

NEVER SIT IN PUDDLES

The girl turned sixteen during a soft, magnolia springtime where the sweetness of the wild told lies about the worn-out land. A cruel and vicious winter went away leaving the county people hungry while waiting for Federal aid. Only the children seemed to love those scrubby hills that reached up to touch the dreams of far-away. The girl, working inside while the woman was in bed with sickness, ignored their freedom. She kept her face away from the window.

She was clearing the kitchen table when the woman called her to the makeshift bedroom by the fireplace.

“Are you all right?”

The woman turned on her pillow and spoke between deep and rasping coughs.

“Is he gone?”

“He left about an hour ago.”

Half sitting against the headboard, the woman tried to smooth the covers on the bed. Her face was wrinkled with the tiredness of a place where age came early.

The girl reached out to touch the woman’s forehead. “You have fever. Try to rest.”

Shivering in a sudden chill, the woman wrapped the covers around her chin. “I...I can’t breathe.”

Forcing short breaths of humid air inside her lungs left the woman choking. The girl watched helplessly.

“It’s spring, even if it is late,” she said. She rumbled a pillow, then turned it on its cool side for the woman. “I think they’re planting cotton across the road. It’s warm enough to do without a fire. You won’t cough so much when the weather’s dry.”

“I can’t help it,” the woman said, crying. “I didn’t bring it on myself.”

“Don’t pay any attention to him.” The girl tried to think of something comforting to say. “You work hard.”

Slowly the woman sank back into a fitful sleep. The girl paused outside the door while her thoughts hurtled her back to the night she stood hesitating in that hall, wiping sleep from her five-year-old eyes...

The passageway, dark and drafty, had only a narrow slit of dingy yellow light that came from under the kitchen door. The child studied it blankly; the slurred voices that lured her from under the peaceful warmth of thick cotton quilts were clear now, but still senseless.

“Mama?”

She pushed open the door a few inches and stood there shivering. Her bare feet balked at the touch of the winter-cold floor.

Now knowing she was there, the man and the woman did not acknowledge her. The man pushed over a table, letting cups and stale brown coffee fall near the red shadows of a potbellied stove.

“Quit acting a fool,” he told the woman. “Get up.”

The woman sat on the floor in a corner as though the shadows there would let her blend into their lonely grayness and disappear.

“Why are you doing this?” she begged. “Why can’t you let me alone?”

Her knees were upraised close to her chin. She wore only the bottoms of a pair of faded blue flannel pajamas. The man took a step towards her and she screamed.

“Stop it, stop it!” The little girl ran to the man and beat him with tiny clenched fists.

He pushed the child aside. “Goddamn it, I’m not hurting her. Go on back to bed.”

“No! You’re gonna hit her!”

The woman, ashamed to be seen naked before her child, crossed her arms over her breasts. The man tossed her the pajama tops and she buried her face in them.

“Now get up or I’ll finish it here,” he said.

“You can’t hit her. I don’t want to go,” the child wailed.

“Tell her to leave.” The man’s face, handsome and arrogant, was wrinkled in anger.

“You bitch,” he told the woman. “She’ll know then. She’ll know now. I’ll make sure she knows what you are.”

The woman shook, crying.

“I’ll help you.” The little girl twisted the skirt of her print nightgown and rubbed her tiny foot against the back of her leg.

The man rocked on his heels and laughed. “Tell her, woman,” he demanded.

“Am I hurting you?”

“No...”

“You don’t want me to stay?” the girl whined.

“No.”

The child stared at them, her lower lip trembling. The man had his back to her and was staring impatiently at the woman’s naked body. The child left then, and stood for what seemed a long time in the hall in front of her room. She did not dare to go back.

Soon, after muffled groans and whispers, the woman's voice rose in hysterical laughter.

"More? More?" she heard the man whisper loudly.

"Oooh...."

The little girl, confused by the change, crawled back into bed where she could pull the covers over her head. She did not understand what had happened. She did not want to understand.

