rather strongly encouraged to attend by my parents, even though it was May. My Senior year. A week before prom. And exams. And my last summer of childhood. But, here I am at a funeral with bagpipes playing in Dublin, TX, the Irish capital of the Lone Star State and the home of the Dublin Dr. Pepper Bottling Company (and Ben Hogan and the World Championship Rodeo with Gene Autry at the helm, but that's a story for another day).

Dr. Pepper is why this town became famous, and why my Granddaddy held a legendary status in it. His great-great-Granddaddy, A.H. Dobkins settled this town back in 1854, after his Daddy, John Dobkins, came over from Ireland in 1735. They came in at Ellis Island and headed

South. The Dobkins have been a Dublin original since the 18th century, and we carry on this tradition, somewhat.

Now, here we all are, crammed in the front row family pew with all our double-names taking up twice as much space in a little white church without air conditioning in Central Texas. While the North still enjoyed the breath of Spring, we've melted down here, our powder and perfume turned to paste. I suppose some of the women in their hats look like they've been frosted, but it's not a cake I'd like to try.

Tears were shed and hymns sung, but the atmosphere wasn't as oppressive as the heat. The town loved my Granddaddy, his charm, his strength, and his humor, but the town also knew him. Knew him well enough to know that hours of mourning would be wasted salt. That laughter and tall-tales should fill his wake, not shrieks and sobs. And the town obliged and congregated like a backyard bar-b-que to send him off to his Heavenly host. It both grated and gratified, this contrast to emotions, and I struggled with my place in it all.

"Dennie Mae..." a voice trilled. It dripped with the same pure cane sugar they still put in their sweet tea, "Dennie Mae..."

I hate being called "Dennie Mae." What is it with the South and their obsession with two names? Why isn't one enough? I'm named partially after Grandmama Mae Belle. Really her name is Bessie Maeve Dobkins, but to call her Bessie seemed too simple, Bessie Mae too direct, so Mae Belle it became. Then there's Aunt Patricia Rose, slightly older than my Grandmama, slightly more senile, and we call her Aunt Pitty Pat. My brothers fared a bit better, Irish twins - Patrick and Peter, and my mother, we just call her Cora, even though she's still pretty southern. My daddy though, is a double-double, too: Robert Joseph Dobkins, a.k.a, Bobby Joe. It's just one of our fun colloquialisms.

“Dennie Mae...” Aunt Pitty Pat trilled again. Granddaddy Dobkins’s coffin had barely passed the back pews and moved into the standing room only section outside the church doors when she rushed over to hug me, sticky sweat and all.

“Dennie Mae. Let me look at my best girl.” She took me in as I fanned myself with a black-and-white photo of Granddaddy, “I brought you a little somethin’.” She dug in her purse and produced a stuffed baby chicken. “I got it at a yard sale last week. I just saw it an’ thought of you, and now A.H. up and died and I can give it to you. Ain’t life funny that way?” and she giggled a bit like a schoolgirl.

I took the small trinket with good manners, “Aunt Pitty Pat, thank you so much. I do love baby chicks,” and smiled graciously. She turned her attention to my brothers, and I escaped anymore damp hugs.

“Every time,” I hear my mother’s voice behind me, a whisper in my ear.

“I know. I don’t know why it’s always baby chicks though? I mean, I liked them as a kid, but I’m eighteen now.”

“Yes, Dennie Mae,” she replied with a smirk knowing my aversion to the nickname, “But, she’ll always remember you as the little girl that watched chickens hatch the summer you stayed here.”

At the age of six, I wanted to live on a farm. We’d read *Charlotte’s Web* in school and I knew I could have my very own Wilbur the pig. No one in my family farmed, but Granddaddy Dobkins and Grandmama Mae Belle had chickens, so that would have to do. I stayed here for six-weeks that summer between 1st and 2nd grade and watched the hatchlings play.

