

Cerberus

Dad and my brother Will pushed the body in a wheelbarrow up the hill. It was already trussed up in a burlap sack so we wouldn't have to look at the stoved-in head and dead eyes.

My other brother Bobby was down in the grave tossing up shovel fulls of clumpy, clay-heavy dirt. Just this afternoon, he'd filled in this very grave. After the minister said his final words and the bereaved family toddled off, Bobby shoveled in the same dirt he was now shoveling out. So, despite the frozen ground, the digging was easy.

I stood next to my mother, but there was no comforting arm extended mother to daughter or vice versa. Guess the digging wasn't so easy between us.

My jeans were frozen; I clenched my thighs to keep the cold denim off my skin. I hunched my shoulders up so the collar of my pea coat covered the edges of my ears; they burned with the cold.

Dad and Will panted from the exertion of pushing the wheelbarrow, laden with dead weight up the hill. Gusts of wind snatched their clouds of breath and threw them down the valley, towards the faintly lit, lone house nestled in the darkness.

The sound of Bobby's shovel scraping against wood drew us all to edge of the grave to look down at him standing on the exposed coffin. Sweat darkened his auburn hair, turning it black, and made him seem a stranger to me. We all seemed to be strangers that night.

Will extended his hand and pulled Bobby up.

"Awright," Dad said.

My brothers lifted the body. Bobby grabbed the feet and Will hooked his arms under the shoulders. The burlap-encased head lolled against Will's belt buckle as they swung the body between them. When it reached the top of the arc they let go; it paused for a moment, then gravity dragged it down into the grave where it landed with a muffled thud, bounced once, then settled to rest on the coffin.

Tomorrow a tombstone would be set above the grave. It would read: 'Franklin D. Newkirk, Beloved husband, father, and brother, 1920-1976.' There'd be no mention of PJ Walker, the 43-year-old man who'd be sharing Mr. Newkirk's Greenwood Cemetery grave —undetected—God willing, until judgment day.

Grave filled, my brothers leaned on their shovels, and my mother and I stood tall as Dad said: "This is done. You're not to talk about this to me, your mother, or each other. Ever."

Then he reached out to my mother and they walked back to the house hand in hand. The boys and I trailed after.

I went to bed that night in awe at the power of lying, and ambivalent about the value of truth.

Of course, despite our father's command to not talk about it, we often speculated about who killed PJ Walker.

"I suppose, seeing the way PJ's head was bashed in, it was Dad," Will said.

"Anybody who can lift a maul could have done that," Bobby said. "Shit Janey, can lift a maul, even with these little chicken arms."

Bobby reached out and pinched the tender underside of my upper arm. I swatted him away with my book.

“I can’t lift a maul, least not so I could swing it,” I muttered and returned to my reading.

“Mom was the only one home...” Bobby said resurrecting his theory of the crime, which was that, our mother, ‘a woman scorned,’ had pushed PJ Walker out of the hayloft in a rage and then finished him off with the heavy maul as he lay unconscious on the cold, cement floor in the barn.

“Dad’s the one I saw... washing the bloody maul,” Will said. His theory was that jealousy, and fear that his wife had finally found an escape route from Greenwood, had transformed our rather milquetoast-y father into a bludgeoner.

“Maybe he just fell out of the hayloft like Mom said,” I said irritated.

There was a short pause and then both boys barked with laughter at me.

“What’s it matter now anyway?” I snapped. “Was it Mom? Dad? Who cares?”

“I kinda care,” Bobby said. “I mean who should I watch out for? Sweet old Mom who’s stirring my oatmeal, or Dad, the guy swinging an ax right next to me while we split wood.”

“Dad said we’re not suppose to talk about it,” I said and gave my brothers the hardest look I could muster, which made them both burst out laughing again.

This laughing and talking about a dead guy, about who might of murdered him, no doubt seems ghoulish and cold to most people. But you’ve got to understand, the three of us were born and raised in a cemetery. Dead people were the family business. Hundreds of rotting bodies surrounded our home, just because the bodies were six feet

under a blanket of bright green grass didn't make them any less there, any less present in our minds. Among ourselves we talked like this about the dead. We were cavalier, matter of fact, but around 'outsiders' we cast down our eyes, folded our hands, and murmured the usual platitudes about the dearly departed. Basically we were to a man, or in my case 'to a teenage girl,' freaks.

Six month's after the midnight internment, I was in the barn tending my horse when an old Dodge Dart with brown rust eating up the tire wells pulled up and parked on the cinder pad. A lady in a loose fitting dress got out from behind the wheel. The car rocked as she hoisted herself up. She wore a sleeveless shift that was too lightweight for crisp fall day, but shiny slick of sweat coated her face just the same. She had a fountain of red hair that rose up from her forehead and then ran down her back like a flow of molten lava.