Five other children filled in the years between that night and the day the girl turned sixteen. At noon they all came in from playing in the mud. Anxious to go back to their games, they ate quickly. One complained that the school, which set its sessions to suit the farmers, was planning to re-open.

"It's just till June," the girl said. "And you'll be home until July."

"But it's hot then!" one complained. "Why do we have school when it's hot?"

"Hush, we pick cotton in September. You know that," the girl said.

"You wouldn't be home now if the weather hadn't been so bad."

When they were ready to go play, she pulled aside a boy of nine. "Will you help me?" she whispered.

"Doin' what?" He put his hands in the pockets of his jeans to pull out two bottle caps. He picked out the cork inside with his fingers while she talked.

"Did you see him when you were out playing?"

"No." Part of the cork came loose. The boy tore it apart, letting small pieces of it fall to the floor.

The girl reached for an empty fruit jar on the top shelf of a cabinet over the sink and handed him a dime. He looked at it, grinning suspiciously.

Using her grown-up voice, the girl pointed to the bedroom. “You’re the oldest boy and I want you to watch her while go look for him. She’s pretty sick.”

The little boy opened and shut a grubby hand over the shiny coin.

“She needs a doctor.”

The girl then handed each of the other children a nickel.

“Will he take her to town?” the boy asked.

“I guess so.”

The man wouldn’t like it, of course, but the people at the store always let the children play there until dark and would bring them in for the night.

“Can I go too?”

“I don’t know.”

“I want a funny book. I only have three Supermen.”

“Open the window in the bedroom. I think it might help her breathe.”

“Okay. Why was he hollerin’ at her this morning.?”

“Sorry he woke you up.”

“He said she oughta die. That’s nasty.”

The girl rubbed her hands across the back of her slacks and looked away.

“She won’t die, will she?”

“No,” the girl said. “There’s too much work to do.”

Wetness on the gumbo ground seeped into her shoes when the girl went looking for the man. She walked freely, her feet letting her slender body sidestep piles of spongy leaves left rotting from the Fall. All the birds were silent in the rain, and the sky was gold from the sun trying to shine through the heavy mist.

She walked in the simply rhythmic pattern of the poem she had recited in the fourth grade.

“I was running along, when I was alone,

Then got so tired, I sat on a stone....“

Just a minute, honey. Class, what’s wrong with this poem?”

“I think it’s pretty.”

“What about the words?”

“I always walk alone in the woods.”

“What do you do there?”

“Just walk. When I’m done with my chores.”

A town child snickered in the back of the room.

“Do you ever sit down?”

“If I get tired.”

“Is there any time you shouldn’t sit down?”

“Well, only if it’s raining and you have to sit in a puddle.”

“Yes, and if the month has the letter ‘r’ in it, it’s too cold to sit on the ground. Or stones.”

“We don’t have stones around here. Just little bitty ones on the road and they’re too small to sit on.”

“We call those stones gravel. But we never sit in roads, do we? And never sit in puddles.”

Puddles weren’t good for anything, the girl thought. They just stayed in one place waiting to be used, never doing anything for themselves. But the ground wouldn’t take them in,

and they never moved away if people stepped on them. All they could do was wait for the sun to get hot enough to take them away.

The puddles were fading from her thoughts as she approached the man working in waist-high grass. Her clothes by now were soaked from the drizzle and clung to her skin.

“She’s worse. She needs to go to the hospital.”

Chewing a piece of the straw grass, the man looked at the girl’s flesh that showed through her soaked clothes.

“Why didn’t you come sooner?”

“What do you mean?” The girl’s voice was angry. “You let her lay there for weeks. Don’t blame me for this!”

“You’d better watch it, girl,” The man said. “You’re still just a sloppy brat.”

The lie came out bitterly as he studied the tall, thin girl-woman who never was nor could be his own.

With an abrupt turn, he pushed through the underbrush to rush back to the house. The girl waited, watching his figure grow smaller and he retraced his steps across the muddy fields.

By now, her clothes were cold on her body. It was harder to walk back in the fading afternoon...