I loved the small town then, far away from the hustle of Austin. The way everyone called me Dennie Mae, and how they’d say hello every afternoon as we walked to the main strip for a

Dr. Pepper. The corner store still had the old-fashioned pull and I felt like I lived in a picture untouched by the world.

With the service over, we piled into pickup trucks, both new and old, and rode to the Dobkins family cemetery. I used to love how everything here echoed my name, but as we traveled through the streets, the town had lost its charm. It seemed tired, defeated, and haunted by a history so few remember anymore. The larkspur and lantana drooped in the early summer heat, stray dogs laid still, too hot or lazy to bark at a stranger. Our rolling caravan passed the Dobkins family home, and the front porch, once a grand veranda, sagged with the weight of age, and of death. The eaves overflowed with moss and ivy, and not in a charming way. Windows were cracked. Paint peeled. Shutters shifted. Grandmama Mae Belle and Aunt Pitty Pat lived in a southern gothic gone awry – it should probably be torn down. What once seemed nostalgically grand, now seemed eternally eerie. A once beautiful landscape trapped inside the shell of an old man.

I slid out of the truck; my Dad's business logo emblazoned on the side: Design Visions of Austin. Even though he hailed from Dublin, he'd left long ago for college at Texas Tech and majored in architecture. He and two of his friends moved to Austin and opened their own business. Their goal: build what's new, revive what's old. Mostly they renovated homes long past their prime in the Austin Historic District, and despite the day's circumstances, I could see my Dad take in the ruin of his childhood town. He never told stories like Granddaddy did, never wanted to indulge in family legend.

It certainly wasn't the first time Bobby Joe had wanted to get his hands on this place; but, Granddaddy Dobkins insisted it never be touched — not the old bookstore downtown or the

knickknack shop or the pizza place with its worn fake leather booths and wooden floors, not the roads in disrepair, not broken homes, not splintered porches. He warned of cursed grounds and disturbing the dead, of protective charms and broken vows. As a small child, all his stories captivated my imagination. Aunt Pitty Pat and Grandmama Mae Belle would listen solemnly and nod with sincerity at each word, but always rubbed the crosses they wore around their necks. Every now and then, Aunt Pitty Pat would mumble, “Lord Jesus, protect this child, may she never, ever, ever...” and it would trail off after that. Grandmama Mae Belle just rubbed and rubbed her cross.

But, no one talked of Granddaddy and his stories today. It felt like they died with him and I watched my childhood, wrapped in a man I loved, be lowered into the ground. A hole opened in my chest, one I hadn't expected, and the silence that filled the air felt pregnant with tension, like a brewing storm. I wanted to ask questions about his life and hear about the mystery woman, but no one spoke of her today. The family bible exposed a blank space where she should have been, etched out after her death. We'd add Granddaddy's date later today, yet I still couldn't ask who she was or had been. The town also treated her like a curse — a modern-day bloody Mary with flaming hair — mention her name and she'll steal your soul. The afternoon sun and the laughter from the church slipped into somber as we laid him to rest in hallowed ground.

The bagpipes played Amazing Grace and the view expanded past his coffin as we tossed in our final flowers. I lifted my head to say “Amen” when movement snagged my attention and the word caught in my throat. A red braid whipped quickly around a tree on the far side of the graveyard and a long green velvet dress pooled in sprawling roots that blended with the forest floor. I forced my eyes closed several times, attempted to clear the tears I hid on the brim of my lashes, but the vision stayed. I shook my head, cleared my mind and told myself this was

imagination, my way of grieving that sparked the memory of the stories Granddaddy told. The setting sun lit the tree line and old headstones in a way that refracted colors of warmth and I could not unsee the red plait iridescent in the evening glow followed by the glint of gold on a pale hand.

“Aideen?” My mother touched my arm to bring me back to the present moment, “Are you okay?”

