

The Clipper

The first thing the boy saw was the fanning mill standing alongside the machine shed. It was a faded red Clipper model, used to separate the seed from everything else: the chaff, the small sticks and stones, and of course, the weed seed.

Inside the house the old woman led the boy to the kitchen.

"A dozen eggs and a quart of cream," the boy said.

"You're the Adams boy. Flora's grandson."

"Yes, Ma'am."

She brought in the basket of eggs from the old refrigerator on the back porch and took a gray paper carton from the stack on the kitchen counter. Her hands were cracked and chapped but she handled each egg tenderly, gently washing off the dirt and bits of straw with warm water, drying each egg on a ragged piece of towel, and carefully placing it in the carton. "Are you still in school?" she asked.

"Graduation's tomorrow night."

"What'll you do then?"

"Go to college. At Ohio State."

She poured cream from the jug into a quart Mason jar, wiped the rim clean on a corner of her apron, and replaced the lid.

"You making ice cream?"

He nodded.

"In the summer time Dad used to make ice cream every Sunday. He said it was the Lord's gift to the poor man. Always vanilla. Said plain vanilla's good enough for me." For a moment she stared off into the corner where the ceiling and the walls met, then she turned back to the boy. "Have you got a minute, son?"

She took him through the kitchen and unlocked the door to the parlor. The shades were drawn, the windows shut up tight, and it smelled of disuse. She lit a lamp and stood near the pump organ. "Can you sit down?"

A cloud of dust rose when the boy sat down on the edge of an upholstered chair, perching there with his back straight and his hands folded in his lap.

The old woman took off her apron, folded it carefully, and laid it on top of the organ. She smoothed the front of her dress and glanced at the half-dozen photographs ranged across the top of the pump organ, taking each up in turn and carefully returning it to its place.

"We wanted children," she began, "Walter and me, but it wasn't God's will. Walter had four sisters and I had all brothers. Six of 'em. I wanted girls so bad, but I lost the baby. The cord was wrapped around her little neck, and she was blue when she come out. Mother was there, and Walter's sister. And Jimmy was just three when his appendix bursted. There was four more, all born dead."

The boy leaned forward resting his forearms on his knees, staring at the carton of eggs and quart of cream on the floor between his feet.

"Walter always worked hard. There was the stock and the crops and the buildings." She took up the apron, working it in her hands like a lump of bread dough. "I minded the chickens and the garden. Now I have it all to do. He don't get out of bed." She looked up at the ceiling.

The boy got up and crossed the room, stopped at the glassed case. Inside it were books by James and Hardy and Dreiser.

"It's foul words now. Horrible things Walter says to me. I don't know where he heard them. Maybe the war. He wouldn't talk about it when he come back from the Somme. Just said there was some sights to see."

"Can I look at them?"

"What?"

"The books."

"If you want."

The case was made of dark varnished wood with lighter streaks. He turned the key in the lock and pulled open the door. A thin layer of dust lay on the books and the shelves, and when he slid the first book out it left a trail. It was Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and inside the cover, written in fancy script, was "To Walter with love, Martha, December 25, 1921." He leafed through the book. A half dozen pages were dog-eared, and scribbled notes filled the margins. All the pages were yellowed and crumbling at the edges.

"Walter and me was married in nineteen and thirteen." She took the wedding photograph from the top of the pump organ and gave it to the boy.

He laid the book down and looked at the photograph. The man sat tall on the edge of the chair, his huge hands folded in his lap and his dark mustache drooping over his lips. The woman stood beside him, short and homely, her hair pinned carefully in place and her dress dark and shiny. Her hand rested on his shoulder, her gaze on his face; he stared straight out of the photograph, without smiling.

The old woman moved close to the boy. "He was twenty and I was seventeen. He was strong then, Walter was, not like now." She looked down at the faded roses on the carpet. "He had big hands, Walter did, but gentle." She touched the boy's shoulder.

The boy jerked and stood up. "I ought to be going," he said.