When she was eleven, she had run across those fields at twilight...she let the back door screen thump lightly on its hinges, upsetting the fireflies that had played there for hours that summer night. ..

“Is that you?”

Twisting her hands nervously, the little girl waited in the shadows to watch a fly pass from side to side of a bowl of cold potatoes. The woman picked up a corner of the tablecloth and covered the leftover plates of food.

“Where have you been?” she inquired, with her back to the child.

“Come her! Right now!” The man commanded her inside.

She was afraid of him, and started crying.

“I ought to kill you for being so late.”

“I...I was just across the road.”

“Don’t lie to me. Where have you been?”

“I got lost.”

Crushing her shoulder in his big hand, the man threatened the girl with his piercing eyes.

“Are you gonna hit me?” she stammered, trying to pull away.

“I’ll beat the truth out of you!”

He twisted the girl’s arm behind her back and slapped her face. Red impressions would appear later on her freckled skin.

“No eleven-year-old brat will lie to me...”

“She said I could go! I didn’t mean to be late, honest I didn’t, please don’t hit me, I won’t ever be late again!”

She looked to the woman for help, but the woman ignored her. She busily retrieved an apron from below the skin and tied it around her waist, her back to the girl.

“I told you to be home two hours ago.”

“I am sorry, really, I am so sorry,” the girl pleaded between sobs.

The girl's arm was turning blue in the man's tight grip. As she tried to free herself, he shoved her down roughly, kicking her thighs with his steel-toed boots."

"You don't have to be so mean," the woman said, finally going to the man, touching his arm.

"She's just like you, you filthy whore," he said sharply. "She's growing up to be just like you."

"That's enough," the woman protested weakly, holding the clean apron to dry her eyes.

The man glared at her. "I've about had my fill of you, too," he said.

The woman then tied the apron to her waist and was silent. There had been enough time for the little girl to pick herself up and move behind the table where it was safer. Purple was beginning to show through the slap marks on her face. Her skin was hard and swollen to her touch.

"If you don't stop crying I'll hit you some more." He removed the leather belt from around his waist and slapped it gently against his palm. "You'd better tell me where you've been."

"I...I went to see a boy I go to school with."

She backed as far against the wall as she could in a vain effort to avoid his threatening stare.

"We didn't do anything wrong!"

Baring his clenched teeth, the man formed the belt into a stiff loop and raised it high in the air above the girl.

"You're lying!" he shouted as the leather came down to snap against her skin, leaving inch-wide welts in cross-cross patterns.

“Oh, my God, she’s just eleven,” the woman spoke in vexation as she looked at her daughter’s innocent body.

The girl screamed with pain, twisting herself in an escapeless dance from the man’s brutality. The man seized her blouse, pulling it so tightly that the buttons came loose, falling one by one to the floor. The girl held the cloth together against her chest until the man had spent his anger. She slumped to the floor, shaking.

“We took a boat on the river,” she said. As the man paused, she fled from the room, pushing back a strand of hair that had fallen across her forehead on the very spot where, very gently, the young boy had kissed her...

...All the children were at the store that night when the man and the girl brought the woman to town. They brought her to an overcrowded hospital where patients, many victims of a flu epidemic, were lined in rows up and down the dingy halls.

Pneumonia also had come to many that cold, wet spring, seeking out the helpless poor in vast and chilling numbers. Most of the sick were old.. Their suffering was part of the land, which was kind some years and harsh in others, but never good enough to give them time without pain.

The woman was the youngest in the halls. Her bed was placed at the end of the hall with a think, flimsy white screen to separate her from the other patients. She now had oxygen to breathe, but it was not enough to send away the sickness.

The man came and sat with her when his work was done. It seemed odd to the girl that people began to speak of the man’s faithfulness and deep concern.

Ministers spent most of their days visiting the sick and praying over them. All treated the girl paternally, except one who wanted to further his friendship.

He was young, just finished with his pastoral training, and he found it hard to compete with the seasoned pulpit professionals of the town.

One night he stopped to speak with the girl and she questioned his face silently with her deep, brown eyes.