“Did you see that woman across the way?” My heart pounded in my chest like a hummingbird hovered, wings thrumming against an empty feeder. I walked around the burial setting and looked again. I wanted to see her, to know her, and to believe in the stories Granddaddy shared. My mind raced with anxious desire to make the vision real.

“Aideen. There’s no one across the way. Maybe a shadow as the sun moved? We’re headed back to the house. C’mon.”

I wanted to go. Not because I didn’t believe my eyes, but because I couldn’t be alone in this moment. I needed to feel part of the family while I processed everything: the laughter at the church, the broken town on the drive here, the heavy presence at the burial ground, the vision in the trees. Everything held its own emotion, and they jumbled in my body fighting for space. I took my mother’s outstretched hand and turned away from the other world.

We walked back towards the line of vehicles when I felt eyes on me. I knew someone watched me move because the hairs on my neck pricked. I turned to see a boy following my steps. He looked my age, his skin painted in a sepia tone against the sunset, his color muted against the bark and leaves. When I met his face, he looked away to the tree line where I saw her moments before. Had he seen? Was he even real?

However, the border of the graveyard stood empty now, a vast expanse of quiet before me. The boy watching me swiveled his head between me and the trees, his body stiff and rigid, his fingers splayed against his thighs as if he sought to hold on to this reality. How long had he been watching me? I turned back to look for him, but he, too, was gone. Vanished into the air like mist rising from a steamy creek bed. My family walked ahead of me, impervious to the sight. I felt frozen in time.

“Aideen,” my mom called to me again, “Let’s go.” I took one last look across the cemetery. I climbed into my father’s truck and buckled in next to Patrick and Peter and my father asked me, “What were you doing?”

“Nothing” was all I could say.

We settled into our rooms and then scurried around the kitchen countertops like mice at a feast, helped ourselves to the overflow of food. It’s a high tradition in the South to feed your feelings with homemade recipes passed lovingly down from the generations before. I admit I liked this part of small-town life because pretending to enjoy overpriced lattes and sugar-free scones in a coffee shop wore on me like a bad haircut. Truth be told, I’d rather gorge on biscuits, gravy, and sweet tea than sip burnt coffee. But, it’s hard to explain the simplicity of homestead to a city that pretends to care about the common man while they overcharge you with a smile.

The townsfolk squeezed themselves into the house, the backyard, the front porch, while dusk settled over the day like dust in the old house. Stories now flowed like the whiskey they held in their cups praising Granddaddy in one moment and cursing him the next, how dare he leave this town? Their grief pulsed in the house and spilled into the summer night disguised as laughter and raucous rememberings. I sought space and squeezed my way through the long

hallway towards the back porch. I hadn't brought myself yet to stand where he fell. I took my time as I moved through the house. I wanted to touch the bric-a-brac and contemplate the photos. I'd been back once or twice since my summer foray as a farm girl, but only with casual effort. I didn't really take the time to look around or appreciate what I just lost; only looked at my phone and texted my friends about the doldrums of country life.

Granddaddy Dobkins's death hit me harder than I'd anticipated. I somehow felt lost without hearing his boots as they tramped through the halls and up and down the stairs. Who would sit in the rocking chair on the porch, sip the whiskey, and tell me stories that electrified my imagination? I still carried a torch for the tales of the red-headed woman with her fair skin and curses on the town. Would she be lost with Granddaddy's death?

Grandmama Mae Belle and Aunt Pitty Pat blocked the back screen door as I approached, their heads together in hushed conspiracy.

"I can't believe he's already here. Ain't got the good sense God gave a rock," Aunt Pitty Pat almost spat the words out. "You think he'd give us more time."

"Now, Patricia, we knew this would come," Grandmama Mae Belle never used her real name, so it put me immediately on edge. Who were they talking about? I moved closer to lean in and hear better, but the old house betrayed me. I used to know which floorboards creaked under my steps, but I'd forgotten. They turned to look at me like twin puppets pulled by a string, eyes wide and smiles pasted on.

"Dennie Mae. How you holdin' up sugar?" Grandmama Mae Belle asked.