"Ma'am," I said as I approached her.

"I'm looking for PJ Walker, he's my son," she said. "Last we heard, he was working here."

"He's not here," I said.

"Where'd he go?"

I shrugged.

In the car I saw something move and shielded my eyes to peer in. A girl with the same red hair, about my age, was sitting in the front seat; she turned her face away.

"Your folks around?"

I tipped my head up towards the house. The lady strode up onto the porch and knocked on the door.

“Hello?” my mother said as she opened the door, drying her hands in a dishrag.

The lady asked again after PJ Walker.

“Ooo gee, let me think, why he left here in March...early March,” my mother said, and then called out to me. “Right around your birthday, wasn’t it Janey?”

I kicked at the cinders and thought, *Don’t drag me into your lyin’*.

PJ Walker was a bad penny, my Dad used to say, always showing up. As a teenager, PJ hung around with my mother’s brothers and even lived at Greenwood for a while when he was in high school, which I suppose is what made him feel like he was entitled to show up whenever the spirit moved him. He’d hire on as gravedigger or what have you for a few months then shove off again.

Then one day right after Christmas, he rode up on an old motorcycle, half frozen in just jeans, a leather coat, and a ratty scarf.

He moved into a barely heated room in the barn.

In February, on an unseasonably warm afternoon, I saddled up Apollo, my appaloosa, and took him out for a long run and ramble around the graveyard and up through the woods to the ridge overlooking the river. I stayed out until it started to get dark and I used the last bit of light to run Apollo through the graveyard, lathering us both up. The wind was still cold and bit my cheeks; my thighs gripped the horse’s heaving sides and burned with the effort. As I rode a strange warmth flooded my body; it was

both pleasant and agitating. By the time I reached the barn I was panting and couldn't have said if I was hot or cold, happy or angry.

I wasn't pleased to see PJ, cigarette in the corner of his mouth, spraying off the backhoe with a hose. The floor of the barn was flooded with muddy water. The spray from the hose spooked Apollo; I had to pull his reins tight. He circled and pranced uneasily.

"Hey, how about turning off the damn hose until I get this horse settled?" I shouted.

PJ dropped the hose and walked over. He reached up and grabbed Apollo's halter.

"I'll hold him for you."

"I don't need you to hold him," I said. "Let go."

"I got 'im," he said. Pulling down harder on the halter.

Apollo yanked his head up and pulled the reins out of PJ's hands. He bucked three times. The first buck almost threw me, but I tightened the reins and pulled Apollo's head hard to the left and rode out the second two kicks.

"Whoa! Whoa!" PJ shouted and grabbed the halter reins again.

"Stop it! Let go!" I shouted and then, as he tightened his grip on the reins, I raised my crop and slashed at his hands with the leather whip. Three times I swung the crop, each time the leather loop snapped against the back of his hands

Enraged, PJ yanked the crop from my hands and turned it on me. He lashed my thighs and buttocks with the whip, the slap of the leather penetrated through my jeans and laid down white-hot strips, as though branding me with irons. It burned and shocked me, because I suddenly was flushed with pleasure. I slid off the horse and stood in front of

him. I took a step forward and pressed my body against his, my soft breast flattened against his hard chest. When he didn't respond, didn't move at all, I slapped his face. Then slapped it again.

I raised my hand for third slap and he grabbed my wrist.

He smirked and wagged the crop in my face.

“Eh, eh, eh,” he said mockingly.

I was so humiliated I could barely stand. It felt like he'd stripped me naked as a joke. He was laughing at me, laughing at how I'd responded to a whip, at my deviancy and rage. And then he winked and nodded at me, confirmed our secret. I wanted to gouge out his eyes, but instead I mumbled; “See to that horse” and fled.

I avoided the barn, neglected my horse for the next week until my mother finally scolded me and hectored me to get out there and exercise that horse or she'd sell to someone who would.

The next day, I slipped out of school early. I made my way home and waited down by the pond and watched the barn. When I saw PJ head out on the tractor and disappear over the crest of the hill, I ran up to the barn. Apollo's stall was a mess and he was wild and unruly. I hitched him to a post out in the barn while I broom-ed out the stall as fast as I could. I scattered fresh hay and tried to saddle Apollo. He was too jittery and jumpy from the week without exercise and danced away from under the saddle. Finally, I backed him into his stall where I'd have a little more control. That's when I heard PJ's voice; he was talking to someone outside the barn. I climbed over the side of the stall and up the ladder to the loft.