Shyly thumbing through his Bible, he asked the girl if she wanted him to pray over the woman.

“I guess it won’t matter,” she said. “You can’t hurt her, anyway.”

Overhead fans droned in the sticky night. Flies followed visitors inside when they opened the doors.

The minister then prayed over the woman while the man stood at her side, holding her hand in a firm, comforting grasp. The girl stood at the edge of the screen as the minister spoke softly to the woman.

“What have I done? Oh, what have I done?” sobbed the woman quietly.

Backing away from the bed, the girl walked slowly down the dark tiled hallway to the front entrance. She perched on a cement stoop at the front of the building. Brown liquid from spilled drinks lay in a gummy mass near a Coke machine. The girl picked up an old newspaper and sat there alone, killing the flies one by one as they tried to devour the sweet, spilled drink. Finally, the hospital slept and it was time to leave.

As the days passed, the neighbors came by the hospital to say that the other children were well and all were back in school.

“I’m glad,” the girl muttered to her neighbor, who had tried to be cheerful with her report of the family.

“It’s hard on them, when they’ve got no kin to care for them.”

“Uh, huh.”

“You didn’t go back to school.”

“No. They need me here.”

The minister stopped by as usual after the neighbors left. She welcomed his visits, but this night stood twisting her hands, thinking of answers to tell the neighbors who kept coming back to her. The minister understood her mood.

“This is a great trial for you,” he said. She did not answer.

“I’m going to get something to eat,” he suggested. “Would you like to come along?”

The girl hesitated a second, then saw her neighbor returning down the hall.

“I am kind of tired standing here,” she said.

They walked together across the street to an all-night truck stop where they found a back booth with torn leather upholstery. She was self-consciously eating her food and was glad that he talked.

“I understand you like school.”

“It’s not hard. But I’m not going now.”

He reached over the counter to touch her hand.

“You must have faith,” he said gently. “God gives us these trials to test our faith.”

She pulled her hand away. Her lips quivered.

“Religion. Religion. You always talk religion. Why doesn’t God give us some food and some clothes and a safe place to stay? Why?”

She slid from the booth to rush out of the diner, racing down the street to the courthouse square. The rectangle of benches near the courthouse was lit by a row of dim lights placed around the Confederate statue in the unknown soldier’s honor.

The minister was close behind her.

“Go away,” she said. “I don’t want your pity. Just let me get back to my nothin’ cause that’s all I’ll ever have.”

She paced slowly around the statue. He stood facing her when she finished the promenade.

“You only think about what you don’t have,” he said. “Do you even realize what you do have?” She said nothing.

“You’re a pretty girl, and you see a lot of other people you never notice. In a few years you can move away and make your own life..you can learn how to really live...”

The girl lowered herself to the base of the statue. He sat beside her. She stared blankly at the light of the Joy theatre across the street.

“You need people,” he said. “We all do.” Slowly, he slipped his arm around her shoulders, but she sat stiffly. “Be a big girl.”

When she turned to face him, he kissed her gently on the mouth.

Startled, the girl pulled away from him, racing back to the hospital in the dark night.

As she entered the lobby with the minister following at her back, the man flew into a rage.

“Stay away from her,” you goddamn hypocrite!” he shouted.

A waiting room of curious visitors turned to hear the tirade. To escape the nameless and faceless crowd, the girl pushed open the doors to the inner hall where she let the quiet of the sleeping building ease her soul. Two women in white caps slipped past her in the hall.

‘It’s a shame, with all those children,’ one nurse told another as they passed the girl. The girl followed them to the spot where she had left the woman. Someone had taken away the tube of oxygen.

Suddenly it seemed as if a screen door banged. Fireflies flickered. Water lapped the sides of the boat in the river. The night was cold. The woman cried.

The nurses pulled a white sheet over the woman’s head and the minister came to stand by the side of the girl. Out in the lobby the man wept loudly.

“Help me,” pleaded the girl, breathlessly. “Don’t let this happen to me.”

“Excuse us,” the nurses told them, pushing them out of the center of the hall, as they turned the bed around to wheel it away.