"I'm fine."

"Now darlin' you ain't supposed to tell fibs to your Granny," and she chastised me with love and affection, but never true admonishment. This caused my eyes to sting a bit.

“I’m alright,” I told her, “But, I am going to miss him and his stories of witches and curses on the town.” I gave Grandmama Mae Belle a small smile, trying to reassure her I’d be okay.

“Now, don’t you go bringin’ up that ancient past. It dies with your Granddaddy.” She exchanged a knowing look with Aunt Pitty Pat. “C’mon into the kitchen. There’s lemonade pie in the fridge. I hid it from everyone else.”

“I think I’m going to head out back for a bit, get out of the crowd.”

“Alright darlin’. You know where we are if you need us. Your brothers are out there, I’m sure up to no good.”

I wanted to keep a close eye on Grandmama Mae Belle and Aunt Pitty Pat. It’s hard to know when the clutches of grief will actually strike, and sometimes it’s like a lightning bolt from a heat storm. No one ever expects them, but electricity charges the atmosphere anyway. Yet my need to puzzle out the ghost in the graveyard tugged at me more. I wanted to ask if they’d seen the woman, because something told me these two old ladies weren’t telling me the entire truth, but I knew I couldn’t ask. Not yet.

When I crossed the threshold of the screen door, the slap against the frame jolted me forward, and there he stood. The sepia boy with his look of disapproval, his frown creating a seriousness beyond his years. He couldn’t be much older than me, if at all. And I had to admit, his stoic face was worth looking at. His hair fell across his forehead in auburn hues and it looked erratic, a mix of downy fluff and coarse locks fighting for space on his head.

I walked toward him, my back straight, my steps sure. Who was this small-town guy that seemed to see failure when he looked at me and brooded upon my presence? This was my family, my grief, and my mystery.

“Who are you? I know I saw you at the burial. I could feel your eyes on me.” The night sky darkened around him and fireflies nipped at invisible dust motes.

“That’s some way to greet a guest. Then again, you aren’t *really* from here,” his voice dripped with derision, his posture matched mine in all its forced conviction.

“Ha!” The snort popped out, almost through my nose. So much for self-assuredness.

He kept his eyes on me, watched me rearrange my hands, my head, my face. Then he spoke, “I’m Connor. And I already know who you are - you’re Aideen, but I believe they like to call you Dennie Mae.”

“They do. I don’t. Don’t do it.” Cursed small town gossip.

“Understood.” His shoulders released a bit, “Walk?” His eyes gestured to the woods behind the house that led to an old cabin erected in 1855 (Granddaddy said the original owner, Chesley Turnbow, still haunted the place on account of the town trying to move it somewhere else. They barely got the old door off its hinges when every shutter in the house slammed shut. It was left alone after that). I hesitated and surveyed the wake behind me. People still gathered, long past cocktail hour, mirth mixed with mourning; although I think whiskey talked more now than words. My parents sat on the porch underneath a pergola of local wood while my brothers hung from old trees in the yard in what appeared to be a contest of who could stay upside down the longest. And Grandmama Mae Belle and Aunt Pitty Pat sealed their eyes on mine. Their countenance told me not to go, like they could hear our words from so far away, but my wonder outweighed the withered stare. I didn’t know this boy, but an odd kinship buzzed between us. I was a stranger and a friend, and I wasn’t afraid. I felt pulled to him like the moon pulls the tide, a coracle drawn to the shore.

“Alright.”

We moved through the back part of the land and I cast a final glance over my shoulder to heads that turned away. The disappointment crushed me, but I wouldn't resist knowing more from Connor. He bewitched me in a way I couldn't grasp and in the back of my mind, Granddaddy whispered, "You have to go."

The ground crunched beneath our steps and once we cleared the last vestiges of sound, Connor spoke.

"I know you saw her," He did not make eye contact, he was not concerned with my reaction.