PJ, with my mother following, him came into the barn.

“Was it Janey who said it?” PJ shouted. “Cause that’s a lie, plain and simple.”

“What I’m saying is, remember she’s just a girl of 14,” she said.

PJ stopped and turned around to face her, he cocked his hip and slump back on his heels and spoke with a voice that suddenly was low and rough. “I remember you at 14, you weren’t no girl.”

“We’re not talking about me, we’re talking about my daughter,” my mother whispered.

Though I could barely make out the words, it was the way they spoke, all soft tones and whispers, which made their relationship clear. I moved closer to the edge and watched them.

““Anywhere but here,’ you used to say, and then you’d beg me to take you with me,” he murmured. “Now when I come back here, it’s me beggin’ you. One day, one day you’ll come away with me.”

She shook her head and hugged her chest. I think she was crying.

“Make it this time,” he said and slid his arms around her waist.

“Get off me,” she said and twisted away. She moved to under the hayloft where I couldn’t see her. He stood below me, leaning against the support beam. He took off his ball cap and ran his hand through his long, hair, shiny with sweat. His temples were brushed with gray and his sideburns ran like rust stains along his jaw.

“Why you being like this?” PJ said, sharply. “What about us?”

She answered just as sharply; “There’s no ‘us.’”

“No? Couldn’t help but notice your second boy, now he’s grown up, ” he said and rubbing the orange grizzle on his chin. “He’s got red beard.”



Suddenly my mother shoved him with both hands square in the chest, and he stumbled backwards and laughed.

“Old Tom’s bound to figure out soon where that red hair came from!” he said. My mother charged him again. He grabbed her wrist and pushed her against the beam. He kissed her, grinding his hips into her as she struggled. For a moment she seemed to melt against him as she let herself be kissed. I thought about spitting on the both of them, but my mouth was dry.

Then he shouted and leapt back from her, his hand flying up to his bloody lip.

“You bit me!”

“I told you to get off me,” she said.

He wiped a swath of blood from his mouth onto his wrist.

“Well, I guess it’s like mother like daughter,” he said, staring at the red streak on his arm, wiping it on the back of his jeans.

*He’s going to tell her, I realized. Tell her that I threw myself at him, that I liked it when he hit me with the whip.*

He rejected me for her.

The maul was propped against the beam in the loft. Carelessly left there by one of boys. Dad forbids the maul in the loft; it’s too dangerous. It’s only 8 pounds, easy to carry a few steps.

“What are you talking about?”

“You ought to watch that girl of yours,” he said “She’s got a kink—“

*I couldn’t let him say another word, you understand.*

The maul fell; the iron end of it was like a fist; it struck the crown of his head and split it open. He crumpled to the ground as though his strings had been cut.

My mother looked up and saw me standing in the loft.

“Janey! What—what have you done?”

A pool of blood flowed across the floor, a smooth, shiny puddle spread quickly out in all directions. My mother grabbed the maul by its handle and dragged it through the blood, drawing a red arc across the cement floor.

I stepped back into the shadows of the hayloft as my father walked into the barn.

He stared at the body, at the smashed head as though he didn't know what it was, and then he looked my mother and at the maul still in her hand.

“Tom, he *was* messing Janey, just what you thought,” my mother said. “He admitted it. He laughed about it.”

I slipped out without my father ever knowing I was there. When the boys came home from school Mom was home alone reading the paper in the kitchen like she always was. Will found PJ in barn, and sounded the alarm just as I was coming down the road, schoolbooks hugged tight to my chest. PJ was so clearly dead there was no reason to call an ambulance. And no need to be hasty about calling the police either, there wasn't any insurance on the barn, any accident there could ruin us, Mom said.

When Dad got home, it was decided around the dinner table. Since PJ had no family far as anyone knew, no one to claim or mourn him, it was best to just bury him as decent as we could and forget about it.

And then that would have been that.

Except Will saw Dad washing the bloody maul.

And then a big housing developer came a long and offered a veritable fortune for the cemetery.

Except it would have meant that the bodies— all the bodies at Greenwood would have had to be dug up and, of course, we couldn't let that happen.

And then my brothers disappeared to parts unknown, my father to a grave on top of the hill, and dementia blew through my mother like a tornado. Memories, loves, words, and thoughts were swept up in a twisting vortex and tore away across the yard and over hill. Everything gone.

Except for one, dog-eared piece of paper, a song sheet fluttering through her mind from which she would sing, to anyone or everyone, if I ever I let my down my guard:

“Janey dropped a maul on PJ Walker;

We buried him in Franklin Newkirk's grave.”