

Hickory

Tuesday
June 27, 1905

I didn't ask to see it in the first place. None of my business. But the gunshot drew me back to her camp, and that's when everything changed. After all, witnessing a murder changes a kid, right?

Earlier, when I first wandered across her path, the woman showed me kindness. She invited me to sit 'neath her canvas lean-to, on her bedding of blankets and soft pillows. They smelled all fresh and clean like they was laundered that very mornin'. Just like Mama's beddings. She even shared some of her jerky. Do swear, my hunger was so fierce, I could've eaten a bear.

Her hair reminded me of corn silk, and her eyes shined like rays of sunlight bouncing off the Tennessee River. She wore a blue-striped, worn-out dress with long sleeves and black boots with holes on the sides. Half the mud left by a storm the night before was caked on them boots. Hand-me-downs worn by one-too-many people.

A wanderer I reckoned, and I should know, seein' as how people called me a street rat because of my raggedy clothes.

Lord, she was pretty.

She camped on the shore of the Tennessee River across from Moccasin Bend, close to my favorite spot for fishing. On the day that changed my life, the fish must've been sleeping. I hadn't gotten a nibble all morning, so I walked over to visit her a second time. Not sure why, except to say she had stirred something inside me. Maybe a memory of my mama and two sisters. My heart had fluttered like it never done before when I made her acquaintance.

I heard voices when I approached the camp, so I hid. The lady was laying on her bedding next to a man, and they was smiling and acting gentle and loving toward each other. I stared at them through that bush for a while, tryin' to recall if my mama and daddy ever shared tender moments like this.

This bein' a private time, I started to back away, but what the woman did next stopped me in my tracks. She stood and walked over to her donkey. She grabbed an old brown saddlebag, cracked and weathered, and emptied it all over her blankets.

Rolls of paper money bound by rubber bands and all kinds of jewelry—shiny red, green, and white stones on rings and necklaces and bracelets—tumbled out.

The only time that I seen that much female finery in one place was when Daddy took me to Fischer-Evans jewelry store on Market Street, the one with the giant clock on the sidewalk. Told me he wanted to buy something real nice for Mama's birthday, but we never got beyond the first saloon.

The woman and her friend argued a spell until he got dressed in his fancy suit and hat, his black boots all spiffy. What they fussed about I couldn't tell, but he scooped all the valuables back into the pouch. Then he took the bag to her jenny and strapped it on. Didn't seem all that interested in the money.

The man turned to walk back to her, then hesitated. Did I make a sound? I held my breath, but he walked to the other side of the camp, all quiet-like. A few seconds later he returned, kissed the woman goodbye, and left. I backed away too, figurin' they'd made up after their hard words, and found another spot to cast my line.

One strange thing I noticed about him. He was missing an earlobe.

That same afternoon the fish continued to best me, swimming on to wherever they was headed, so I fixed my line and walked toward the Walnut Street Bridge. Daddy and I lived in the wilds of Hill City, on the other side of the bridge, in a hutch that Daddy built.

I remember the exact moment I heard the gunshot, 'cause I was reckoning Daddy would beat me for leaving the water without supper. The sound echoed from the way of the woman's campsite. I hurried over and squatted in the same shrubbery.

Still have horrible dreams about what happened next.

First thing, I almost tripped on the woman's dog, shot dead, blood pooling all around. Cryin' was out of the question, even though I wanted to somethin' terrible. The dog took a liking to me when we met earlier, as I did with him. His empty eyes stared straight ahead, like he'd spotted some varmint and

wanted to run after it but never got the chance. Never did own me a dog. Now someone snuffed the life out of this pooch, and I wanted to punch that person.

A man was on top of the woman. He'd wrapped a strap around her neck and gripped it so tight she couldn't breathe. Poor lady tried to pull his arms away or scratch his face, anything to get free, but I never seen a female with the strength of a man. She was no match for him.

My first thought was to run away fast as my legs would carry me. Almost caused me to bolt from my hiding spot, which would have been the end of me too. Same time, I wanted to help, but trouble and me was well-acquainted. For certain, I would've joined the woman in the hereafter.

When she finally stopped struggling, the air squeezed clean outta her lungs, the killer stood. He stepped back, stared long and hard at her, and crumbled to the ground, bawling like a newborn child. I raised one hand to cover my mouth. Never seen a grown man cry so.

Daddy didn't drop one tear when my mama and the girls died.

After a spell, he stumbled over to the woman's donkey, swaying like Daddy after too much hooch. Most of her belongings was loaded on that animal, like she planned to vamoose sometime soon. An old, beat-up guitar. A canvas to catch the stormy weather before it soaked her blankets and such. A frypan and two pots. And the saddlebag filled with riches. All that money should've been buried somewhere to keep it safe from thieves in the night.

Maybe she and the other man was gonna leave town together.

The killer glanced into the bag, smiled, and stepped away with it. Then he stopped and studied the dead woman. He stood glued to the ground, frozen like a snowman. As sure as Sunday was a-comin', ice ran through his body instead of blood. A crueler act I ain't never witnessed, and I seen a bunch at my daddy's hand.

Two killings happened that day. The kind lady, too young to have seen her last sunrise. And her dog, shot trying to protect its master. A third death almost took place that evening as I tiptoed into camp hoping Daddy was asleep. No such luck.

Embers in the fire pit heated the air in the lean-to like a warm blanket. He rolled over, his own stink of whiskey fouling the night air like a polecat. Sweat poured from his forehead, and he stared at me for the longest time. Said he lost his job at Roane Iron Works and slurred some foolhardy claim about it being my fault.

What could I say? I wasn't talkin' much at the time, and I'd determined a while back not to waste my words on him.

He stood with some difficulty and staggered toward me, his thick body blocking the lantern light several feet behind him. “Why are you still breathing?” he said and swore it would’ve been better if I had met my Maker in the cabin fire too.

A hard man, Caleb Crabtree. One part of me said I should stay, him being the only family I had left. Another voice inside screamed out a warning.

Run and never look back!

I should’ve listened. With a clenched jaw and his nostrils flarin’, Daddy had his violent way with me. Darkness filled my eyes and blood poured from my mouth, as I watched him collapse onto his bedding.

An owl hooted, and I remember thinking that critter has got nothing to complain about. He’s free and living a fine life, swooping from branches to snatch his dinner any old time or to scare someone who needs scaring.

Later, my body shot up, flames a-blazin’ all around me. I heard myself say, “Get outta there, Mama! Get away!” It took several moments to realize the cabin had long since burned to the ground, along with everyone I loved in this world. But the injuries from my beating were real. My ribs ached something terrible, and a shooting pain made its way to my brain, as I carefully lay back down on my damp blanket.

Daddy snored away without a concern in the world.

Ten-year-old kids should never have nightmares like mine.