"I did," I thought his acknowledgement of the woman in the woods would bother me, but he only spoke what I already knew. "Who is she?"

At this he stopped and turned to face me. "What do you mean, who is she? It's your family legend, at least her side of it." *Her side of it? I'm clearly out of the loop here.*

"Well, why don't you explain it to me anyway," and exasperation filled my words. "All I've ever known is the story of a woman with fiery hair, pale skin, and a cursed ring. I don't even know her name." Years and years of this legend and someone else knew more than I did.

Connor walked a few steps forward and paused. He pulsed his right hand open and closed and it was then I noticed the tarnished ring that encircled his right ring finger. It looked to hold a broken crown, wearied with age and two wizened hands. The middle of the ring came to a point with a jagged line that seared down the center like a broken heart.

"It isn't my story to tell," he spoke so low his words sounded like a growl and the chirp of crickets echoed louder than his voice.

"Damn it!" I turned on my heel and stomped away. Why won't anybody talk about this? Granddaddy told me the story, but never the entire truth. My dad brushed it away any time I

brought it up at home, like he couldn't be bothered by legends of the past. Grandmama Mae Belle and Aunt Pitty Pat refused to indulge Granddaddy's lore and prayed.

I could hear Connor's steps behind me. I quickened my pace and returned to the backyard where only a few people remained. My mother walked the yard to pick up stray cups and paper plates. Patrick and Peter had gone inside and I'm sure were making a new mess in the old clawfoot tub. My dad probably had out blueprints ready to raze the town flat. I zipped inside and knew exactly where I wanted to be — under the stairs. If Connor still followed, I couldn't hear him anymore. I stopped at her picture.

It loomed as a presence hung in the back where no one traveled. "Are you being hidden from me?" I wondered aloud. An answer startled me.

"Yes, and no," Grandmama Mae Belle replied. "But Dennie Mae, I need you to let this one go. I need you to not believe." Her mouth held a firm line, her eyes pleaded with me.

"Why?" I could hear the whine in my voice, the reverberation of a childish plea. "Why can't I know?"

Connor's voice broke the tension, "That's a good question," his eyes looked from the picture to me to Grandmama, "Why can't she know?"

I'd never seen any one question my Grandmama before, much less a young boy. But answer she did, with a snappish, "You know why Connor, and you have no business bein' here. Just go home, let this die with him."

"Now, you know I can't do that Bessie Mae," and his face appeared suddenly older, more taunted where youthful curves blended his cheeks and jaw before. "She's part of this, no matter how much you want her not to be. Aidan protected her as long as he could, but Bobby Joe

refused to do the same. She's cursed to the earth, but she's not of the earth. You have to let her go." With every word, his jaw defined, his eyes turned gray, his hair hoaried on his head.

Grandmama Mae Belle's eyes watered, "Does it have to be today. We just lost him; isn't there more time?"

"No." This single word lifted me from my place by the picture and its colors whirred into movement like the painting sprung to life. I tried to resist the pull of Connor's outstretched hand, but his gravity tugged me towards him. Grandmama Mae Belle stood stock still, as if the words of redemption stole her breath. Connor looked upon me with a longing expression I'd not seen before, "Do not be afraid," he said, "You are not of this world, but cursed by it. You must give your life so that others long lost to you may go free."

He walked me to the front porch, where Granddaddy had fallen only days before. The splintered wood healed itself where we stood when Connor sliced his hand for blood. He reached for mine and I freely gave it knowing no choice existed. Our skin touched and burned like fire and the world around me turned dark.

The morning sun burned my eyes. It slipped through the murky dawn and blocked my vision. I lifted the quilt from my body and fingered its tattered edges, loose threads that pulled from the fabric after years of wear. The floor felt cold beneath my feet, the fire not yet lit in the grate. The world stretched before me and I lifted the fabric to gaze out onto the rolling green of Ireland, my earthbound world stretched before me again with a glint of gold on my right hand.