She folded her hands against her breast and stared at the roses. "But he leaned his face up close and kissed my cheek. His beard was rough but his breath smelled like warm milk. He shushed me and it was all right. I knew we was making babies and it was all right. Part of the job."

The boy set the photograph on the pump organ and took up the book. "Can I see him?"

"Who?"

"Your husband, Mr. Wills."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded.

She led him up the narrow stairs and down the back hall to the last door. Inside the old man lay propped up against pillows, his face all a great hooked nose and his hair a wild shock of white. His mouth hung open and he snored intermittently, great buzz-saw raspings.

"There's someone to see you, Walter." She smiled at the old man, then at the boy.

"Whuh-unh?" He snorted and his eyes snapped open.

"What the goddammed hell?"

"The boy wants to see you," she said.

"Who the hell are you?"

"You know me, Walter. I'm Martha. Your wife."

"Get out of here. I never saw you before."

Tears came into her eyes and she went back down the stairs, the boy behind her. "I hoped he'd be better. Why did you want to see him?"

"I wanted to ask him about the books."

"The books?"

"Yes. I wanted to ask him."

The boy came back at the end of his first term in college and again asked to see Walter, alone this time. When she assented he climbed the steps and stopped short of the door, his trembling hand just inches from the knob. Then he turned it and pushed open the door.

"Who are you?"

"Adams. I'm Ben Adams." He took a deep breath and stood with the volume of Hardy in his hand. "I came to ask you about the books."

"Books?"

"In the glass case. Downstairs. She said they were yours."

"Books," the old man said.

"I love to read, and I thought maybe you would tell me about your books."

When he handed the book to the old man the huge hands swallowed it. The fingers were long and thin, little more than bone and sinew, with outsized swollen joints. The old man opened the book and leafed through several pages, then closed it and laid it beside him on top of the quilt. He looked out the window for a moment, then back at the boy.

"Get the hell out here," he said, his black eyes flashing like flint on steel. The boy hesitated.

"Get the hell out," the old man shouted. He hurled the book at the boy.

The boy fled back down the stairs, passing the old woman on her way up. He smoothed the

wrinkled pages as best he could and put the book back in the glassed case. His reflection stared back from the glass in the door and the mirror image of his hand turned the key and relocked the door. He went through the kitchen and out the door and down the back steps. Glancing across the yard he saw the fanning mill up against the shed, now snug in a drift of snow. The sun disappeared behind a cloud and it got colder, and the wind swirled a skiff of snow across the empty yard.

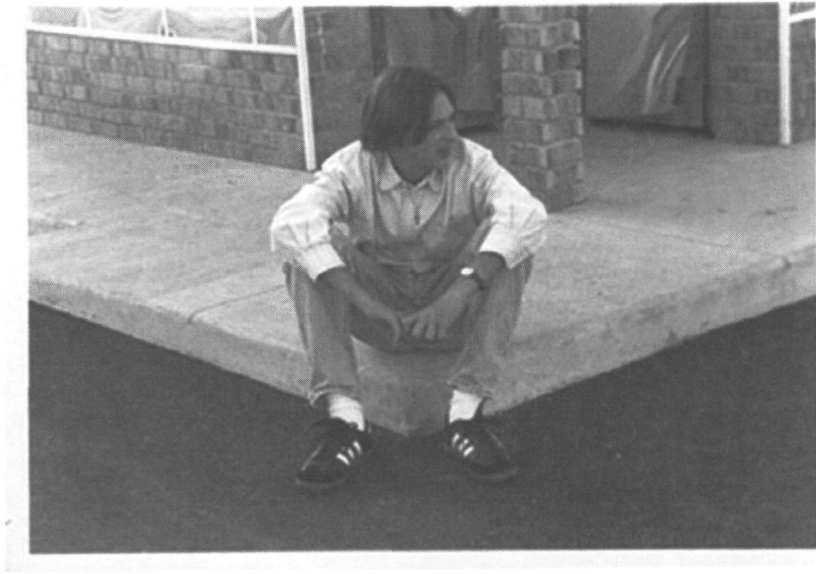


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